



Terrorists,
Romantics and
Supermen

The Image of the Viking

The Middle Ages: Viking raids on the British Isles and European Coast

The Vikings, primarily from Norway and Denmark (and later Iceland) began raiding the wealthy monasteries along the coasts of the British Isles. Many medieval writings portray them as evil, bloodthirsty heathens.

However, Vikings didn't just make off to the North with goods and slaves, they also settled in the British Isles and integrated with the populations, forming a powerful kingdom in East Anglia and founding the cities of Dublin and Waterford in Ireland.



A 19th century interpretation of Viking activity in the Middle Ages



« Pirates normands au IX^{ème} siècle »

Vikings in the East



"I have never seen more perfect physiques than theirs—they are like palm trees, are fair and reddish... They are the filthiest of all Allah's creatures: they do not clean themselves after excreting or urinating or wash themselves when in a state of ritual impurity (i.e., after coitus) and do not <seven> wash their hands after food. Indeed they are like asses that roam <in the fields>." —Ibn Fadlan, describing the Rus

In the 9th and 10th centuries, Scandinavians primarily from Sweden, called the Varangians or Rus, sailed down the river systems of Eastern Europe, raiding, trading and settling. The Varangian nobility ruled from Kiev during its heyday.

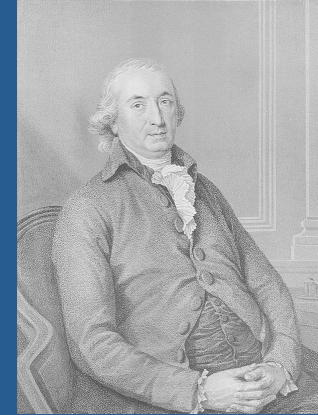
The Vikings sailed further south, reaching as far as Constantinople (present day Istanbul). The Byzantine emperor kept a special guard comprised of these Norsemen, called the Varangian guard. Several Icelandic sagas, notably *Grettir's Saga*, contain (often fanciful) accounts of adventures in Constantinople.

A 19th century Russian artist's depiction of the Vikings



The beginnings of Viking Romanticism

- Viking Romanticism was strongest in the 19th century, but arguably has its roots in the studies of Swiss Paul Henri Mallet and Johan Gottfried Herder (at right) in Germany.
- Herder believed a poet "is the creator of the nation around him, he gives them a world to see and has their souls in his hand to lead them to that world". He believed that a nation's poetry was truest and most powerful before a nation became "civilized". He explored this power in Norse and German poetry, rejecting the Latinate, classicizing tendencies of his contemporary German culture and encouraged Germans to be proud of their national heritage. This shows an important strain of nationalism at the roots of Viking "revival".



The Nationalist Viking: The case of Norway

- By the 18th and 19th centuries, Norway, having been under Danish, then Swedish, rule for the better part of half a century strove in both art and literature (relying particularly upon Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*) to create a unique, distinctly Norwegian identity, based largely on its glorious Viking past. Archaeological discoveries of ship burials and Viking artifacts helped to bolster national sentiment.



Norwegian artist Oscar Wergeland's painting of Norwegian Vikings landing in Iceland

...and in Sweden

- The Swedes too, smarting from the loss of Finland to Russia in the early 19th century, wholeheartedly embraced the new Romantic Viking. Of particular note are Eric Gustaf Geijer's poem "The Viking" and Esaias Tegner's "Frithjofs saga", the latter of which was a romantic retelling of a medieval saga and which was such a smashing success throughout Europe that even Goethe praised its "mighty, barbaric style of verse". Both Geijer and Tegner belonged to the "Geatish Society" (*Götiska Förbundet*), a literati dedicated to the promulgation of Scandinavian antiquity.



Ingibjorg, the heroine of Frithjofs saga

The English finally get over it...

- No longer embittered about all the raids in the middle ages, but rather caught up in the wave of Viking enthusiasm, England begins to explore the Scandinavian aspects of its identity. Archaeological remnants also encourage this, and many English poets are inspired by the wild mysticism they see in old Scandinavian culture.



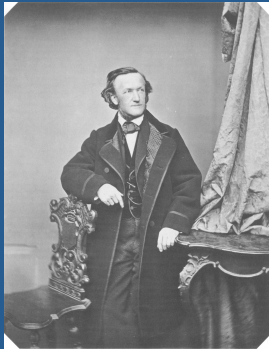
"The Ravager" by English painter John Charles Dollman

The Romantic Viking

Pillage and plunder are SO 500 years ago. The new Romantic Viking embodies courage, loyalty, strength, simplicity and a sort of primal mysticism.



The Apotheosis of the Viking: Richard Wagner and *The Ring*



German composer Richard Wagner (1813-1883) was one of the most influential composers-and thinkers-of the 19th century. His musical innovation was nothing short of revolutionary and he was virtually worshipped by thinkers of the time ranging from Friedrich Nietzsche to Charles Baudelaire to George Bernard Shaw.

Wagner was deeply interested in an ideal "German-ness" and several of his operas treat on this ideal character. Often Wagner looked back to the Middle Ages, and some of his most famous works include *Tristan and Isolde*, *Tannhauser*, *Lohengrin*, and *Parsifal*.


The *Ring* Cycle

Ragner's monumental work is the four opera cycle *The Ring of the Niebelung* (1869-1876) . Wagner based his work on medieval German and Scandinavian poetry and prose, especially the Icelandic *Poetic Edda* and *Saga of the Volsungs*. The *Poetic Edda* is a collection of Old Norse poems of gods and heroes and the *Saga of the Volsungs* deals particularly with the heroic line of the Volsungs, culminating in the disastrous relationship between the hero Sigurd and the valkyrie Brunnhilde.

The four operas are: The Rhinegold, The Valkyrie, Siegfried, and the Twilight of the Gods




A thoroughly modern ideal



While Wagner's opera looks backward and idealizes the heroic literature of Scandinavia and Germany, it also portrays thoroughly modern ideals. The god Wotan reveals, for example, that in the hero Siegfried, he has attempted to create the ideal man, a man who is free of the gods and will transcend them—this is very much like the idea of the "Superman" that became present in the late 19th century (and is largely associated with Nietzsche, who was influenced by Wagner). In the final opera, the gods die, indicating man's spiritual and artistic freedom from moribund traditionalism.

Can does kill dragonz?



I slayz your dragonz!!

Wagner and Racism

- Richard Wagner, despite having many close Jewish friends, is also known for his "anti-Semitism", largely due to an essay he published railing against what he called "Jewishness" and Jewish composers in German music. Several of his villains have stereotypical "Jewish" traits, as compared to his virile Germanic supermen.
- Much later in his life (after his last opera was completed) Wagner was also known to be interested in racialist theory positing the supremacy of "Aryan" races over the "Semitic" and "African".
- Regardless of Wagner's personal views, his later appropriation by the Nazi party should probably come as unsurprising.

Compare the portrayal of the villain and hero from Arthur Rackham's illustrations for the *Ring Cycle*



The Thule Society



Formed in Germany in the early 20th century, the Thule Society was a folklore and occult group interested largely in Germanic and Scandinavian antiquity. However, racism (particularly anti-Semitism) and anti-Communism were part of its ideology. The Thule Society is also known for its sponsorship of the Deutsche Arbeitspartei, which was later turned by Hitler into the Nazi party.

During WWII, Germanic and Scandinavian Romanticism became too much associated with the enemy to remain fashionable. J.R.R. Tolkien railed against that "ruddy little ignoramus" Adolf Hitler" for "ruining, perverting, misapplying, and making for ever accursed, that noble northern spirit, a supreme contribution to Europe, which I have ever loved, and tried to present in its true light."

Viking Metal: Bringing Bombast Back

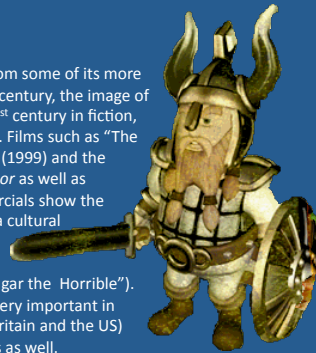
Growing out of black metal in Scandinavia in the late 1980s and early 1990s, "Viking Metal" bands focused their content on Norse Mythology, particularly the darker more violent aspects. The sound tends to be "epic" with both conventional and growling vocals and occasionally fuses folk music. Notable Viking metal bands are Bathory (arguably the pioneers of the genre), Enslaved (below) and Einherjar.



Peter Nicolai Arbo's *Asgardreid* was used on the album cover of Bathory's "Blood Fire Death"

Viking 2.0

Having been mostly rehabilitated from some of its more unfortunate associations in the last century, the image of the Viking is still popular into the 21st century in fiction, film, and even as a commercial logo. Films such as "The Vikings" (1958), "The 13th Warrior" (1999) and the upcoming film of the comic book *Thor* as well as video games, novels and TV commercials show the popularity the Viking still enjoys as a cultural symbol. The modern-day Viking can be romanticized, idealized, and lampooned (e.g. the comic strip "Hagar the Horrible"). Viking identity and heritage is still very important in Scandinavian countries (as well as Britain and the US) and has proven attractive to tourists as well.



Looking Forward

- In 2000 the Smithsonian museum greeted the new millennium with an exhibit on the Viking discovery of America. The Vikings served as model of enterprise, ingenuity, resolve and courage (pillage and plunder were downplayed here) and as the ideal representation of the spirit of the new millennium.



Statue outside the capitol building in Minnesota, where many Scandinavian immigrants to America settled.

Links to images

1. <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Viking.jpg>
2. <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vikings.jpg>
3. http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vikings_in_a_boat.jpg
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20. http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Viking_at_MN_Capitol.jpg

A few Viking-themed videos

- Clip from the 13th Warrior: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=13thWarrior>
- Capital One commercials: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CapitalOne>, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CapitalOne>, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CapitalOne>
- Stephen Colbert's Viking Economics <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ColbertViking>
- Hail, Odin! Enslaved's "Path to Vanir" <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OdinEnslaved> You can find a lot more Viking metal on Youtube.
- "Ride of the Valkyries" from Wagner's *Ring Cycle* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RingCycle>
- Kill da Wabbit! <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KillDaWabbit>