The Vikings were the people who came from Scandinavia (Denmark, Norway, and Sweden) from about AD 700 to about 1125. This period is called the Viking Age. Vikings traveled great distances in their longships, as traders, settlers and warriors. Many of the Vikings were tall and had red or blonde hair and beards. Villages on or near any coast in early medieval Europe lived in great fear of Viking attacks. Some of the countries most affected by Viking piracy were England, Scotland, Ireland, Germany and France.

The Vikings were people from Scandinavia. Today, these countries are known as Denmark, Norway and Sweden. Around 400 CE, they began to make frequent raids by boat into Europe, even going into the Mediterranean Sea and raiding Sicily and southern Italy. The Vikings began attacking the Atlantic coast of southern France and also the eastern coast of England.

By 1000 AD, some of the Vikings settled in northern France, where they were called the Normans, or Northmen, and the area where they settled is still called Normandy. Here they also converted to Christianity.

At around the same time, some Vikings sailed west to Iceland, Greenland, and even as far as Nova Scotia, Canada. Some Viking men married Native American women there. The Vikings settled in Iceland and Greenland, but only stayed in Canada for a short time, because the Inuit people there were too strong for them, and because a global cooling period beginning about 1300 CE made the oceans too icy for their ships to sail.

The Vikings were superb sailors. They built boats that were very long and narrow. They were called longships or dragonships, because they had giant wood carvings of dragons that were displayed at the front of the boat. The dragon was used so that people would be frightened. Each longboat could carry over 100 people.

Many people think of the Vikings as always wearing big helmets with horns. Actually, there was one Viking helmet found in Norway, and it didn’t have any horns.

The Vikings discovered America about 500 years before Christopher Columbus set sail.
Leif Erickson was one of the important Viking leaders. He was the one that led the Viking sailors over to the land now known as America.

Women were very important members of the Viking culture. Because their men were away for long periods of time, the women were the ones that ran the household and farms. Viking women also knew how to protect themselves, and they could pick out any man they wanted to be their husband.

Even before the Vikings converted to Christianity, religion was a very important part of the Viking culture. Vikings worshiped a various number of Gods and Goddesses. Since the Vikings were known warriors, it makes sense that their version of heaven included fighting all day. If a Viking was a good and true warrior, then they would be able to go to Valhalla, or heaven. After fighting all day long, their nights were spent eating and drinking like it was a party. This was called feasting.

Eric the Red was another famous Viking leader. He tried to get his people to settle up North. Even though the land was crusted with ice and completely white with frozen snow, he called the area Greenland to trick others to come live there. Unfortunately, the only time there was actually anything green there was just a little by the ocean during the peak of the summer.
VIKING LONGSHIPS

SHIP FACTS

Sizes of longships vary greatly, but most are between 60 feet and 90 feet in length. The larger ships can carry more than 50 warriors at a time.

Despite their large size, many longships are still actually light enough to be dragged out of the water and pushed on rollers for short distances overland. This is essential when rivers are blocked by rocks, rapids, or waterfalls.

Many longships can reach the formidable speed of 17 miles per hour in a strong wind. Even when under sail, the maximum speed is still amazingly fast—7 miles per hour.

The biggest and most famous longship of its day was built in 996 by Olaf Tryggvason, king of Norway. Named The Long Serpent, it was a staggering 121 feet long and was powered by the strength of more than 68 oarsmen.

1) Why was the design of Vikings longships so important to their effectiveness?

2) What were the results of clinker-building? How would this offer the Vikings extra protection and safety?

3) Why do you think the Vikings decorated their longships with drekars?

4) Why was it necessary for the longships to be light in weight? (despite the size).

5) The Viking longships were able to travel at very high speeds—what benefits could this provide the Vikings?

So, what exactly made the Vikings' longships so useful, durable, and deadly? The main strength lay in design.

First, craftsmen used axes to split oak trees into long, thin boards. They then used iron nails to attach them to a long keel, or spine, which ran along the bottom of the ship. The boards were nailed to each other so they overlapped, like a fish's scales.

Thin ropes soaked with pitch (a tar-like liquid made from tree sap) were placed in the joints between the boards to waterproof the hull. Finally, the structure was reinforced with wooden ribs, which were tied in with flexible larch tree roots.

This technique is known as clinker-building, and it results in vessels that are quite flexible. While the hulls of other ships might snap in two if they ran into rough weather or other obstacles, longships usually bent, but didn't break. Since the keel didn't run too deep, the ships could easily navigate rivers and other shallow waters. And because they were light, they could go very fast.

Viking warships were known as drekars, or dragons, because of the fearsome wooden dragon-heads adorning their fronts. Their sides were usually decorated with the shields of the warriors on board, and the biggest could carry more than 100 men! Of course, drekars were only used in war; when Vikings were more interested in trading, they carried supplies in cargo ships called knarrs.

Numerous Viking longships have been unearthed in Northern Europe. The largest, a warship found in Denmark in 1996, is more than 36 meters long. The most famous is probably the Gokstad ship (pictured), unearthed in Norway in 880. You can see it at the Viking Ship Museum in the Norwegian capital of Oslo.

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