Finding Out About
THE VIKINGS
Also in this series:

FINDING OUT ABOUT THE INCAS          C. A. Burland
FINDING OUT ABOUT THE ATHENIANS       Patrick Anderson
FINDING OUT ABOUT IMPERIAL CHINA      Professor C. P. Fitzgerald
FINDING OUT ABOUT ANCIENT EGYPT       H. E. L. Mellersh
FINDING OUT ABOUT STONE AGE BRITAIN   H. E. L. Mellersh
FINDING OUT ABOUT THE BABYLONIANS     E. Royston Pike
FINDING OUT ABOUT IMPERIAL ROME       P. E. Cleator
FINDING OUT ABOUT THE TROJANS         H. E. L. Mellersh
EXPLORING THE PAST SERIES
General Editor: Patrick Moore

Finding Out About

THE VIKINGS

by

D. PHILLIPS-BIRT

Illustrated by

DAVID COBB

FREDERICK MULLER LIMITED
LONDON
CONTENTS

1. THE ARRIVAL OF THE VIKINGS . . . 9
2. WHO WERE THE VIKINGS? . . . 25
3. WHY THE VIKINGS HAD FINE SHIPS . . . 33
4. THE VIKINGS IN ACTION . . . 51
5. DIGGING UP THE VIKINGS . . . 68
6. WHAT THE VIKINGS BELIEVED . . . 79
7. THE SHIPS THAT MADE THE VIKINGS . . . 92
8. FINDING OUT MORE ABOUT THE VIKINGS . . . 103
9. THE VIKINGS REACH ACROSS THE WORLD . . . 120
INDEX . . . . . . . . . . . 139
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Illustration Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Viking dressed for raiding</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stone Age rock carvings drawn perhaps 4,000 years ago</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piece of ship’s planking found in Norway and now about 3,000 years old</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rock carving of a ship made in the Bronze Age</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A group of Bronze Age rock carvings</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viking routes</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The broad waters of Scapa Flow</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Gosforth Cross, Northumberland</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four-wheeled cart in the Oseberg ship grave</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A runic stone and Viking sword</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Areas of Viking penetration</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PHOTOGRAPHS

Between pages 56 and 57
The Oseberg Ship, most beautiful of all the Viking galleys found
A Norwegian creek
Another view of the Oseberg Ship
Viking iron swords
A sword discovered in Ireland and a spearhead found beside the Thames

Between pages 88 and 89
The noble Gokstad Ship
Another view of the Gokstad Ship
A beautifully carved head in wood and another carved animal’s head
A Norwegian runic stone
A runic stone found in Sweden

Between pages 120 and 121
A Swedish runic stone with involved design
A comb in a case and a belt buckle
A fine piece of Viking jewellery
Viking treasure trove discovered in the Isle of Man
More Viking jewellery
A tortoise brooch
THE ARRIVAL OF THE VIKINGS

RATHER MORE than a thousand years ago Churchmen and men of learning throughout Europe were inclined to believe that the end of the world was at hand. Like people in other ages they looked around them and all they could see was change and decay; what had once seemed permanent was in ruins.

Even Rome itself, the heart and head of the old Empire, was desolate. There was no longer an Emperor. Splendid architecture and monuments, surviving beyond the better days when they had been raised, looked over streets that were almost empty; and in the Forum the Emperor Trajan’scolumn shone in the sun recalling the time when the Empire had been at its greatest.

Those were the days that the minds of thoughtful men now kept returning to, when the Roman Empire had stretched from the north of Africa, eastwards to the Persian Gulf, westward to the Atlantic shores, and ended in the north only where the forests began and lines of outpost camps stretched along the Danube and the Rhine, or by the wall that Hadrian had built in the northern mists of Britain.
The Empire was dead, though men hesitated to believe that such a catastrophe was possible. But Europe had gained no single new master. Rather, she had a hundred petty masters risen from amongst the northern races which had taken the lands that had been garrisoned by the Legions of the Empire. Europe was split into a multitude of kingdoms governed by warring chiefs, who at their least might be little more than big landowners, or might have risen to the distinction of bishoprics or dukedoms.

So it was in what is now France and Spain and Italy, so indeed everywhere. Once the edicts of the Roman Senate and the shields of the Roman centurions had been enough to impose some kind of order upon an unruly Europe; now there was just the government of competing strong men, and the reminders of old times in the straight ribbons of Roman roads laid across Gaul and Britain, and in pillared villas here and there now hung with uncut ivy.

The British Isles were a Europe in miniature. Kent might be at war with Sussex, East Anglia divided against itself, and ever-altering kingdoms like Mercia, Wessex and Northumbria passed their days in restless strife. North of them was Scotland, the barren, mountainous kingdom of the Picts and Scots who were for ever at war with one another. And beyond them was the sea; while over the rim of its northern horizon were the countries that were yet in no sense European, where the Northmen lived; the lands, indeed, of the midnight sun but impenetrably dark none the less even to the most
educated of the rest of Europe. Neither the Roman Empire nor the missionaries who spread Christianity had stretched to the Northmen. Here people who became known some centuries later as the Vikings, lived hunting, fishing, boat-building and worshipping fiery, but not wholly unlikeable, gods of great antiquity. The rest of Europe was to come to know the Northmen, but not yet.

The Roman Empire as a power may have been dead; but it left more than the memory of civilization behind it. Even to the edges of the Empire there had been carried the rudiments of elegant life, some learning, some Christianity.

Out of the ruins of the Roman Empire was appearing gradually the kind of government that became known as the Feudal System, which someone neatly described once as disorder slightly organized; and during the years while this slight degree of organization was growing up the Church gained considerable power and wealth. It is difficult for us to appreciate today, in a world where the central civil governments are all-powerful, where nearly everyone can read and write, and news travels rapidly, how important the Church could be at a time when few people had contacts beyond the fields around them, and civil government was mainly a riot of illiterate aristocrats having quarrels. Churchmen belonged to a great international body. And in the Church alone were men who could read and write, who could copy and distribute manuscripts (there were no printing presses) and collect libraries.
This will suggest to you, incidentally, one of the problems confronting us in finding out about the Vikings. We cannot turn to printed books written by them. So far as literature is concerned we have to rely on a few precious manuscripts, which have survived until today and been studied by scholars, and which originally were probably written out by priestly hands in abbeys that you may still see today standing in ruins.

The Church became an ardent missionary in Europe. The old pagan religion of northern Europe was essentially that of the Vikings, but while much of the rest of Europe was converted at this time, the Vikings were too far away to be influenced. The missionary work spread the faith from the Continent to the small islands of Britain, though parts of the country remained true to the older gods. All over Europe the scattered Christian settlements grew in power, and the new monastic orders, such as that of St. Benedict, established communities of monks and nuns. These were often made rich by gifts from powerful laymen who hoped by such presentations to take a short cut to Heaven.

They may have been disappointed in this respect, but a little later in history the Vikings found good reasons to be grateful for their wishful thinking.

Northumbria, in the north of England, approximating to the present Yorkshire, Durham and Northumberland, was particularly noted for its religious establishments and the ardour of its faith, and in that country of moor, heather and thick
winter mists, monks walked from place to distant place preaching to and working for the people. One of the most important of the monasteries was built on Holy Island, and Northumbria was regarded as a centre of light and learning, far ahead of the rest of England in civilization.

In Ireland the missionary and evangelistic work was even stronger; amongst the many religious settlements made was one on Iona, a small island off the extreme west coast of Scotland, and this was in close touch with Ireland. Above the high cliffs where the fog swirled between Ireland and Scotland there appeared one of the greatest shrines of learning and religion, and men and women of the Christian faith gathered in the island from all parts of Europe.

From our point of view today we may find one disadvantage in this conversion to Christianity that was occurring. Under the old pagan faith, people like the Vikings were often buried along with their most valuable possessions—the finest of their weapons, ornaments and beautiful jewellery; or even more utilitarian things such as carts or kitchen pots. We today, digging in the graves, discover such objects and from them fit in a few more pieces to the jigsaw of the past, learning how remote people lived who have left no writings to tell us.

But Christianity objected to this custom. With the spread of the religion we have to rely more and more upon the few written records that remain. In this respect at least we may be glad that the Vikings, still living too far north of Holy Island and
Iona and the ardent Christianity of Northumbria and Ireland, remained pagans and continued to bury with their dead a mass of objects, even complete ships. Without them we would be unable to tell this story.

Meanwhile new nations were appearing in Europe. One of the biggest of these was the kingdom of the Franks, occupying roughly what today is France and West Germany. The Emperor Charlemagne, or Charles the Great, was the ruler who spread the Frankish empire farthest, and he made his conquests a crusade. He sought to preserve against the pagans of the north, and the Mohammedans of the south, both Christianity and the decaying culture of Rome and the Mediterranean. While the monks in the abbeys and monasteries looked after their corners of the countryside, wrote and copied manuscripts, and provided hospitality for the travellers, Charlemagne vigorously spread Christianity at the point of the sword and offered to his defeated enemies the alternative of baptism or death. Numerous people chose baptism. Eventually his far-flying conquests reached the shores of the Baltic. The Danes, who were very soon to form one branch of the Vikings, were already sheltering many of those driven before the Emperor of the Franks. Like the refugees, the Danes preferred their old religion to the invading Christianity, and inevitably regarded Charlemagne with less admiration than did Christian Europe; and they were shortly to show this.

One spring day at about this time, three ships
approached the Dorset coast from the sea. Had you been watching out from where Portland now stands high on its rock, with the long low sweep of the Chesil Beach stretching away in a curve below you towards the west, you might have seen the three dots on the horizon grow in size. Gradually the ships would have revealed some of their details. Bright sails would have appeared, sails with a chequerboard pattern of red and white diamonds. But almost before you had time to examine them carefully, they would have been lowered; then the short mast, controlled by several men with ropes, would have been hinged downwards towards the stern and laid inside the hull.

In a few moments, the dark hulls would have taken on a centipede air as many oars were struck out on either side. Propelled swiftly, and leaving their long wakes in the sea, the three boats would close the shore, and on board, amid the crowd of swinging oarsmen and men busy about tasks in the middle of the ship, you would have the sight of piles of round shields painted brightly in yellow and black. And on the men themselves, in their long yellow jerkins and bagging trousers gathered in at the knees, would swing long two-edged iron swords.

Almost up to the shore now, the ships would slacken their speed, the oarsmen working more easily. Now you might hear shouts in a language unknown to you, as the ships came gently into the shallow water and some of the hundred and fifty or so men on board would wade ashore. Leaving
A Viking dressed for raiding
the rest behind them, this party would proceed inshore, axes in their hands, swords dangling by their thighs.

We do not know, in fact, whether there was a watcher that day who saw the strange ships from nobody knew where coming up to the coast. It is not unlikely that there was, but perhaps the raiders were unobserved until they had landed. But we do know what happened a little later. The news of their arrival spread. The chief man of the locality, the King’s reeve, went up to them to discover their business. He was killed, and soon afterwards the raiders returned to the beach and put back to sea.

News travelled very slowly in those days. The average man of Dorset knew little about most of the people inhabiting other parts of England, and hardly anything about those from over the sea. We may guess that there was much worried discussion about where the ships had come from, who the men were, whether they would return. Plans were perhaps laid to give them a hotter reception should they appear again.

Years passed, however, before the Vikings again came to the south of England.

Now, let it be owned that we are not certain about several details of the above story. We are not sure, for example, about the date on which this first recorded raid of the Vikings occurred, but we may say it was some time between A.D. 785 and 790. We cannot be sure of exactly where it occurred, and it may have been nearer Dorchester than
Portland that the King’s reeve was murdered. We cannot even be assured that the raid, though the first mentioned in the Old English Chronicle, from which the story comes, was indeed the very first to have occurred on the English coast.

All this will suggest to you how difficult it may be to piece together the facts of history, especially before the days of printing. We have to take a clue here, a hint there, and make out of the pieces of the jigsaw a picture that approximates to the truth. Inevitably, the jigsaw is never perfectly completed; bits have got lost: there are always holes somewhere in the picture. For these were happenings of more than a thousand years ago.

It was not long before the Vikings struck again elsewhere. One day they descended upon Holy Island.

Holy Island, or Lindisfarne, is off the Northumberland coast. On it stands a Benedictine monastery and a castle; a fishing village spreads itself close by the shore, and at low tide a sandy spit connects the island to the mainland.

A party of British archaeologists working not many years ago on the restoration of the ruined monastery found a very old stone carved in relief upon two sides with symbols and pictures. On one side there were worshippers portrayed at prayer, drawings of the cross, and other expressions of Christian faith; on the other, Vikings were depicted in formidable battle attitudes advancing with their weapons brandished.

The early Viking raid on Lindisfarne has been
described in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and the account expresses all the horror which those alive at the time had experienced at the event. It had been preceded, it was said, by omens—tempests and famine occurred, and even dragons were reported—while at about this time blood was seen to drip from the roof of a church in York, all testifying, according to one clever man whose writing still remains to us from those days, to the wickedness of the people of Northumbria; which, you must agree, seems bad luck on them, since they were considered to be amongst the best Christians in the islands. You may believe what you will of the supernatural; what is certain is that with summer, one June day, the Vikings descended, plundering the rich shrine before destroying it, and murdering the monks and nuns. Then the black ships pointed their prows out to the sea again, deeper laden than they had been earlier with all the loot on board, and left behind a scene of desolation and bloodshed, the story of which carried terror as it spread. “Behold the church of St. Cuthbert sprinkled with the blood of the priests of Christ” bewailed a monk of Holy Island at that time.

The stone found by the archaeologists was recognized to have been carved soon after the monastery had been pillaged, perhaps by one who had witnessed the event and lived—possibly a monk who had escaped the carnage—and even more than the literary accounts of the event, like that in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, it makes alive
for us the horror that people then felt in the desecration of one of the noblest of Christian shrines.

Tragic though its connections may be, that old carved stone dug up on Holy Island is able to demonstrate neatly to us how we have been able to learn much about the Vikings’ way of life. The relief carving shows the sort of rough jacket worn by a raiding Viking of that period, their tightly gathered in trousers, the type of axes and swords that they used.

This was one of the first Viking raids, and of those early days at the end of the eighth century there is much that we still do not know.

The Vikings ranged round the coasts and far up the rivers of Europe, masters of all because of the mobility given to them by their boats and their superb seamanship. Unfortunately for us, their ability with the pen did not match that with sail and oar. When we wish to read something about the Vikings written in their own day, we can find little apart from what their enemies wrote of them in the literature of the lands that they plundered.

And inevitably such writings are not polite about the raiders; indeed they burn with hatred of the pagan host that robbed and murdered. This distorts our picture of the Vikings. Though you could hardly describe them as soldier-scholar-gentlemen, though indeed they were coarse and brutal in much of their lives, so, too, were the Christian peoples whom they treated so badly. The Christians often treated each other no less unpleasantly, not to
mention the Vikings if they fell into their power. Thus we read of the English nailing the skin flayed from Vikings on to their church doors.

We learn much about the Vikings as well as the English from a work that is the first example of great English prose and also the earliest example of history ever written in English. It is the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle mentioned above, or the Old English Chronicle, as it is sometimes called. The English in which it was written is not the English of today, but that earlier language of which much remains in our own speech, and which during these years was still being moulded into the form that Shakespeare used so gloriously.

King Alfred, who spent much time fighting the Vikings, and was also one of the greatest English rulers and scholars (though you may overlook it, remembering only that he burnt the cakes, which is unfair to him), was responsible for parts of the Chronicle, though he may not have written any of it personally.

It is a long and wandering work, very dull in places, but it tells much that we should not know otherwise about the history of our country from the beginning of the Christian period until the middle of the twelfth century. It was largely compiled by monks, the most important of the work being done at Winchester. The best reading comes in the parts dealing with the English struggle with the Vikings, when the story is told with drama and events march excitingly. Poems are included in the book—one is about a battle, fought where in
England we are not sure, when an English army routed the Northmen.

Many versions of the *Chronicle* exist, for it was frequently revised. It might well have been lost altogether, but for a certain Sir Robert Cotton who lived some four hundred years later in the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. He collected old manuscripts and he was in time to rescue many works which might have disappeared (as a great number did) when the monasteries were dissolved by Queen Elizabeth's father King Henry VIII and their contents scattered. In the days of Sir Robert's grandson the collection was damaged by fire, but it later found its way to the British Museum where it provides, including the editions of the *Old English Chronicle*, some of the most important written information we have about the Vikings of A.D. 800–900.

We are not sure how soon it was after the first Viking raid that others followed, in what force the raiders arrived, or where on the coast they made their landings. But we do know that before long place after place near the coast or up the river estuaries were receiving the dreaded visitations of the dark ships, while the abbey bells rang out their warnings over the countryside.

At home the Vikings were poor. But as we have seen earlier, at the time the Church was rich, and also the most civilized organization in a Europe that was otherwise warrior ruled. It was also defenceless. Monasteries were islands of comparative calm and civilization, of culture and people
who read and thought, and also did some practical good in charity and the organization of the countryside. There was, however, nobody to guard the treasure-loaded shrines.

The monasteries were often situated like Lindisfarne on islands or remote headlands within the sound of the waves that in winter hurled themselves on the beaches and at the feet of cliffs that stood far out into the sea. The darkness, loneliness, and the gales of winter were the unassailable defence of the shrines for much of the year, and the strong voice of the wind and sea must have been welcome in the ears of those living behind the protecting walls. For monk and nun knew now the terror that might descend on them when the sea again lay quieter under the skies of summer and the drumming waves that defended them were calm.

But nothing could have been more convenient to the Vikings than this siting of the religious houses. They were not in their early days highly armed warriors; and though later they usually wore mail shirts and developed military tactics for fighting once they had landed from the ships, originally they were water thieves, quick enough to brandish the two-handled battle-axe which they used with such strength if necessary, but preferring to land and loot and push off again before the slow-moving countryside could be organized to oppose them.

It was not long before other monasteries suffered the fate of Lindisfarne. Two years later, as we know from the Old English Chronicle, the raiders from the sea fell upon the Island of Iona, the small
island we have mentioned off the west coast of Scotland, where above the gaunt yet beautiful cliffs numerous carved stones and crosses scatter the small countryside still with reminders that Iona was once more than just the tiny Hebridean island of today inhabited by a few hundred people. Shakespeare called the island Colmekill—you will find this in *Macbeth*—and the word means “island of St. Columb’s tomb”.

Here, some two hundred years before the Vikings had arrived, St. Columba had founded his great monastery, and now it was not only one of Christianity’s powerful lights, but rich as well. The Vikings, rowing and sailing down those dangerous seas where the Atlantic meets the North Channel of the Irish Sea, and fog comes down quickly even in summer, landed on the island and sacked the treasures of the monastery, carrying them back to their own lands. In our day some of it has been dug out of graves and burial mounds, and it provides one more link in the story of where the Vikings went and what they did.

Iona was profitable to them. They twice visited it again and laid it waste, in the years A.D. 802 and 806. Meanwhile, they had raided several other places on the coast. The Viking Age had begun in earnest, and in a few years they were to be masters of much of Ireland; and not Iona alone, but numerous monasteries rich in treasure were to surrender their hoards to be carried back in the longboats to the countries of the Northmen.
WHO WERE THE VIKINGS?

IT IS always best, though often not easy, to be sure of what you mean by the words you use. In the story that we have to tell here, it is peculiarly difficult. The story concerns the peoples who occupied the countries that we now know as Norway, Sweden and Denmark. It stretches in time from that far-off period when the ice of the last Ice Age crept away northwards from those lands, back to where the polar regions now are, and allowed men to enter Scandinavia; it reaches forward to a comparatively recent period, that of William the Conqueror, the Norman who conquered England and had in his veins, like all the Normans, strong Viking blood.

So, who were the Vikings? It is a name commonly used to indicate the people of Norway, Sweden and Denmark, who between A.D. 800 and A.D. 1000 left their far northern lands, mainly in boats, to raid the richer, better-civilized countries of Europe to the south. For in that southern Europe, there still remained, as we have seen, some of the wealth and culture, the stone-built towns, the roads and higher civilization which began
with the far more ancient Greeks, and had been carried all over Europe by the rulers, the armies and the roads of the Roman Empire. All the power that had created that civilization was long past now; but like an old house decaying for lack of attention, yet still containing the beautiful things that had once glistened in its rooms when crystal lights shone, and there were people and music under its roof, there was plenty lying around for burglars to steal. In that old house which was the Europe of A.D. 800 (more than eleven hundred years ago) the burglars were the Vikings.

The name by which we know them—"Viking"—is able to tell you a little about the sort of people they were. Actually, many possible meanings of the word have been suggested, and we need not worry here about which is right, for each of them fits the case and is able to give you an impression of them.

Some will tell you that the word simply means "warrior". If so, it is suitable, for they were warriors, if of an unusual kind, who were convinced that death in battle led straight to the Hall of Valhalla, where heroes lived for ever in the stimulating company of Odin, the one-eyed god of war. Personal honour was vital for their self-respect, and to be admired for bravery was the greatest pleasure they could receive.

Others will explain that the word "Viking" comes from the word "vik", meaning creek or inlet. This suits them even better. For they came from beside the fjords, where the mountains of Scandinavia are broken apart by long wandering
arms of the sea which cut far inland, while above their steep-sided cliffs the forests of oak and pine grow thickly. In such places, by beaches formed in the clefts of the rocks, or by the sandy estuaries of Danish rivers, the Vikings lived during the winter in their long wooden huts, eating, drinking, singing, building their ships, and planning what they were going to do far over the sea when their ships were launched and the summer had come.

Or perhaps the term “Viking” is derived from an Old English word meaning camp. That, too, describes the Viking people. At home they lived in what really were encampments; and while abroad, when the ships were hauled out on the foreshore, a camp would spring up beside them. Such encampments were raised as far west as America, in Greenland where snow-covered mountains and glaciers were the background, in bays of the clearest blue water in the Mediterranean, and also far inland, in the heart of France, by the Île de Paris itself, where the upper waters of the River Seine lapped the shore and you may now today stand by the Cathedral of Notre Dame.

Warriors, men of the creeks, men of the camp—these all describe the people who were called Vikings. But the descriptions fail in one important respect. For above everything the Vikings were men of the ships. They were the greatest seamen and shipbuilders of their day, amongst the greatest there have ever been, and but for this fact we should not be concerned with Vikings in the middle of the twentieth century.
As it is, we have been interested enough in them to piece together, small bit by bit, the Viking story, by digging in the ground to find remains of their ships, weapons, jewellery, and household equipment; to examine the drawings that they left on rocks; to study the songs and stories that they sang and told beside the fire during the long and dark northern winters, and which survived for centuries, passed from person to person before being written down long afterwards.

The Viking story began long before anyone had thought of calling the people Vikings. If you look at a map of Europe showing the continent as it was some thirteen hundred years ago, you will find that what we now call Norway was called Northmanland. The name may be used for Sweden and Denmark too. Or you will find that some maps give no name to any of the countries. For they were then beyond the limits of the Europe that then mattered. So we must come to an agreement to call the Norwegian, Swede and Dane Northmen, inhabitants of lands on the remote and neglected edge of the Europe that the Roman Empire had once governed, and where most people, by the year A.D. 800, confessed Christianity as their religion. And this the Vikings emphatically did not; though we shall find that by the end of our story the gay, cruel, boisterous gods of the Northman had been discarded even by them. The Norwegians we shall call Norsemen, and the Dane, Swede and Norseman—Northmen all—were all Vikings.

They had a culture, as we shall see as our story
proceeds, but it was not the culture laid upon Europe by Greece and Rome; and the people they plundered described them as “hateful, faithless, cruel, and enemies of civilization and the arts of life”. They also called them a “blind force of destruction”, and prayed “Save us, O God, from their violence”.

Such was the terror that the Vikings evoked when they crossed the seas in their boats and pounced on this or that place on the European coastline, landing on a beach here, rowing far up a river there, setting off on a raiding expedition inshore; then getting back to the ships and away to sea again, leaving flames and probably murder behind them and carrying treasure with them over the horizon.

However, the Viking story did not begin with their piratical raids in about A.D. 800, and it did not end a few centuries later with more murder and homesteads still blazing. The Vikings, who burst upon the European scene with such violence in about A.D. 800 and held the stage with much effective drama for two centuries, already had a long history behind them, and when it was all over they left their heavy mark upon the future of Europe. You are, perhaps, partly a Viking.

For century after century the peoples of Norway, Sweden and Denmark—mainly farmers, shipwrights and fishermen, with some traders as well—lived their own lives within the boundaries of their own countries. Norway, wrote the historian Adam of Bremen in 1075, is the remotest land in
the world; which was what most people in Europe, less knowledgeable than the historian, felt about Scandinavia at that time.

Suddenly, some three hundred years before Adam of Bremen wrote, in about A.D. 800, rather more than one thousand years ago, they suddenly, as we have seen, took to their boats and burst upon a terrified Europe to the south of them in a series of raids and colonizing ventures which continued for two hundred years.

Why did they abruptly decide to become pirates and then colonizers and conquerors? History, by piecing together clues, has to try to answer such questions. Some people have believed that it was due to pressure of population, to the fact that a growing number of Northmen were being forced to inhabit their rather poor and barren land. We have no proof of this. Others suggest that it was because in Norway and Denmark, though they were in no sense united nations in the modern sense, there was growing up more organization and central authority, which did not suit the rugged, freebooting spirit of some Vikings or their attitude to life, expressed in their worship of Odin, the Lord of War; Thor, the God of Thunder; and Frey, the God of Fertility.

The Saxons, who were barbarians like the Northmen, were neighbours of the Danes. But as we have seen in the first chapter, Charlemagne, King of the Franks, had conquered them, destroyed the worship of Thor and Odin and pressed Christianity on them with a murderous violence
that was hardly Christian. This, it has been said, is another reason why the Vikings attacked Christian Europe with such ferocity and were particularly violent to the churches and monasteries.

It seems more likely that churches and monasteries were attacked because of their wealth, and that the main reason for the sudden Viking onslaught was the exciting discovery, made some time about A.D. 800, that to the south of their own home there was a world that was weak, defenceless, wonderfully rich, ripe for plunder. A sort of gold rush began, offering chances to get rich quickly which the energetic and adventure-loving Vikings willingly grasped.

The nature of the Vikings’ own land can tell us much about the Vikings themselves. Norway was a wild country of forests and mountains cut into by those long, narrow, wandering arms of the sea—the fjords—a land much of which was barren and some of it north of the Arctic Circle, in areas where the midnight sun gleams palely; an inhospitable and rugged land even today, and much more so a thousand years ago.

It could offer little to its inhabitants but the sea, which ran up between the chains of islands off the coast or penetrated perhaps a hundred miles deep inland up the sunken valleys which made the fjords. The men of Norway turned to the sea because it was kinder than the land. For the warm Gulf Stream ran into their western shores, and there was a narrow coastal strip of country that was warmer and more comfortable than the rest.
So men hugged the coastline and fished the sea—in the Leads or channels lying between the numerous islands off the coast. They had been doing this for thousands of years before they gained the name of Viking and went a-raiding. And they would never have been able to have gone raiding but for the fact that for a thousand years their ancestors had been developing the arts of seamanship and shipbuilding. Hundreds upon hundreds of years had gone into the evolution of the skill and the fine sea-going ships that the Vikings possessed in A.D. 800 and which enabled them to pounce on this and that point of the European coastline and then get away again to sea before anyone could catch them.

We have been able to piece together the early story of the Northmen in various ways that we shall now examine. Let us for the moment forget about the Vikings of A.D. 800 who raided Iona and Holy Island and turn back to a remote past, so long ago that there was no writing, no nations but only tribes, and no history that we can find except by digging in the earth for remains—for human or animals’ bones, for weapons or tools—or by examining pictures scratched upon the surface of rocks.

In such days the Viking story began.
WHY THE VIKINGS HAD FINE SHIPS

WE SHALL be considering boats and ships a great deal in this story. It was simply because the Vikings had unusual skill in shipbuilding and something amounting to genius as seamen that they became the people we are interested in today. Of no people or race that has become great in the world can it be said as truly as of them that their life centred upon their ships. Without them they would have remained what they had been: a race of poor farmers and fishermen dwelling beside the Baltic sea and northern Atlantic on the fringe of Europe.

We must also at this point remember something most easily forgotten at this present time. For the last hundred years change has been so rapid in the world, mainly owing to mechanical inventions, that we can hardly imagine the earlier world when changes came gradually and a lifetime was not long enough to notice them, nor even many lifetimes on end, and a great-great-grandson would live in a world his great-great-grandfather would understand at a glance.

Men learned once, for example, to make a simple
Stone Age rock carvings of ships drawn perhaps 4,000 years ago
bronze axe. At first it was not a very good axe. It was improved, and improved again, and yet again until it became quite an efficient tool or weapon. But a thousand years may have passed between the time when men invented the first poor bronze axe and devised the last good one; yet they were both just bronze axes, and unless you knew a little about how to handle them you might not be able to distinguish much difference between the first and the last.

You see how different it all is today. In the lifetime of your father, an aeroplane rose into the air and flew slowly, wobbling slightly, a little height above the ground for the distance that a golfer may drive a ball from the tee; and it was considered the wonder of the day. Never had man flown nearly three hundred yards before. Now he travels three thousand miles above the clouds between breakfast and luncheon. Material progress as rapid as this has never been experienced before by the human race. In the past it took some twenty times as long as the fifty years that passed between the early aeroplane staggering its few hundred yards and the present supersonic aircraft, for men to discover how to make a slight improvement in an axe. A thousand years may seem an impressively long time, but even they are only fifteen normal lifetimes stretched end to end.

So it is that the Vikings owed the skill in shipbuilding and seamanship that they showed to the world in A.D. 800 to the ancestors of an extremely remote past.
Drawings of some of the earliest ships have been found on the smooth faces of rocks in the north of Norway, and they are amongst the earliest drawings ever made by man of anything in northern Europe.

They bring us back to the days when men first inhabited this country. The seas were at a higher level than they are now, for the ice cap was retreating northward and the forests which were later to provide such good timber for shipbuilding were advancing from the west over country that had once been covered by ice. The ship drawings cut into the rocks are of various sizes, some more than four feet four inches in length, others just a few inches long, and they are all simple in outline, like pencil sketches on a pad.

At first sight they might not seem able to tell us much; but if we assume—and we have reason to do so—that artists were accurate, an expert is able to draw many conclusions from them, simple as they are. It seems probable that they were accurate, for they drew not only ships but animals which we can judge, vivid outline sketches of reindeer, seals, elk cows and whales, the creatures with which in their hunting and fishing they were so familiar.

It was generally supposed until recently that the ships carved on the rocks were dugouts carved and hollowed out from single tree trunks with axes of stone. But the log boat, the simplest of all vessels, is a most unseaworthy contraption, liable to be too narrow and heavy to be either buoyant
or stable enough for seagoing. Now we believe that they were skin boats, closely resembling those used by Eskimos today. There is one particularly good reason for thinking so. If you draw a very simple outline drawing of an Eskimo boat, such as the umiak, it looks just like many of the rock carvings. Then again, the life of these early people was bound up with the bones and skins of animals. In many places along the western Norwegian coast archaeologists have dug up the kind of tools, such as scrapers, that those who worked with animals’ skins would need to use. Digging above the sites where the Stone Age people lived—one near where the town of Stavanger now stands—the bones of numerous deep sea fish have been found showing that the people were no less great and experienced fishermen, than hunters on land.

The date of these Stone Age people was about 6000 B.C., or eight thousand years ago.

Archaeology is rather like a detective story in which clue follows clue, leading gradually to a climax; but the climax is not the unmasking of the murderer but the picture of the life lived on earth by people who have not written to tell us anything about it; who have left no books or documents; of whose existence, indeed, people of only a hundred years or so ago knew almost nothing. For archaeology is a young science.

Here is an example of the kind of detective work involved. Fishermen today in the waters off the west Norwegian coast use lines weighted with sinkers, and the weight of the sinkers varies
with the depth of the water in which they wish to drop their hooks: the weights may vary, for example, from about half a pound for shallow water to three pounds for deep. Rock carvings show fishermen out with their weighted lines—the pictures that were cut into the rock some six thousand years ago, when the fishermen depicted were alive and went out with the dawn and came back as the sun dipped below the horizon for the short northern summer night. Dug up on shore the pebbles used as weights by many of the fishermen of that long-ago have been found, and their weights vary in the same manner as those of the modern fisherman’s; many years have passed, but dawn and sunset and the way to catch fish on hooks are much the same as when the Stone Age fisherman went out. One archaeologist, Kaare Peterson, had expert knowledge of modern fishing methods and he was able to show, from the weight of the stone sinkers dug up, that Stone Age men had gone fishing in deep water, perhaps with more than five hundred feet of water beneath them, which meant that they were experienced seamen working far away from the land.

For such purposes, seamen of today have been able to point out that boats of skins or hides stretched over a framework of bone, or sometimes perhaps of wood, were far more suitable than heavy unstable dugout canoes. It is possible, though we cannot be sure of it, that they carried a sail of hide. For many reasons, including details of Stone Age rock carvings, we now believe that
the skin boat was the seagoing ship of the age, and that seamen went considerable distances from the land in them. The log boat was used only on the rivers and lakes.

Time passed in tens of centuries and from the skin boat the vessel of wooden planks emerged. But we cannot say much about the process. Telling the story in a sort of tantalizing whisper in which a word is caught here, and missed there, are the carvings on the rocks continuing from age to age, a picture story book in which the illustrations are not always quite clear. For it is difficult to tell how a ship was built from a sketch of her.

Here a few fragments of ancient, broken timber make a clue for us linking the men who fished the "leads" during the Stone Age and the Vikings who ran their galleys up on to many British and European beaches during the summers when King Alfred ruled in Wessex.

The broken pieces of earth-covered wood were found in Sunnmore, Norway, and are now in the

![Image of a piece of ship's planking]

Piece of ship's planking found in Norway and now about 3,000 years old.
historical museum of Bergen University. Like so many objects from which archaeologists may conjure a story to make the past vivid, they are not immediately impressive—merely a few strakes of very old pine.

The pieces had been laid on a large stone which had been covered by a pyramid of earth high enough to make a landmark in the countryside, and they were found when the cairn was dug into a hundred years ago. The bits of wood were the remains of a boat laid in its massive grave at some time in the late Stone or early Bronze Age, or some three thousand years ago. We are unable to tell whether once a complete boat had been buried, of which the bits alone remained, or whether the odd planks were a token.

But they are able to provide an important link in our story. Examinations showed the pieces to be sections of a ship’s planking. The planks were carved thinly to less than half an inch, and were laid with their edges overlapping upon one another. Now if you look at a yacht’s dinghy today, or many other sorts of small rowing boats, you will see planking arranged just like this, the planks not butting and making a smooth exterior, but overlapping and forming a series of ridges. Numerous boats are still built like this today. It is known as the “clinker” or “clench” method of planking; and the pieces of pine dug up from the grave mound in Sunnmøre tell us a little about how we ever came to build wooden boats in that way. Only the people of northern Europe
ever constructed ships like this. Apparently they have been doing so since the end of the Stone Age, and still find it convenient in spite of plastics and metals and other shipwrights’ methods.

If you look at a modern clinker-built boat, however, you will find that the overlapping edges of the planks are held together by copper nails or rivets. Examination of the pieces from Sunnmore showed that they were sewn together with some kind of gut or bristle; while between the overlapping surfaces of the planks there was wool to ensure the water-tightness of the joints.

These are the oldest pieces of a built ship found in northern Europe, or it is believed anywhere else. But what a great deal the few fragments can tell us. From them we learn that men were building boats of cut planks before 3000 B.C., and as you have seen, doing so in a way related to our own. How much we should like to have dug up the whole ship, which would have revealed details of the construction now likely to remain for ever hidden! But in these remains we have enough—just enough—to assure us that by the end of the Stone Age the peoples from whom the Vikings were descended were already learning the skills in shipbuilding which, passed on and improved as the generations came and went, ultimately gave the Vikings the skill on which their way of life depended. In the Stone Age, men were learning to fashion planks from trees with axes of flint—a brilliant achievement demanding more skill than ripping them off with a circular saw driven by electricity—and to
fasten those planks together into ships that were able to make no trifling voyages.

It will be obvious that hacking planks from trees with flint axes was not only a difficult feat but also most wasteful. Out of each soaring pine tree and broad staunch oak only two planks were obtained after the felled tree trunk had been split down the middle, while nearly all the rest of the timber became useless chippings. This was not only so at the period of which we write, but continued until the end of the Viking story, when after thousands of years the dark and dense forests were so thinned to provide the planks for houses and shipbuilding that there was a shortage of timber.

The age of Bronze followed that of Stone. Not far from Oslo on the Skagerrak coast, in a fertile area of country, but one that also abounded with smooth-faced rocks, there have been found innumerable carvings in the hard stone. Long before archaeologists were as well informed as they are now, indeed, before there were many archaeologists at all in the modern sense, these drawings had been gazed at and wondered about. There were drawings of animals, of men riding, ploughing with oxen, brandishing swords, blowing trumpets; and as well as such easily recognised scenes, there were also scattered over the rocks strange signs and symbols almost meaningless to people today. These took various forms, such as rough circles or a number of concentric circles one inside the other, or circles with a cross within. There were winged horses, too.
These drawings by folk of the Bronze Age are quite different from those of the Stone Age, which were straightforward if simple pictures of what men saw. The minds of men were changing—becoming more complicated, more thoughtful, perhaps less happy because more questioning. Men thought about life and death, what the world was about and why. They were beginning, in fact, to worship, and the symbols scratched on the rocks are evidence of the worship of sun and fire which, most naturally, seemed god-like. Was not the sun the source of night and day, of the seasons, the governor of crops and harvesting; and did not fire make the wonderful new bronze, for which tin and copper were melted out of stones and fused together?

One of the most common subjects illustrated on the rocks were ships; innumerable ships, often surrounded by the magic symbols, yet in spite of this intrusion, drawings able to give us hints about the progress of shipbuilding down the centuries. The importance of the ship in the life of the Northmen is clearly indicated by the great numbers of these carvings—three hundred and fifty have been found together in one place, for example, and some of them more than fifteen feet in length. Drawings of ships in their hundreds have been found on the flat surfaces of the rocks near the sea in Norway and Denmark—the homes of the later Vikings—and these may be dated with some accuracy.

The archæologist then has to make himself into
an expert on ship construction, deducing from the drawings which in some ways are so vivid, but often so tantalizingly vague in technical detail, just what changes were made in the methods of building ships between the time when the Stone Age Northmen fished the Leads and his successors did so in the Bronze and Iron Ages.

Some of the most famous amongst the multitude of Bronze Age carvings were found in the Ostfold region of Norway. Outlines of boats are clearly represented, with the uprisings prow at one end and the animals' heads at either end, while along the length of the hull are vertical strokes representing either oarsmen or oars—we are not sure which, but it matters little. In one rock drawing there are no fewer than eighty-one strokes thus representing the crew.

One of the most famous rock carvings of a ship found in Scandinavia. It was made in the Bronze Age

This leads us to an important fact that has been appreciated only in the last few years. During the Bronze Age, in the ten centuries between approximately 2000 B.C. and 1000 B.C., long voyages were made in ships. Perhaps during this time the Northmen, nearly two and a half thousand years before they became known as Vikings and raided the
coasts of Britain, paid their first visits to our island, where they were able to find the tin that they needed for their precious bronze. Possibly the Northmen went even farther south; and perhaps even, at that remote time, they reached America. Then America was forgotten until the direct descendants of the Bronze Age seamen, the Vikings, found it again; and then again it was forgotten until Columbus sailed into it by mistake, not knowing it was there.

We cannot be sure of this; but at least we do know that the Northmen had already built good seagoing ships and that this skill developed down the ages until it reached the Vikings. We know this now because it proved possible to give a date to the rock carvings. Originally this was done by
means of a picture of a sword clearly shown in one of them. A sword like it had been dug up and was in a museum. It was of bronze, and the date was already known. The carvings were older than had been thought by about a thousand years. Where the carvings failed was in giving many details that were needed of the ships themselves on which this very ancient seafaring age had depended.

Here the archæologist, who otherwise would find it difficult to go farther, is helped by being able to examine a still living example of a ship similar to one of those in the rock carvings. It was dug up in Als, South Jutland, and it is of later date than the fragments of planking discovered at Sunnmore. But it tells, more completely, a similar story. The planks are sewn together, the framing of the boat is of slender hazel branches, and at either end the hull juts out in two spurs, just as we see in the drawings on the rocks.

Following this vessel, which had been dated by experts as 300 B.C., a model of which is in the National Museum in Copenhagen, several of other ships have been recovered by digging; they span the years between 300 B.C. and A.D. 900. They are not many in number, but it is the task of archæology to create a story from a few vital clues. Half-a-dozen or so ships are able to tell us much about a thousand years of shipbuilding and to explain how it came about that the Vikings had the necessary ships for their later achievements.

Up to this date—some three hundred years
before Christ—the ships were paddled, for there was no way of fixing oars so that they might be rowed, and there were no sails. We move down the ages for five hundred years and we find another ship, which was built in about A.D. 200, and discovered in Norway not long ago. Resembling in many respects the vessel found in South Jutland, there is one most important difference—means are provided for rowing as opposed to paddling. That is, arrangements were made for holding the oars near the top edge or gunwale of the vessel, so now it was no longer necessary for her to be paddled like a canoe. Now this was almost as great an advance in the means of ship propulsion as the one that occurred centuries later when steam engines replaced sail power. A large ship that might be rowed by oarsmen was capable of going farther and faster while being under better control than one driven by paddling.

Next, we come to another ancient ship of perhaps a couple of centuries later which shows further important progress in the art of shipbuilding. This vessel, of seventy-six feet in length, was found in 1863 buried near Nydam in the marshy land of Schleswig, then a German province. Most conveniently, there were coins also buried in the vessel, which enabled her to be dated. We can date things by more scientific methods today, but at that time a few coins helped enormously. The ship differed in a most important respect from the one above, in that her planking was not sewn together but was fastened with nails,
and in this respect resembled a modern clinker-built boat. Like all the earlier vessels, there were no signs in the Nydam ship of a mast step, so like them she was a pure rowing-boat with no hope of help from the wind in driving her. But she was a sea-going ship—one able to make long voyages, rowed by fourteen men on each side.

The use of iron nails you should particularly notice. The age of iron had arrived. Not only did the Viking have iron nails to fasten his ships together, he had iron tools with which to build them, and to use for many other purposes. And there was iron in Norway. This produced something like a revolution in their society. It gave the Northman a new power over nature, enabling him to make iron swords, axes, spears and better ships more quickly. It is suggested that the discovery of iron, which made a new human era in the same way that nuclear physics has made one in our own lifetime, was the most important development in allowing the later Vikings to achieve what they did. Without iron they might have remained in Scandinavia.

It was nearly sixty years later, in the year 1920, that another Viking ship came to light, again in the Sunnmøre region. It was estimated that the vessel had been built some three hundred years after the Nydam ship, and she revealed that the centuries had produced several more vital improvements in shipbuilding. Here, for example, was a ship that carried a mast and sail. This was a tremendous advance.
There was another, less obvious but no less important. Any ship, being long and relatively shallow and narrow, tends to be weak along its length; she may, in fact, break in two when labouring amongst waves; many ships have done so. One of the means by which this is prevented is found in the “keel”, a heavy piece of timber running the length of the hull at the bottom, projecting below the planking and forming a rigid back-bone. Once a keel has been invented it may seem an obvious device. But prior to, say, A.D. 500 (we cannot be sure of the exact date) nobody had thought of building a boat on a keel, and when it was first done it was a wonderful idea. For in the earlier years, in order to gain enough fore and aft strength, builders had to make the section or body of a ship deep and narrow, like the letter “V”, for then the side planking was able to provide some strength along the length of the boat. Now, with a keel able to do this, the shape of the boat might be improved. The breadth was increased; instead of being shaped like a narrow “V” the hull might have a section more like a broad letter “U”. This made a more stable, more roomy, more seaworthy craft.

There was another important development shown in the ship dug up in 1920. The rudder, like the keel, was once a brilliant invention. At first the rudder was simply a paddle projected down on the starboard side at the stern and loosely attached by a lashing to the hull. This may be seen in some of the rock carvings. But it was a clumsy
arrangement, little use for controlling the boat when sailing. During the centuries it was improved, the paddle became a side rudder properly hinged to the hull, and with a handle, or what we now call a tiller, by means of which the rudder might be turned.

Briefly, we have reviewed some six thousand years of history. We have been able to do so simply because of the multitude of rock carvings left behind them by the forefathers of the Vikings, and with the further and greater help of a few actual ships which have survived amongst the thousands that must have been buried. There has not been a word of writing to help us. So we have seen ships change from creations of skin stretched on a framework to vessels of wood planks sewn together. Then the wooden boats were slowly improved. Men learned to row instead of paddle. The sail was devised. Each step was a revolution in its day, and between each revolution centuries passed.

It was the legacy of skill inherited from thousands of years of experience that enabled the Vikings in the year A.D. 800 to create out of the tall oaks and pines by the sea the finest ships in Europe. Now these wonderful instruments of seagoing were able to carry them far over the world. They made them one of the great peoples of Europe.
THE VIKINGS IN ACTION

They sailed and rowed into the sunset down the Viking way which led from the fjords to the Orkneys and Shetlands, the east and west coasts of England, the west coast of France; to Ireland and out into the Atlantic to Iceland and beyond. Originally, the galleys had raided in ones and twos; soon they came in fleets of hundreds manned by thousands to conquer and settle; and the sea seemed full of the dark hulled ships.

There were two chief Viking routes to the south. One, followed mainly by the Norwegian Vikings, went to the Orkneys and Shetlands, and down the Irish Sea to the west coast of Britain and Ireland. It led also to the wonderful voyages that brought the Vikings to Iceland, Greenland, and eventually (as we shall see) to America.

The other, or inner line, went down the North Sea to the east and south coasts of Britain and the north coast of France. As you will see from a map, this was as natural a route for the Danes to follow as the outer was obvious for the Norwegians. But it also over-simplifies what happened. The
Vikings did not work together to a neat plan. The routes overlapped. Inner and outer routes converged as the ships made the often dangerous passage down Channel, and off Land's End turned south, from where, at the end of the voyage, were the olive groves of Spain, or deep in the Mediterranean, the domes and broken pillars of classical architecture. Thus far did they voyage from their native fjords in Norway and the narrow channels winding amongst the sands of Denmark.

To have achieved such voyages with such numbers of men and ships raises seamanship to an heroic level that it has never attained since. The ships they used were brilliant examples of the skill of the shipbuilders; but this does not alter the fact that they were merely large, undocked craft, less safe on the ocean than yachts of today one quarter of their size. The losses of ships and men were frequent; but here the knowledge of seamen must reinforce the little that history tells us directly. How many Viking ships were lost in Portland Race before its dangers were realized; how many in the Raz de Seine; how many when a sudden summer gale came up in the Bay of Biscay? History will be for ever silent on these points, for the events occurred unwatched by all but those involved. But seamen know that they must have happened frequently. And occasionally history does throw its ray of light if wrecks occurred at moments when great events were in train. Then we read in old records of the wrecking of fleets driven on to unscalable rocks in onshore winds.
against which the oarsmen could make no way, and of ships sinking by scores far out at sea as they were flooded by curling waves.

During these years the Vikings left the northern seas of their race far astern, and crossing the Bay of Biscay rowed and sailed southward until the mountains of northern Spain came over the horizon. Arabian historians tell us of their visits, describing the warlike visitors as the “heathen wizards”. For at this time Spain was dominated by the Arabs, or Saracens, the followers of the Prophet Mohammed, and they had made the sunny peninsula prosperous as it had never been before. Here for the first time Vikings must have looked upon the tall jasper columns of Moslem temples, perhaps even seen Arab scribes writing not on parchment but on paper; and under the sun of summer-time Galicia observed sugar cane in the fields.

They worked along the coast and actually captured from the powerful Saracens Lisbon, Seville and Cadiz. Later they went farther south, passing through the Straits of Gibraltar, and in the sea that had been dominated at different times by Phoenician, Greek and Roman, seamen from the far edge of the north Atlantic sailed and pillaged. The galleys were drawn up on African shores, and behind the stockades encampments were set up in the Rhone delta. They sacked Pisa, where there was as yet no white marble cathedral or leaning tower.

There was another line of Viking attack, not so
well remembered today as the two which sent the Norsemen and Danes out to the south and east in the ships. It lay overland, from the coast of Sweden to the east and south-east, across that middle part of Europe where the Slav races live; and it led down the long courses of the now-Russian rivers Volga and Dnieper to the Caspian and the Black Seas, thence to the eastern end of the Mediterranean. Here the Swedes who had made the overland route, and the Norwegians who had made the sea route down the edge of the Atlantic and through the Mediterranean, met in Constantinople before parting again, the one to the caravan terminus at Trebizon, the other to the sea route along the Mediterranean. So it is that thousands of Arab coins have been picked up in Sweden, dated a thousand years ago, a record of that old trade down the Volga river. The Swedes fought less and traded more than the seagoing Vikings. The peoples we now call Russian gained their name from the word "Ruotsi" by which the Swedes themselves were known by the Slav people whose masters they were for a short while.

Right in their path as the Vikings sailed to the west were the Orkneys, a collection of low, rocky treeless islands—there are no fewer than sixty-eight of them—about which swirled fierce tides and currents as they do today. Long before the Vikings came to them the Orkneys had been inhabited; and it seems indeed that at much the same time as the ancestors of the Vikings had been fishing in their skin boats and carving the rock drawings
of the Stone Age, there was a rich community living in Orkney. On the islands there may still be seen the great circle of standing stones at Stennes, moved to their position and raised upon end sometime in the Bronze Age and looking now just as they must have appeared when the first Viking landed and decided that these islands, in spite of their wet, turbulent weather, and their long winter darkness and gales, might provide a base for his operations and a new land to inhabit. With the Vikings, Orkney, now a Scottish county, came under Norwegian rule, and remained so for more than three hundred years.

The Orkneys became a focus of Viking power, the Earls of Orkney the most powerful of chiefs. Day after day during the summer months the broad waters of Scapa Flow would be busy with the activities of the galleys; coloured sails of visiting
The Oseberg ship, most beautiful of all the Viking galleys that have been found. She was buried with a queen and contained a large quantity of treasure. In the bow of the craft can be seen the steering oar.
A creek in Norway where the Vikings once rowed their boats.

Another view of the Oseberg ship, which can be seen in the Bygdøy Museum, Oslo.
Viking iron swords found in Britain.
(Left) A sword discovered in Ireland at Limerick, which was founded by the Vikings.

(Below) Spearhead found beside the Thames.
Viking ships from the Isle of Man, from the Faeroes, from Iceland even, would pass between the islands and under the sheer granite cliffs, to go out to sea through the rushing tide of the Pentlands, or to make one of the entrances between the islands and into the Flow. The time was to come when the Orkneys were to pass out of the main stream of history again and become the little-thought-of islands in the grey north; until one day not long before the first Great War an admiral realized that Scapa Flow was the one suitable base for the main part of the British Fleet in a war with Germany. So once more, after nine hundred years, the waters of the Flow carried the most powerful warships of the day, which like the Viking ships commanded the waters round the British Isles.

We know as much as we do about the Vikings in Orkney because there is a great deal about them in the sagas, which were written by the descendants of the early Vikings in Iceland. They are long and wonderfully-told stories of the days when the Vikings were a conquering race—the days of which we speak now—and we owe much of our story to these sagas, which we will be discussing later. Much is owed, too, to Snorri Sturlason, an Icelandic historian who was assassinated in the middle of the thirteenth century. You will see that what we know about the Vikings from written evidence is due either to their enemies or to their heirs who lived long after them. Except in inscriptions upon stones—the Runic stones which we
shall also be mentioning later—the Vikings left no story for us in their own language.

Iceland, the island of story and poetry almost on the Arctic Circle, might not seem at first a favourable place for people to settle, with its mountainous landscape, lava black uplands and shining icefields over which play alternately the grave Arctic sun and the frozen Arctic gales. But in the valleys and by the coast there are glens and waterfalls and hot springs; while over the whole island the skuas, golden plover, guillemots and familiar gulls circle in their thousands—today as when the first Viking touched its shores after a six-hundred-mile voyage from Norway.

We are not sure when this first occurred, but we gather that by A.D. 900 many families were established there, on the authority of an old Icelandic book which actually preserves the names of those who had arrived on the island from Norway. They also came from Ireland, and it has been suggested by one archæologist that the haunting quality of Icelandic literature owes something to the mixture of the Norse and Celtic blood that occurred.

There could be few peoples less alike than the Norsemen and the Irish; nor two lands more dissimilar than Norway and Ireland. Ireland was in some ways the Norseman’s dream. But it was unlike them to dream vainly, so they went there, at first as raiders, then colonizers. From their bases in the Isle of Man and the Northern Isles, they rowed and sailed down the Irish Sea with
that soft coast on the same side as the great steering oar, and watchers from the shore saw the fleets of black hulls with bright sails knowing that they could do nothing against people who so absolutely commanded the sea. In the early part of the ninth century the galleys were continually being run up on the beaches of the broad harbours of Cork and Waterford, or rowed up the Shannon to where Limerick now stands. The bare fields and river banks had stockades raised upon them, and in turn what we know today as Cork, Dublin, Wicklow, Wexford, Waterford and Limerick began their lives as seaports not far from the hamlets and mud villages of the native inhabitants, who watched with justifiable fear.

"There came great sea-cast floods of foreigners into Erin," wrote a distressed chronicler, "so that there was not a point without a fleet." And the foreigners found themselves in the transcendingly green countryside where there were no towns but just scattered tribes, divided and defenceless, which were watched over but not organized by the rich and no less defenceless churches and religious settlements.

Within a few years the inhabitants of the religious colonies who survived were walking the weary French roads that led towards Rome, and at the same time Norse chieftains who had returned home were being buried by their fjords together with their treasures from Ireland. So today we dig up numerous ninth-century graves in Norway with collections of Irish jewellery in them
which mutely testify to the same story that Irish chronicles tell with vigour and colour of those days:

"If a hundred heads of hardened iron could grow on one neck, and if each head possessed a hundred sharp indestructible tongues of tempered metal, and if each tongue cried out incessantly with a hundred ineradicable loud voices, they would never be able to enumerate the griefs which the people of Ireland—men, women, laymen and priests, young and old—have suffered at the hands of these warlike ruthless barbarians".

So speaks the contemporary voice of the Northmen's victims. The Vikings themselves are silent. Had they spoken, we may be sure that the tone would have been different from the Irishmen's. The brooding, imaginative Celt softens the harshness of life by dreams, and he prefers to look at reality through the soft light of an Irish evening. He sings, but his songs have a lilt and sadness. How interesting it would be if we could hear the voices of the Vikings raised in song during an evening by the stockades of Waterford; and then move inshore and listen to Irish voices singing beside the cabins of a hamlet by a hillside—the voices of two peoples totally unlike, of realists and dreamers, of one people happy and adaptable beneath foreign skies, of another gently melancholy beneath their own. Where the Celt thought of life and death and muddled along, the Viking was efficiently active, brisk and businesslike even with his gods.
THE VIKINGS IN ACTION

The rivers carried the Vikings far inland, and when there was no longer water in which to float the boats, or if a waterfall or rapid intervened, the galleys would be hauled ashore and manhandled by their muscular crews for great distances over the country. This seems today an almost incredible feat when we consider the size of the ships, perhaps more than eighty feet in length.

We have to remember that men had different upbringings in those days. They had never known mechanical power in the form of engines, tractors, cranes and the like to assist them in the moving of great weights from place to place. The past, especially the long past, shows numerous examples of weight lifting and moving that astonish us today. Some of the huge stones that make Stonehenge on Salisbury Plain weigh more than three hundred tons and were lifted high into the air and placed upon others. What is more amazing, these stones were brought from the Prescelly mountains in Pembrokeshire, one hundred and forty miles away as the bird flies, and the bird of these days flew over roadless country.

When we consider such achievements, the Vikings’ operation of hauling their ships for long distances over the land appear almost simple. There might be sixty men in a galley, all of them with the strength bred into them by their lives and forefathers, and all experienced in the art, now almost lost in civilized men, of hauling and shoving and manhandling.

It must have been by such means that the Vikings
reached Paris, far up the winding Seine. Today you may go up the river passing through towns and villages, or between the well-cultivated fields, a gentle and civilized countryside on either hand, with only a little to remind you of what it was like when the Vikings steered up the same broad waterway.

Not only the shore has changed, but in some places the river too. For example, there were a couple of islands near Rouen which today are part of the mainland, but which still have the name of le Houlme, or islet, to provide a clue of how the country was once formed. Today, as you work up the river, your vessel will from time to time pass into locks in which, with sluice gates closed before and behind you, the ship is lifted or lowered to the new water level of the river ahead. These points were once watersheds, with the river tumbling down over rocks and steep irregularities of the bottom. As they were approached, the Vikings would have had to haul out their ships and manhandle them along the banks until the river again ran smoothly.

Nor indeed, waterfalls apart, did it always run in a way that could reasonably be called "smooth". There is a distinct current in the Seine which may at the time of the Vikings have been stronger than it is now, against which the boats would have to be rowed.

The Vikings became masters over big areas of Britain, and one man, King Alfred, realized that they could be defeated only when his people, like
them, had ships. He organized the defence of his kingdom, Wessex, which comprised the southern counties now called Sussex, Hampshire, Dorset, Somerset and a little to the north of these. The Danelaw—the rule of the Danish Vikings—had been established in the eastern counties from the Thames in the south to the Tyne in the north. All England, it seemed, might become a Viking-ruled land, especially when Wessex briefly fell to the conquerors, and Alfred with a small army remained to face the Danes while many of his chief followers left Britain.

This did not occur. Alfred built a war fleet, copying the ships of the Vikings to some extent, but improving them and also enlarging them, it would seem, for the Old English Chronicle speaks of his vessels being “full-nigh twice as long as the others; some had sixty oars and some had more. . . .” It was said that Alfred had three hundred vessels, and he used these to patrol the coast and attack the Viking fleets before they reached the shore. The Vikings’ command of the sea was, in fact, being challenged. In the year 875 we are told, again in the Chronicle, that “in the summer King Alfred went out to sea with a naval force, and fought against the crews of seven ships, and took one of them, and put to flight the others”.

The fortunes of battle swayed from side to side, and when conditions again became stable it was with Alfred’s Wessex living independently beside the Danelaw. The Vikings were changing; pirate raiders originally, they were now settlers, warlike
still, but living in reasonable order, working on the farmsteads of the Danelaw, which were to them so rich and fruitful compared with the barren acres of Scandinavia. A Viking chief repaired the walls of Chester, which had been neglected since the Romans who built them had left, and behind the protecting palisades and ditches of towns like Lincoln and Nottingham—then hardly more than villages in clearings amongst the trees that pressed closely round them—independent Earls lived with their own armies and ruled with rough justice. The battle-axe, if not laid aside, at least hung idle more often than hitherto, while the fields of that old green wooded England prospered through the work of the sons of those who had driven ashore from the longboats looting and pillaging.

Many of the Vikings were now Christian. The people of this gay and gusty race were practical in their religion as all else. Christianity seemed good politics in this new land they inhabited. With so many gods already, it was no great problem to add another. Meekness and mildness may not have appealed to them, but they were businesslike and preferred to be well insured.

But time passed, Alfred was dead, and another wave of raiders came from Scandinavia, just when the Danelaw and Wessex had almost merged into one kingdom. The result was the establishment, for the first and last time, of a Viking rule over much of England, and this was followed by the rule of a Viking monarch, Canute, who created a Sea King’s short-lived empire.
No one could have seemed more of an Englishman than King Canute. Yet he had come to England in his Viking father’s own war galley, himself a young Viking and a pagan. The peace established by King Alfred was weakening, and seventy-five years after he died the Danes had conquered again, and conquered, it had seemed, with great effectiveness. For the Viking in Canute was submerged in the King; he ruled over England, Denmark, Norway and the Hebrides. This he achieved in the Viking manner of conquest, but what a strange Viking he was compared with those earlier!

He became a Christian. He brought wealth to the abbeys and the Church, and there is a very old song which the monks used to sing in praise of him. He sent churchmen from England to help in the difficult work of driving out the pagan religion from the Scandinavias. He was a strange, wise conqueror. Indeed, when he died young, at the age of forty, he was not regarded as one at all; and the countrymen of King Alfred were happy to be ruled by the close descendant of those whom Alfred had fought.

In many ways the Viking story would be given a roundness and polish which it lacks had this great Scandinavian empire lived, a maritime empire, worthy outcome of a people who worshipped the ship, who had come plundering from the sea and lived to rule with a fairness that made the nominally conquered the ready subjects of the first and last Viking ruler of England.

Another, smaller Danelaw had been established
in what is now called Normandy, after the Vikings, for its original name was Northmandy. They invaded the old and declining Frankish empire, Norwegian and Dane together sweeping across France, and there were years of continuous fighting: "There does not exist a road," wrote a contemporary, "which was not littered with the dead. . . . Despair spread throughout the land and it seemed that all Christian people would perish." It appeared indeed that Christian Europe was going to be submerged in the pagan high tide of conquest.

They settled in the Seine valley. The Franks fought the colonists, and in the careless manner of those days sometimes a raiding Viking would join the other side and fight the Northmen on behalf of the Franks in return for handsome payment in silver. The Vikings were happy to be mercenaries if it were profitable. But they remained in Normandy.

They became in time Frenchmen, speaking the French language, adopting the Christian religion, but in mixing their blood with the conquered they produced a talented and virile race which in a few years, under William the Conqueror, became masters of England. The Vikings, who first arrived in England as the pagan host some two hundred and fifty years earlier, raiding the monasteries and rushing on stolen horses over the fields to burn and destroy the farmsteads, returned then as the armoured and mounted knights of Normandy followed by their retainers under a flutter of flags, attended by abbots and high dignitaries of the
The Vikings in Action

Church, but still in many respects Vikings at heart, loving the horse, the battle and the ship. So once more Viking blood became mixed with the Celt and Saxon of Britain. The Viking story ends, in fact, with Vikings who had become Englishmen and Frenchmen.
GOKSTAD is a collection of farms in the fertile Vestfold region of southern Norway, not far from the wide fjord that runs from the sea fifty miles inland to Oslo. It is treeless and flat country sloping gently from the farms down to the sea, where the Skagerrak runs up into Lahelle Bay a mile or so away.

One of the farms had on its property a large mound over which the plough was run each year. In spite of this, it was still about fifteen feet high and sloped gently down to the level of the rest of the land, making a rough circle about one hundred and fifty feet across. Nobody took much interest in this large tumulus, though it had been known since people could remember as the King’s Mound, and it was said that not only a king but his treasure was buried beneath.

We do not know why it was that the sons of the farmer who owned the land had the idea one day to dig down into the mound to see what they could find. From the top they started to make a hole straight down through the frozen ground, for it was early in the new year.
For a time they found nothing; then, not treasure, but pieces of carved wood were struck by their spades. This was interesting, though it may not have meant much to the farmer’s sons. In spite of its name, nobody was sure exactly what the King’s Mound was, or why it had received the name. It was quite likely not to be a king’s grave at all but simply a natural hillock in the flat country. But since pieces of wood clearly carved by men were buried in the earth through which they were digging, it was evident that the mound had been built, not formed by nature.

News travelled to Oslo about what was going on down at the farm. For the year was 1880, and even then people had become aware of what, not so long before, would have been an astonishing fact: that most of the history of mankind was to be found not in books and documents but out in the open air written or drawn on the rocks, or buried in the earth.

So an expert antiquarian arrived on the scene a few weeks after the work had begun. He was not altogether pleased about what he saw, for he knew a lot about making excavations of mounds—he had already dug much history out of the earth—and the farmer’s sons, not surprisingly, were setting about it in the wrong way. The antiquarian realized that the hillock was man-made and that the name of the King’s Mound by which people knew it might well be justified. Care was now needed in digging to discover what it contained. As the land was not his, but the farmer’s, he
probably had to be rather tactful about what he said; but as the ground was also very hard from frost he was able to delay the digging for a few months, after which it was begun again; but now in his way, and under his direction, they did not continue deepening the hole from the top of the mound, but instead went some distance away and dug out a trench into it from the edge.

There are obvious reasons why, when exploring a mound that men have raised to cover objects, you should approach it in this way. Whatever is buried beneath the hillock will probably be at the level of, or a little below, the ordinary ground beyond. By driving a trench in from the side you approach the treasure, whatever it may be, on a level with it, and as soon as you have struck lucky you have simply to part the earth from it on either side and from above, and you are able to throw the dug-away earth to left and right. But if, instead, you dig downwards from the top, whatever you discover will be under your feet, and it will be difficult to know exactly what it is you have found until you have dug and carted away much of the mound. It is hard enough work excavating, anyhow, without making it harder. Also, damage to what lies below must be avoided.

For a day they dug through heavy blue clay, and for a part of the second, when they came upon what seemed to be a vertical wooden post, oddly enough almost in the centre of the trench which they were clearing. A little more digging soon revealed that the post was in fact the bow of a
great wooden ship. By pure luck they had directed their trench into the mound from the best possible angle.

A great amount of earth had yet to be removed before the full wonder of their discovery was revealed. The trench, narrow until this moment—simply a passage into the heart of the hillock—had to be broadened. Professor Geoffrey Bibby writes of this stage of the excavation that it "... went forward aided by favourable weather. For two months not a drop of rain fell, and the digging could go on from dawn to dusk in the long days of the northern midsummer".

Those two months of hard digging need not surprise us. The ship was seventy-six feet six inches in length and seventeen feet six inches in breadth. Not only was it necessary to dig away the tons of earth from around and on top of it, but the vessel had been sunk into the ground below the hillock and also filled with clay, all of which had to be removed, and all removed carefully to avoid damage.

There were more complicated difficulties, too. That old ship had lain in her bed of blue clay for a thousand years without harm. The wood in her, as it came to light under the spade, was firm and hard; all except one part which had not been covered by the airtight seal of the thick, wet mud. Now, exposed to the air after so long, the timber began to twist and crack.

Much ingenuity was needed to preserve the structure of the ancient ship. To prevent the timber
drying, water was poured over her at regular intervals while the diggers toiled to free her from the clinging earth. Eventually she was clear, and reposed, still muddy and broken in places, at the bottom of the large hole that had been dug around her. Then the remarkable feat was achieved of removing the heavy yet delicate hull to Oslo. The ship was cut in halves, the only way to transport so large an object, and first on a horse-drawn wheeled cart, and afterwards in a barge to which it was transferred at the water's edge, it was carried on the slow journey to the capital. In a shed on the University grounds the vessel was completely restored, so that men had before their eyes a Viking ship exactly as it had appeared to the Vikings themselves.

The ship was only a part of the great discovery. Within the ship were a mass of articles. They ranged from a bronze cauldron which was perhaps used for cooking the crew's food, to scraps of gold-threaded silk work, a belt buckle, the bones of that most precious of birds in the days when the ship had been buried—a peacock—and the skeleton of the Viking chief whose ship it had been and who had been buried with her in about the year A.D. 900. The date is approximate, and based upon the style of the carved ornaments found on board. Today it might be checked by methods of dating that have been evolved only in the last few years. There was much else, too, found in the mound, but before we look at all the treasure that came out of the ship, let us see how another equally import-
ant grave was uncovered, which contained even more than was found in the Gokstad burial mound.

Twenty-three years later another farmer in the Vestfold region not far from Gokstad began on his own to dig into a similar kind of hillock that was on his land, on the farm of Oseberg. Like the farmer’s sons at Gokstad he dug down from the centre of the mound, and eventually hit a wooden structure which, knowing about the Gokstad ship, he guessed to be another buried vessel.

The story proceeded on much the same lines as that of the Gokstad ship, but with the difference that here the excavation was even more difficult, the reward yet greater. The vessel was more beautiful but also more delicate—a pleasure vessel made for a queen—and we might call her today a yacht amongst the Viking ships; and the mass of objects found in her was the richest hoard of possessions that had once been owned and handled by Vikings ever found in one place by people of our age.

Though the timber in the ship had been beautifully preserved, the ship herself had been badly damaged, and after numerous photographs had been taken and drawings made, it was literally taken to pieces plank by plank. From these numerous parts she was later rebuilt some thirteen hundred years after the Viking shipwrights had first put her together, perhaps by the seashore not far from where she was found.

The ship itself was only one part of the problem. She had been a woman’s ship, and inside and
around her were numerous articles each able to
tell us something about the way the Vikings lived. Here is a brief list of some of the things found in
the burial mounds of the Gokstad and Oseberg ships:

A wheeled cart; a sledge; numerous pieces of
wood carving, spades and a hand spike; a board
rather like a draughtboard for a game that is still
played today; cups, kegs, trays, candlesticks;
gilded bronze and lead ornaments; a sword; oak
chests; a loom; quilts and tapestries; a kitchen
stool, buckets, dishes, ladles, knives; a chair; a
bed; two tents; grains of wheat and a wooden
bucket of wild apples which still had the bloom
on them and were as fresh as when a Viking had
picked them and laid them in his Queen’s grave.

There were also the human and animal remains:
the bones of a man in the Gokstad ship, who,
experts in anatomy were able to say, had been
about five feet ten inches in height, fifty years old,
and had suffered from arthritis. Outside the ship
were the bones of some twelve horses and six
dogs. In the Oseberg ship were the skeletons of two
women, one generally considered to be the young
Queen, the other her elderly servant who also had
suffered from arthritis.

Later we shall be seeing how all this array of
articles and remains can make a picture of the
Viking’s day-to-day life. What you should notice
now is the great skill with which excavations have
to be carried out if the buried treasure is to be
preserved and tell us all that it can about the lives
and manners of people dead a thousand years and more.

Metal objects are fairly easy to cope with. Helmets, swords, jewellery, pots and pans, once they have been found need not come to much harm. But wood, which lasts so wonderfully if it is kept out of contact with the air and damp—which destroy it, as it may be in the hot sands of Egypt or the thick clay of the Vestfold—disintegrates almost under your eyes when suddenly exposed to the light of day. If the wood is painted, colours that have lasted unchanged for centuries under the earth will fade quickly when dug out by the excavator. Wooden objects, too, become broken. It may be something as large as the Oseberg ship, or it may be a sledge like the one in the same ship which was discovered in more than a thousand fragments, each of which was chemically treated to preserve it, after which they were assembled to make once more the complete sledge—a far more difficult job than that which faced the Viking who made the sledge in the first place. Sometimes it was not possible to put together the surviving fragments. The beds, for example, which were six and a half feet square, could not be re-made from the pieces. But though the bits were in such bad condition they could tell enough about what the original beds had looked like to enable exact copies of them to be made.

You will notice that amongst all the many articles found in the royal burial mounds there is nothing in precious metal; no ornaments in gold or silver, no jewellery or precious inlays.
This brings us to a most important fact, the significance of which we shall be talking about later. Before the modern-day farmers and archæologists had begun digging up the mounds, men had already burrowed into them and taken away such valuable objects. Just before the war, in 1939, a ship not unlike that found at Oseberg was discovered buried in Suffolk. Or perhaps we should not say a ship, for unlike those buried in the blue clay of southern Norway, all the planking and timbers had disintegrated, and only the marks in the earth, the impress of the ship that had rested upon it, could tell what she had been like. But here it was obvious that there had been no earlier visitors to the mound, and the treasure remained—gold and silver jewellery, silver dishes and spoons, and many other precious objects.

The uncovering of the graves on the Gokstad and Oseberg farms were the most spectacular and valuable research ever made into Viking history, but the burial mounds were only two of many.

As long ago as 1751, in days before archæology had become an established science, what was apparently a ship grave was found. Digging revealed a vessel which was described as a big, open, oak planked vessel. But this is all that we know about her. Almost exactly a hundred years later a large mound was dug away near the village of Borre in order to make use of the gravel it contained. A ship was unearthed and much luxurious furnishing—axes, glass vessels, the bones of animals and some harness—were brought to light. But the
ship had been irrevocably damaged by unskilful digging before experts arrived, and also many of the objects disappeared as a result of pilfering.

Across the other side of the bay, in the Ostefold, at the top of a slope where the land ran down to the River Glomma, was a huge burial mound—nearly ninety yards across—visible for miles around. A few years after the ship had been unearthed at Borre archæologists were called to investigate this other great mound, where a ship had been discovered and various articles found, which included glass beads, some cloth, and carved reliefs in wood of human figures; also part of a ski and human bones. But much of what was found disappeared, and the ship itself, unlike those found at Gokstad and Oseberg, had mainly rotted away. But it proved possible, in spite of this, to give an approximate date for the grave by means of the carved ornaments that were found, and it was thus learned that the mound must have been raised over the ship and treasure in about the year A.D. 900, at the time when the Vikings were roaming so far round the coasts of Europe, raiding and colonizing.

Though many grave mounds, large and small, have now been dug up, it is exciting to realize that a few large ones still remain which nobody has yet examined. There are five, for example, in the region round Borre, and one day these, too, may be opened up to reveal ships and objects, buried along with the chieftains or kings who owned them.

You may be wondering why it was that the Vikings buried fine ships and so many valuable or
useful articles with the bodies of important people when they died. You will see that obviously they did not do so in order to give archaeologists and historians the pleasure of digging them up again centuries later. Indeed, we may be sure that the Viking would be terribly shocked to know that the contents of his well-furnished tomb should now be on display before the eyes of men in museums.

To understand why the graves were made, we must learn something about the way the Vikings worshipped, and the nature of the gods whom they feared or respected.
WHAT THE VIKINGS BELIEVED

THERE has been preserved to us an eye-witness account of a funeral which is perhaps the most remarkable piece of literary evidence we possess about the Vikings. To have found and excavated the graves, recovering what was laid in them over a thousand years ago, has been able to tell us more about the Viking way of life than any other research; but to have also a description by one who witnessed the scenes of a burial, who watched the ship being loaded with its assortment of articles, who saw before they died the animals (and even one of the people) who were laid in the vessel, makes the long past vivid indeed.

The writer was an Arab traveller and merchant named Ibn Fadlan, whose descriptions are considered to be reliable, and the burial occurred in the year A.D. 922, or at almost the same time as that of the Gokstad ship. A chief had died, and the writer explains that they immediately laid him in a temporarily covered grave, providing him with food and a lute, while the complicated preparations were made for the entombment.

The dead man was wealthy, and according to
custom his possessions were split into three parts. One was taken by his family; another paid for his burial costume (which presumably included the valuables to be interred with him), and the third, mostly oddly we may think, paid for a kind of drink resembling beer it is thought and a favourite of the Vikings, which was drunk on the funeral day and before.

They now proceeded to make the clothes in which the dead man was to be finally interred, and also to perform a more gruesome task—that of asking which of his servants wished to be buried with their master. At the funeral witnessed by Ibn Fadlan one of the women slaves volunteered, and from that moment she was condemned to die in a few days; but meanwhile she was looked after with particular care, with almost tender solicitude it would seem. She was allowed, too, a generous supply of the beer, surely an act of mercy in view of her position.

The chief’s ship had meanwhile been dragged ashore and laid on a framework above a pile of timber. A wooden bench covered with silk carpets and cushions was next put on the ship; and then appeared the “Angel of Death”, a giant of a woman, the writer says, whose task it was to dress the corpse, which still lay in the temporary grave, and also to kill the slave woman. The weather was intensely cold, and when the corpse was removed from the grave, it had not decomposed. It was now dressed in the elaborate burial clothes, complete with boots, and a silk mantle having gold buttons, and on the head a hood of silk and fur was placed,
after which the body was carried to the ship, laid on the silk carpet and supported by cushions. Fruit, plants, meat and bread were put beside it. Also weapons. The Vikings may have thought less about the comfort of the living than some do today; but they certainly were more anxious about the comfort of the dead.

It was now the turn of the animals. A dog was killed and thrown into the ship. Horses were turned loose and made to work themselves into a lather before they, too, were killed and flung into the vessel. Two cows followed, a cock and a hen (and you will remember that the skeletons of horses, cows, and birds, were excavated from the Gokstad and Oseberg burial mounds). Then it was the turn of the slave woman, who, after various rituals, was led towards the ship where she was to meet her end at the hands of the Angel of Death. She was given another beaker of the beer, over which she sang before drinking. She said her farewells, distributing such jewellery as she was wearing, and drank and sang more. We may hope that by this time she was drunk, and Ibn Fadlan suggests this was so when he says that she now looked completely bewildered and staggered as she was led to the ship where she was to die. Here, held down by four men, two others strangled her with a cord round her neck, while the Angel of Death stabbed her with a dagger, and shields were beaten with wooden sticks to drown her cries. To the twentieth-century mind it is a truly ghastly scene. She was laid dead beside her master.
Finally, the closest relative of the dead man appeared with a piece of burning stick with which he ignited the wood beneath the ship; and other people followed with burning faggots and branches to feed the fire. On this occasion a high wind sprang up and the fire blazed brilliantly and very quickly the ship and the chief and the slave girl were ashes, over which a mound was later raised.

So a powerful Viking was sent on the road to Valhalla.

You will notice that the ship and contents were burnt, unlike those in the mounds whose excavation we described earlier. Viking burials took many different forms; there was no consistency, and scholars have spent much time studying the thousands of graves revealing the various modes adopted in different parts of Scandinavia and at different periods for laying the dead to rest. Sometimes they were cremated, sometimes placed in a coffin unburned. A stone model of a ship might be interred with the body, and many rich objects, or sometimes nothing at all. There were no firm rules; there were, after all, many gods, many interpretations of how they should be satisfied; and the gods, like men, were wayward.

Today the important fact is that in the old pagan beliefs the next life was an intimate continuation of the present; the ship, a sword, or jewellery, the horses, even the kitchen pots that were desirable in this world were no less so in the next. The after life was imagined, too, in an even more vivid and much more sinister light through a belief that
the dead might haunt and harm the living, and this led to actions that seem almost incomprehensible to us today.

When the great burial mounds at Tune, Gokstad and Oseberg were being opened up, it soon became evident that people had been digging deep into them at some earlier time.

When buried with his ship, the important person laid to rest in the grave was placed in a burial chamber, which was a wooden house with a flat roof built over one end of the vessel. Together with him in the chamber would, we have seen, be placed many of his most valuable possessions, and perhaps, too, the bodies of servants. In one case we have reason to believe, from the twisted position of the skeleton, that the servant was buried alive and left to suffocate.

While digging out the Tune ship, marks in the earth showed where a previous tunnel had been sunk into the mound, and entry made to the burial chamber. The later investigators found, when they went into the chamber, some human bones and those of a horse, also a number of smaller objects and some pieces of carved wood; what was also clear to them was that at some date since A.D. 900, when the mound had been raised, the tomb had been plundered.

It was the same story with the Gokstad ship. Here the spoilers had dug into the mound and then made a hole through the ship and the log wall of the burial chamber. In the Oseberg grave there was evidence of the robbers having cut a passage into
the mound from the side (the spades with which they had done so were still lying about in the earth) and then broken into the massively constructed burial chamber and plundered its contents.

Or, at least, that is one interpretation of what had occurred, and a very obvious conclusion to reach. Plunderers knew the wealth of gold and silver objects buried in the grave and set to work to recover it. Two human skeletons of women were found, as I told you earlier, in the burial chamber of the Oseberg ship, and when the bones of one of the skeletons was re-assembled, it was found to be almost complete except for the hands and arms. These, it has been assumed, were loaded with jewellery, and the plunderers had simply hacked off the limbs.

But there are some archaeologists who suggest that this idea may be too simple; or at least that robbery was not the only reason why at some remote date men broke into the tombs. One amongst them even goes so far as to believe that there never was much in the way of jewellery and precious metals in the Oseberg burial chamber; that the chamber was entered not to steal valuables but to take away the body of the young queen who had been buried there. That this may be true is suggested by the fact that only a few bones remained of one of the two skeletons, that of the younger woman, who is assumed to have been the queen, while the bed on which she lay in the grave had been hacked to pieces.
This would appear to suggest that the grave-breaking was concerned mainly not with robbery, but with some pagan belief about life and death and the power of the dead over the living. The robbers may have gone into the tomb to steal the queen’s body.

We have now to try and discover something about the religion of the Vikings.

An interesting fact has been deduced. On the evidence of the wooden spades left behind in their tunnel by the grave breakers at Oseberg, it can be established that the act was done not very long after the ship was buried; for they are of the same type and date as those buried with the ship.

We must remember that when the Vikings swept down from the north upon a terrified Europe, they had been untouched by any influence of the Christianity that some eight hundred years earlier had appeared in the eastern Mediterranean and later spread far over Europe by the Roman Empire and missionaries. But neither Empire nor missionaries had reached across the northern sea to Scandinavia while the Gospel story was spreading. Much older gods were the gods of the Vikings; gods who may seem strange and incomprehensible to us, but who were vivid and powerful to them. We know what little we do today about the religion of the Vikings from the evidence of the graves—not only from the large ship mounds but from literally thousands of smaller graves found in the Nordic countries: two thousand five hundred graves have been found in Birka in Sweden alone—
and also from two long collections of stories and poems made in Iceland in about A.D. 1200. This, you will see, means that they were written about four hundred years after the first Vikings went to sea raiding, but the two works, known as the Edda, tell us most of what we know in detail about the Vikings' religion. In splendid prose and poetry the Edda gives the stories of the Viking gods and heroes; of how the world began, created by Odin, father of the gods; of how it would end amid universal war and turmoil in which Odin himself would perish. There is no shortage of either gods or heroes in the Edda. But it all ends on a quiet note with a new and beautiful world rising from the turmoil of the old, where everyone is peaceful, and Magni, a son of Thor, becomes a greater god than his father.

This was to happen at some time in the future. Meanwhile Odin ruled in Valhalla from his palace in a grove where the leaves of the trees were gold. Here was the splendid and earthy heaven of the warrior, a heaven of feasting, and fighting with weapons of gold beneath the golden roof of the palace. But Odin was not a mere fighter; he had given one of his eyes to obtain wisdom, offered as a pledge at Nimir's well, which was the source of all understanding.

We shall never known how the stories originated that raised not only Odin, but Thor whose hammer made the thunder, the beneficent god Frey who brought sunshine and pleasure, and together with these three giants amongst the gods, many others
each the hero of wonderful stories. The gods were the controllers of what man was powerless to influence; and there was so much in the world beyond the command of men that many gods were needed to maintain order. They were very human, these masters of the world. They had to be bribed and made a fuss of, and it was believed that they were best pleased when men offered to them what was most valuable to themselves—their horses, their dogs, above all themselves in human sacrifice. There is a document written nearly a thousand years ago which gives an account of the sacrifice of ninety-nine human beings, apart from numerous animals. The Vikings may not have been responsible for this particular religious slaughter, but we cannot doubt that human sacrifice was amongst their religious rites.

When the first rock carvings were made in the north of Norway we may assume, though we shall never know about it, that the early ideas of the gods were forming in the minds of men who were, like the drawings they made, straightforward; also without the power of thinking along broad lines. Then thought becomes more subtle; when men drew a ship or a sword on the rocks it became more than a ship or sword; it developed religious significance. Trying to explain the inexplicable human lot, men made the gods—and after thousands of years, the gods made by men to account for what happened in the world became greater than men; for they were older and many thousands of years of belief had sanctified them.
It is difficult for us, who have been brought up in the Christian religion, to understand one in which there are many gods, none outstandingly good, none all-powerful, but each powerful enough to be worth attention. Yet, as it happens, this is the common form of religion. The philosophic Greeks, the practical Romans, were content with such gods, which expressed their vision of life as they saw it. Long after the Greeks and Romans had ceased to be great people, the Vikings preferred many gods to one; and when they adopted Christianity, they retained numerous habits that began with those older Nordic gods. And so do we; though to go into all this would make the story too long. The snake, serpent and dragon were important symbols to the Vikings, though none of them, like us, had ever seen a dragon; and their snake perhaps meant more to them than the snake in the Garden of Eden does to us.

We know little about the temples, for no remains have ever been found, but written descriptions have survived, though they belong to the last days of the old gods. One, written by Adam, a German monk from Bremen a few years after William the Conqueror had landed in Britain, describes a temple in which the carved image of Thor stood for worship, with Odin and Frey on his left and right.

But these were the twilight days of the Nordic gods, though the twilight was long. In the early Viking period missionaries were going to Norway, Sweden and Denmark. Beside fjords and in the
The noble Gokstad ship with its soaring figurehead and shields positioned along the gunwale, as the Vikings placed them to keep the ship drier.
The Viking ships are a source of endless fascination for schoolchildren. The Gokstad ship, seen here without its figurehead, is fitted with 16 oar-holes, proving that it was rowed by 32 men.
(Right) A beautifully carved head in wood, which may have belonged to the prow of a ship.

(Left) Another carved animal's head, found in the Oseberg ship.
(Left) A Norwegian runic stone.

(Right) This runic stone was found in Sweden and is one of thousands scattered over the country.
shadow of mountains, where the wooden temples to Thor and Odin and Frey stood beside groves in which the sacrificed bodies, human and animal, were still hung from the trees, the doctrine of the "White Christ" was taught. But it was several hundred years before the sacrifices were no longer made, and the Vikings of Northmandy had become Norman knights, while still in the northern lands the gods of their fathers were not forgotten.

The Vikings who had come south and were at home in England, Ireland and France were the first to accept Christianity; and they did so in a business-like way. In matters of religion they were fatalists rather than fanatics. Accustomed to many gods, one more could do no harm and might become useful. So we hear of a Viking who, the saga tells us, "... believed in Christ, but he invoked Thor for seafaring and brave deeds".

The Vikings in Britain gradually became Christians because it was good policy. The chiefs led the way. We read in the Saga of Burnt Njal how Thorgeir, the old pagan priest, when asked what law the people of Iceland should follow, replied after a day of grave doubt: "It seems to me as though our matters were come to a deadlock, if we are not to have one and the same law; for if there be a sundering of the laws, then there will be a sundering of the peace, and we shall never be able to live in the land. Now I will ask both Christian men and heathen whether they will hold to these laws which I utter".

He went on to say: "This is the beginning of our
laws, that all men shall be Christians here in the land. . . .” Then he gave a warning against public heathen idol worship, but added that if it were done secretly, “. . . then it shall be blameless”. Thor and Odin were not disowned, but moved into the shade. The old gods were there for those who wanted them. So Christian Vikings merged the old with
the new. They raised a tall Christian cross at Gosforth, Northumberland, showing the Crucifixion, but also carved on the stone is the heathen god Loki in chains. Viking graves have been found on which are carved the cross of Christianity alongside the hammer of Thor.
EARLIER I told you about the once-mysterious burial mounds of Tune, Oseberg, Borre and Gokstad which were eventually excavated by skilful archaeologists who discovered within masses of beautiful and interesting objects, including the largest and best preserved Viking ships that we have today. We will now look at the ships themselves in more detail.

It is right that we should do so. Their ships were at the heart of the Viking way of life. Other remote peoples have left great architecture, the work of sculptors or painters, the writings of philosophers or historians, to keep their light burning down the centuries. The Vikings left pictures on rocks, wonderfully executed wood carvings, splendidly wrought gold, silver and bronze jewellery and ornaments, and the literature which is the adventure stories of the sagas. But above all they left, to be discovered in the modern age, their ships. They were the outstanding achievement of the race.

For they put their greatest art and the highest of their technical accomplishments into their ships. From certain angles of view, the Gokstad and
Oseberg galleys, as they stand today in the Hall of Vikings in Oslo, may be admired purely as lovely shapes, creations justified without needing to prove their usefulness, accepted simply for their beauty. It was, indeed, once said that the Oseberg ship should be cast in bronze and mounted as a national monument. You will see in both the Oseberg and Gokstad ships more of the virtues of good sculpture and poetry embodied in ship forms than has ever been achieved elsewhere in the world.

All that was most contemplative and mystical in the Viking found expression in the galleys. The ship dominated his day to day routine, his aspirations of worldly success; the advancement of his nation whether Norwegian or Dane; it was the always recurring theme in the pictures in tapestry, in the prose and poetry on runic stones, in the history celebrated in the sagas. For more than four centuries, from perhaps A.D. 800 to 1250, one of the great peoples of Europe almost, you might say, worshipped the ship.

The galley unearthed from the burial mound in Lower Gokstad is the finest example we have today of Viking shipbuilding, and reveals the skill that had been attained by A.D. 900 in the shipwrights' craft better than could any written record. A thousand years after this vessel was erected by the waters of the fjord, she remains an unsurpassed example of wooden shipbuilding.

Though an open boat, she was no small vessel with her length of seventy-six feet six inches. She was composed of numerous pieces of oak,
intricately shaped and knitted together, carved out of trees felled nearby and transported to the building site. First, there was the keel, the most massive piece of timber in the vessel. This was her strong backbone, running most of her length and all in one piece. I shall be mentioning later that in 1893 an exact copy was built of the Gokstad ship; but when it came to cutting the keel, no oak tree in all Norway was big enough to provide a suitable log, and one had to be imported from Canada, where there were still to be found trees such as the Vikings had felled with their axes.

Out of the keel at either end sprang upwards in noble curves the stem and stern timbers, also fashioned of oak and shaped to fit the keel. Keel, stem, and stern, each had to be carved by hand out of the oak tree to their intricate shapes. Then there were the frames running across the bottom of the ship, and the many planks on each side making the skin. All these were shaped before any part of the vessel was erected on the stocks.

The amount of carving work involved in all this was tremendous, and we have to remember that only hand tools were available; also that there were no drawings used to guide the builders. Hundreds of individual parts of heavy oak had to be laboriously fashioned to the preconceived but undrawn design, each having to fit accurately when the time for assembly came.

Consider the planking, for example, in some ways the most remarkable work in the ship. The planking on each side was of two kinds—that which
formed the bottom of the hull and had to be assuredly watertight; that making the upcurving topsides of the vessel above the water. Each of these planks had to be carved out of the solid oak trunk, and not just cut straight like a floorboard, but shaped in a long curve to follow the lines of the hull.

And in one important respect the Vikings made this part of the work even more difficult than it need have been. Though they used iron nails everywhere else in the vessel for fastening the parts together, the bottom planking of the hull was not nailed to the frames, as would be the method of a modern boatbuilder, but lashed or tied to them by cords made from the thin, strong roots of a tree. This cord passed through holes made in the frames and through "cleats" or raised projections placed along the centre of each plank on the inside and also having holes in them spaced to coincide with those in the frames.

You might think that the cleats would have been cut out separately and fastened to the planks afterwards with nails, but this would not have been strong enough. Each cleat was a part of the plank itself, carved from the same thicker piece of timber as the plank was cut down to the required thickness. The skilful and laborious work involved in this staggers us today.

Why did the Vikings adopt so laborious a manner of construction? It was to give flexibility to the bottom of the hull which, when the ship was at sea, was for ever having to resist the impact of
the sea. Once the ship was afloat, the surrounding water would press the planking against its supporting frames, so it would be unlikely to be torn away from them. But as the ship rolled and pitched amongst waves, so long and narrow a structure could hardly remain perfectly rigid. Parts of it were, therefore, allowed to move slightly, easing and giving, reducing the strains falling on the hull, just as when catching a cricket ball the quick backward movement of your hands takes the sting out of the impact. When at sea the Viking ships twisted visibly, while the bottom of the boat and the great oak keel moved up and down as the hull bent. The boats remained watertight because they were yielding enough to make such movements without coming apart, as it were, at the joints.

We know this because when the copy of the Viking ship mentioned earlier was sailed across the Atlantic in 1893, this behaviour was noticed.

Another important piece of timber in the vessel was the mast step, on which the bottom, or heel, of the mast rested. This again was a massive piece of oak, rather beautifully shaped, being carved down at either end in the form of a fish’s tail. Then the upper planking had to be hacked out of the tree trunk. This in some ways was a simpler job than the lower planking, for it was simply nailed to the frames in the manner we should adopt today, so no cleats had to be cut. One of the upper strakes of planking was made thicker than the others, for into it had to be bored sixteen large holes through which the oars would project into the sea. Above this thick strake
of planking there were thinner strakes, while the topmost one of all was designed to carry the row of shields which were hung along the side of the ship when she was at sea, to give additional protection against the waves.

Many other parts of the hull had yet to be made, and we may imagine the busy shipwrights working by the water, the still unfashioned trunks of oak trees, some with the barks still on, stacked not far away, while closer at hand piles of carved pieces—keel, stem, stern, heaps of planks and frames—mounted higher close to the spot where the ship would soon be erected and take on the shape of the galley which next spring would carry one more expedition far over the seas. Winter was the period for shipbuilding.

The work of erection would finally begin. The high, curved prow and stern would be mounted on the keel and fastened to it with heavy iron spikes, the joints making a perfect fit. A few upright wooden moulds would be placed along the length of the keel round which the already shaped planks would be bent, each laid to overlap the one below, in the manner of construction inherited, as we have seen, from the Northmen of the Stone Age. Iron nails were then driven through the overlaps to fasten one plank to the next.

As the hull rose higher and took its shape, wood beams would be placed across the inside above the bottom planking, on which would be laid the planking that formed the platform on which the crew walked. Curved wooden knees would be put
in place extending the lower ribs upwards to the full height of the hull, and against these would be laid the topside planking which had already been prepared—the strake with the oar holes and eventually the strake that would carry the row of shields.

One more important part of the ship must be noticed, for it was the means by which it was controlled on the so often stormy seas crossed by the Vikings during their voyages. This was the huge side rudder or steering oar fixed to the starboard (right) side of the ship, close to the stern. Today ships and boats have stern rudders, swinging like doors on hinges from the extreme stern. This had not yet been invented, nor indeed was for some hundreds of years; instead, as we have seen, the Vikings had devised this type of side rudder, centuries before the Gokstad ship was built. In their later and larger vessels it was more than sixteen feet long, slung on a withy cord and lashed to the hull in such a way that it could be twisted on its vertical axis, this having the effect of turning the ship’s head; while it could be swung upwards or downwards along the line of the ship, which was essential, for when fully lowered, the oar projected well below the bottom of the ship. Through the top of the rudder there projected a small stick, like the tiller in a modern stern rudder, by means of which the helmsman turned the steering oar.

Eventually the day would come when one more Viking ship would stand ready for taking the water on launching ways of rollers down the beach. How
many hours would have gone to building her we cannot say, or how many men were employed. But of their magnificent skill we need have no doubt. We have not a great deal of knowledge of the tools that they used, though a selection of them have been gathered from various graves. They had the axes for stripping down the giant oaks into the shapes they needed, the gouge for hollowing and shaping, hammers for the iron nails, and the auger for drilling holes. On these and a few other iron tools, the creation of their ships depended. And on their skill. To have shaped the many separate parts and the lovely curves of such vessels without drawings, so that each part fitted into its place and each curve flowed into another as though nature, not the hands of men, had formed them, was an achievement at which we may wonder. The poet Longfellow said this about it:

"Thorberg Skafting, masterbuilder
in his shipyard by the sea,
Whistling, said, 'It would bewilder
any man but Thorberg Skafting,
Any man but me!'"

And surely this is true?
The Gokstad ship, the Viking war galley of about the year A.D. 900, was a wonderful example of wooden shipbuilding; and not only do we know all the details of the methods used in her construction, but thanks to the numerous other ship remains and the hundreds of rock carvings, we have been able to trace in some detail in an earlier chapter how,
during the centuries, the Viking shipbuilders learned the skill needed for such clever shipwrights’ work.

But even the excellence of the Gokstad vessel could not stop them advancing yet further in the art of shipbuilding. Ships became bigger, for one thing. The Gokstad ship was seventy-eight feet six inches long and was propelled by sixteen oarsmen on each side; that is, by thirty-two altogether. Her total crew probably exceeded sixty men.

The day was to come, about a hundred years after the Gokstad ship had been buried, when vessels with thirty oarsmen per side were in use, their length about one hundred and seventy feet, or more than double that of the Gokstad ship. Even bigger galleys were built, carrying up to seventy oarsmen altogether, and in a few cases more, crews numbering about three hundred men.

To build bigger is not always to build better. It is perhaps enough to say, without getting too technical, that brilliantly devised though the structure of the Gokstad ship was for a vessel of her size, it was unsuitable, without great modification, for a ship twice her length and about eight times her weight, as the later vessels were. We come up against the old problems of the ships bending and breaking and tearing themselves apart as they moved among the waves—problems solved for smaller craft during centuries when the Viking shipwrights learned first to build boats of skin, then ships of wood, and then to improve on these in
quality and size until the excellence of the Gokstad ship was reached.

But it was in the nature of the materials they used—the oak and pine trees—and the methods to which their tools limited them, that progress, at least in size, had an effective limit. It occurred in galleys with about twenty-five oars per side, appreciably bigger than the Gokstad ship, but much smaller than the monsters. There is one story told of King Sverre, who set sail with a fleet in his ship which had thirty-two oars per side; and before leaving the land it had been noticed that several remarkably heavy chests had been carried on board. Once at sea with the sail hoisted, it became evident what these were for. They contained iron nails, and these were distributed to the crew who were told to drive them in where necessary when the ship gave signs of working, straining and leaking as she moved among the seas. Such ships, indeed, could not be made strong enough.

We may be certain that the shipwrights did much towards strengthening the structures of the bigger vessels, making yet stronger the jointing and fastening of the stem, stern and keel, the linking of the frames with the keel and the planking with all the other parts: for never in the history of the world perhaps have there been men with a longer and deeper experience of building ships in wood. There was not only one Thorberg Skafting amongst the Vikings.

It happens, however, that we can say little in detail about these later vessels. While many
thousands of years in shipbuilding that passed between the Stone Age skin boats and the Gokstad ship have been revealed to us in rock drawings, and then in the ships themselves, no such information is available for these much later years. There are no longer either ships or drawings; only written descriptions, not always reliable. Not only are their ships dim to us; the Vikings themselves are no longer what they were. Those that went to Normandy a few hundred years before are Normans, or if they followed the Conqueror to England they are becoming Englishmen; while those who had been there earlier were already Englishmen. In their own country they are not so much Vikings as Norwegians, Danes and Swedes, members of nations and fighting the battles of powerful kings. The old burial customs are falling into disrepute, for Christianity was powerful; the archaeologist loses his way, and it is the turn of the historian studying documents.
FINDING OUT MORE ABOUT THE VIKINGS

The ships of the Vikings alone are treasures to the archaeologist; but he finds it even more valuable and exciting when in a ship grave there may be found a mass of objects that the Vikings used in their everyday lives. A skilful examination of all that was discovered in the Gokstad and Oseberg burial mounds can tell much about the way the Vikings lived. Taken in corroboration with other finds, the picture becomes vivid.

Some of the many articles dug up have already been briefly mentioned. Let us now examine them more carefully, together with other discoveries made elsewhere, and see what sort of picture emerges.

One of the largest objects in the Oseberg grave was a four wheeled cart and four sledges. When the mound was opened up to the light of day these were in thousands of fragments, one of the sledges alone being in 1,068 pieces. The bright paints on them, however, still held their original colours which had to be copied quickly before they died in the air from which they had been protected for
more than a thousand years. Reconstruction was a formidable jigsaw puzzle. The small bits of wood were boiled in a solution of alum, and when dry soaked with linseed oil, a process ensuring that they did not lose their shape or crack. Later, they were painstakingly re-assembled. The four wooden cartwheels had wide rims made from segments of beech wood, and thick spokes connecting them to the hub. The axles of the wheels were fixed to a strong central member running the length of the cart. The body, mounted on trestles fastened to the central member, was made of elaborately carved boards or planks, and mounted on the front axle were the two ash shafts for the horses.

There has been some argument about this cart amongst experts. It has been suggested that it was a sacred vehicle, and one archaeologist, Professor A. W. Brøgger, has said that probably it was never intended for practical use. It has further been claimed that there were no suitable roads or even

Four-wheeled cart reconstructed from the pieces found in the Oseberg ship grave
tracks for the use of horse drawn vehicles in the Viking age.

Whether or not the actual cart found in the Oseberg grave was used in practice cannot be said, but other evidence makes it pretty certain that carts drawn by horses were in fact often employed by the Vikings. In the tapestry also found in the Oseberg ship there are several pictures of horse-drawn carts, and we know, too, from other evidence, that the making and maintaining of hard tracks across the country was a practice in Viking times. So we may accept that in summer they would set off across the country in vehicles, if less elaborate than the Oseberg example, at least of similar type.

Three of the four sledges were no less beautifully made and carved than the cart. When they were dug out, the runners of the sledges were in a pile apart, and oddly enough it was found that the bodies of the sledges, when re-assembled, would not fit properly on the runners. This suggests that the two parts of the sledges do not belong to one another.

The point, however, is not of great importance. There is no argument that sledges were one of the most common means of overland transport for the Vikings when the snow lay deep in winter, ships were hauled out on shore, and the lakes and rivers were frozen. Then the sledges were loaded, and over the snow, dazzlingly light against the darkness of massed oaks and pines, journeys would be made to the music of the horses' harness and the duller
sound of their hooves on the soft ground. Perhaps, after sea voyaging, this mode of transport appealed most to the Vikings. There was something in the glide and swing of a sledge on snow that recalled the movements of a ship, while with a sledge were the horses, too, for which the average Viking had an affection second only perhaps to his feeling for a ship. Ten horses were buried in the Oseberg grave, a suggestion of the esteemed place that they held.

Viking coins have been found in numbers amounting to hundreds of thousands. This is particularly useful, for they have dates and names written upon them. It is possible to date a grave fairly accurately from the coins found in it, and above all they are able to tell us where the Vikings had been. So we find in the Scandinavian graves coins from Ireland, from England, and others minted by the Arabs. The Vikings dropped and forgot their axeheads, they took the coins of the people, and a thousand years later archaeologists put the clues together to find out more about them than might seem possible when it is remembered that they left no written records of themselves.

The archaeologist spends much of his time endeavouring to rediscover what was once known by the humblest of people. Every Viking knew the sight of the familiar axe, the sword, the bow and arrow, and the spear. They were as common sights to them as the walking stick, the lawn mower, the sporting gun, or the aeroplane are to us.

More than four hundred swords have been
found, for example, in Scandinavia alone. Some are simple, plainly wrought in iron; others have beautifully decorated hilts. And here we may notice a fact that has been mentioned before. Fewer swords have been dug up in Denmark than in Norway and Sweden, not because the Danes used them less but because they became Christians earlier, and the custom, so useful to the archaeologist, of burying possessions with the dead in case they should find them of use in the next world, was no longer followed.

More characteristic of the Viking than the sword was his axe; the axes that had at first in the Stone Age been chipped from flint, later cast in bronze, and finally made of iron. As they moved over the world, the Vikings lost some of their axes, discarded or dropped from a lifeless hand in battle; and they may be rediscovered today by the Thames in the heart of London, for example, or in the Isle of Man, and in the quiet countryside of Oxfordshire. Spear heads are found too, but just as a sword survives its scabbard, so does the spear head last while the wooden shaft to which it was attached disintegrates with time. We know from the sagas and elsewhere that the Vikings used bows and arrows, but not a single bow or arrow shaft has survived until today.

Such weapons and utilitarian objects, transcending their immediate purpose, often became the means by which the Vikings expressed their innate sense of beauty and appreciation of fine workmanship. We have found a number of iron axe heads
inlaid with silver in intricate and haunting patterns. Spurs for the horseman, and horse collars, have also been discovered with silver inlay, and the shields which lined the gunwale of the galleys were elaborately decorated with colour and embossing.

By nature the Vikings were artists; they had an instinctive sense of form and line, that species of talent which is not a product of brains or education, though it may be refined by both, but of what we should now call the æsthetic sense. They had an intense feeling for beauty, which is often found to accompany the warrior temperament. It showed itself in the most direct way in their love of picturesque splendour in clothes and personal decoration. They were, when they had an opportunity, a “dressy” people. The dandy was not an uncommon type amongst them. Silks and brocades most elaborately embroidered in gold and silver, a gold or silver armlet, a stately cloak, were worn by those Viking men able to afford the luxury, while the women had more elaborate jewellery—tortoise brooches and buckles with animal carvings, sometimes in pure gold. The Vikings became skilful workers in the precious metals, an art that they learned on their travels, and numerous examples of such work are to be found today in the museums.

No Viking art is more impressive than their wood carvings. When the Oseberg ship was excavated, it was no less the mass of carving found with her than the ship herself that made the discovery so important. It is not surprising that it was in the carving of animals that the Vikings excelled—
at first the animals that they knew from experience; later those of which they had heard on their travels, and to which they gave new and wonderful shapes like nothing that has walked on four legs. They became creatures of splendid imagination. There are moments when you feel that the Vikings had only to see a piece of timber to carve it. Actually, at any period there must have been only a few men amongst them who combined the skill of the wood carver with the vision of the artist. They produced the animals' heads and the supporting symbolic carving which we may examine today; and however long we do so, we continue to find new and unexpected surprises in the work.

Sometimes a piece of tapestry may provide an archaeologist with valuable information. A small fragment of such work, which was dated about A.D. 900, was found in the Ostfold region at Haugen, and many remnants, all brilliantly coloured, came to light when the ship of the young queen was uncovered. Woven into the linen were pictures of horses dragging carts with solid wheels, other horses ridden by Vikings in mail suits, and scattered amongst the pictures are symbols in various colours, such as the ancient swastika, which Hitler appropriated as the badge of the Nazi Party in 1933.

One of the most important tapestries belongs to a later date, and may be seen today in Bayeux, a town a few miles from the Channel in Calvados, Normandy. It is a strip of linen over two hundred feet in length and twenty inches wide, and on it in
needlework of different coloured wools are scenes from the life of King Harold II. The tapestry would seem to have been ordered by the Bishop of Bayeux for the decoration of his cathedral, and the work is now dated as about A.D. 1120, having been done by Norman ladies in the vicinity of Bayeux—the wives of the Norman gentlemen who had been Northmen and Vikings a few generations earlier.

In the panorama of scenes woven into the linen we may see the shipwreck of Harold, the landing of William the Conqueror, the death of Harold on the field of Hastings. Ships appear frequently in the story, and though needlework is not the best medium for accurate illustration, the vessels shown appear to have been portrayed under expert instruction. The chief fault to be found with them is that they appear to be too short for the number of oars shown, and this was no doubt to economize in the length of the tapestry. The interesting fact for us to notice is that though the tapestry deals with events occurring in the middle of the eleventh century, the ships illustrated hardly differ from the Viking ships of two hundred years earlier. We know, however, from other sources that, though similar in appearance, they were usually bigger.

We are able to explain in great detail how the Vikings built their ships; we know much less about their houses. We do know that they were usually made of wood, in logs or planks, or wattle and daub held together by a framework of timber, as you may still see in a few old houses in England today. That the houses were comfortless by modern
standards we have no doubt; but so, too, was the housing of most of northern Europe, and it remained so for centuries yet to come. In the early Viking days, dwellings of the humbler people were shared with the animals, and it is unlikely that there were windows, though there may have been open holes in the walls. Sometimes, when driven to it by lack of timber, the Vikings built in stone—in the Orkneys, Shetlands, and the Western Isles—and often in such treeless places they would use the driftwood that the sea washed ashore.

Only a few relics of Viking houses have been found, and though they may tell us a certain amount, they are never, like the ships of Gokstad and Oseberg and even earlier, complete enough to show the details. The lost Viking town of Hedeby, which stood close to the Baltic in Schleswig, was burned down at a time when Denmark and Norway were fighting in about 1050. The story of the disaster has been told by various writers of the day, and now you may look at the remains of Hedeby itself where they have been uncovered by archaeologists digging down over a wide area into the fields that for centuries had covered what was once one of the largest of Viking towns.

The story that the old historians told of Hedeby's fate was confirmed when the diggers found themselves working down through layers of charcoal-laden earth which were immediately below the grass. Going down deeper, in the course of which work numerous fields had the level of their soil lowered by many feet, the lower parts of the ancient
wooden houses came to light, the ends of the posts and framework. They had been built in different ways of timber and wattle and daub; and it was possible in some cases to see where the hearth had been, in the middle of the floor.

We should like to know more about the Viking at home. Much of his life was spent in the ships or in the encampments behind the stockades on foreign shores. But he was a settler as well as a rover and conqueror; he tilled the unproductive fields of his homelands and the richer soil of Ireland, Britain and Normandy, returning each night to the hutted farmstead and the bowl of food heating on the fire. He was an earnest and devoted family man; indeed, family honour and loyalty was a central feature of his ethic of living.

One of the problems of finding out about the Vikings is their speechlessness. The Greeks of a thousand and more years earlier, the Romans of eight hundred or so, speak to us not only clearly in the mass of their writings that have reached us in the modern world, but they do so with a beauty and distinction that makes the voices of those ancient people, their likes and fears and capabilities, in some ways as clear to us as someone writing a few years ago. Even the fabulous people who inhabited the island of Crete more than two thousand years before the great Viking Age wrote more for us to read (though we have only recently learned how to do it, so difficult was their script) than the Vikings. For the Vikings' only contemporary voice is brief and intermittent, like one heard
over a bad telephone line. This is the writing upon their runic stones.

Runic stones are found scattered all over Scandinavia, literally in thousands—there are two thousand five hundred in Sweden alone. The stones are of various shapes and have writing in the Runic alphabet upon them, and often elaborate carving as well, some of the work being very beautiful.

There was a runic alphabet before the Viking age. It was originally formed by modifying the letters of the Greek and Roman alphabets so as to make it easier to carve them in stone or wood, and the first method of doing this may have been devised in the second century A.D. It was modified in after years, and indeed varied from place to place. Also, runes were not only letters of an alphabet; there were also signs to which magical powers were attributed, mysterious elusive symbols that we cannot understand today which once had the power of witchcraft over the minds of men. We should not feel too superior about this. Belief in witchcraft was still powerful six hundred years later, and of a more cruel kind; while in our own century the swastika of the Nazis has shown the power that men think they may discover in a pattern made up from a few insignificant lines. The swastika, incidentally, appears on some runes.

The runic stones on which the writings and carvings appeared took many forms. They might be in the shape of a delicate, bent column, like a runic stone from Dynna, Norway, which tells a story we may understand in its carved figures of men
and animals. Others were heavy, squat stones, sometimes of quite irregular shape, and it is not always possible to understand what they have to tell. What is said, for example, in one long piece of runic writing on a stone in Sweden will probably never be wholly known. Professor Brondsted has said that it is "... full of secret runes, number magic, and puzzling and inscrutable passages. ..." We
are faced with an old, long discarded sense of magic.

How much, then, may be learned from the runes? From those by which it was hoped only to invoke the powers of magic little, except for the insight they may give into the way a people of long ago thought and believed. For our own beliefs of today may equally be lost and have to be recovered by men of the future. But the runic stones were also used as memorials to the dead, or even the living, and then that chiselled writing on the surface of the stone may tell us the story of a battle, about a marriage, a good deed, a sea voyage, give a brief account of a lifetime, or retail the travels made by the person commemorated (to Constantinople, for example, or Greenland). The runes may be set in poetical form, but the translation of poetry being difficult, the pleasure of them is likely to be confined to those who speak the Scandinavian language concerned.

The drawings carved on the runic stones can be valuable to us, though they may originally have been intended for decoration only. One showing a ship is particularly valuable to the historian and nautical archæologist, being one of the few representations of a Viking galley under sail. Though we have many hulls of Viking ships which are able to tell us so much about the shipbuilding on which their power rested, sails and cordage will not survive the years, and without pictures it is hard to be sure how their ships were rigged. The stone, found in Gotland, shows not only the sail hoisted,
but details of her rigging. Like many stone carvings it also puzzles. We cannot be sure what all the network of rope is below the sail, for it is a complicated manner of rigging unknown to us, and one not used, so far as we can discover from other sources, by the Vikings. You have also, when looking at such pictures, to recognize the conventions used by the artist. He shows the sail braced fore and aft, along the length of the hull; whereas when such a ship was sailing, it was square across the ship, or nearly so.

A well-known historian once said that you began to understand the past only when you felt that you could hear in your mind the people of it speaking. So the earnest searcher into the past studies all that has been written by the people of that day, but since the whole cast of their minds is liable to be different from our own it is only a few unusually talented scholars who can find the man of the past beneath the antique manner of his writings. Even when the writing has the lovely delicacy of the old Greek, or the stateliness of Elizabethan English, there is likely to be the human touch missing, except for the scholar.

We certainly cannot hear the voice of the hearty, beer-drinking, swashbuckling Viking in the writing on the runic stones, though it may prise open a crack the door into his secret mind. But several hundred years later, some of the tales that bards told in the log cabins of the ninth and tenth centuries were for the first time written down; and
so we have the sagas, which have been mentioned from time to time in these pages.

Saga is an old Norse word meaning story, and the Norse sagas were written in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. They are the great literature of Iceland, though some of the sagas were written in Norway; and many of them tell of the high old Viking days which our story in this book has been about. But the stories are then about events that had occurred three to four hundred years earlier, in the days when the Gokstad ship was buried, or Lief Ericsson was looking for the first time on the shores of Wineland. These days were no less distant from the time of the saga writers than is the beheading of Charles I from our own time. To some extent the stories had become in the course of the centuries romances, wonderfully tall, unbelievable tales of an heroic past when men greater than life strode over the world and perpetrated the most amazing deeds.

For example, Ragnar Ladbroke was a real Viking. He had taken a fleet of galleys up the Seine to Paris in about the year 845, and achieved many other deeds which brought him fame amongst his contemporaries; but we cannot now be sure of where truth ends and story-telling begins in the account of his activities. He is credited with having sailed the Mediterranean and explored the White Sea; also to have ruled in Dublin. Then there is the story of why he did all this. Once upon a time there was a lovely daughter of a rich earl in Norway and she, Thora, had been given a baby dragon, which
unfortunately grew bigger and bigger until it was not only too large for the chest in which it was kept but even for the room in which the chest stood. Finally it went outside, where it coiled round the outside walls and made a prisoner of the beautiful girl; for the dragon would not let anyone in but the man who brought her food. Also, by this time the dragon itself was eating a whole ox a day, which the earl was finding most expensive. The earl offered the reward of his daughter’s hand to anyone who could kill the dragon, and this Ragnar Lodbrok achieved. All might have been happy for ever afterwards; it was, we are assured, for some years. But Thora died. To kill his sorrow, Ragnar Lodbrok took to the ships and sailed far off as a roving Viking.

So is truth and myth mixed. Perhaps it was some personal tragedy in the life of Ragnar Lodbrok that made him the dedicated seaman and warrior that he became. This has occurred with other men. And no doubt he did achieve much of what is attributed to him. But not all. His activities in the saga span several generations of achievement. He is the poetic embodiment of a Nordic hero. The sons of Ragnar Lodbrok were hardly less celebrated than he. They led an army that captured York at the end of the year 866 and fought battles against King Alfred.

Yet how much may be learned from the sagas of day to day life in the Viking days, about their weapons and jewellery and clothes, about how they travelled on land, how they felt about an enemy or friend! In amongst the romance which makes
such good stories are numerous pieces of realistic life, facts which bring alive for us in the twentieth century the Viking of the tenth century.

This is the value of the sagas if we treat them as documents. They also happen to be works of art, and accordingly tell us something about the minds of those later Vikings of the twelfth century who were telling the old stories of their race and still retained the feelings of the earlier days.
THE VIKINGS REACH ACROSS THE WORLD

SHIPS ARE of little use without navigators. Once land has disappeared below the rim of the horizon—one of the sagas speaks of the land going down into the water; a beautifully vivid phrase—the ocean becomes a trackless place without landmarks, without anything to guide at all, it would seem, among the waste of waves.

Yet the Vikings regularly went far out of sight of the land. Even the voyage from Norway to the Shetlands was more than two hundred miles, due west, down the Old Viking way. Setting off from farther to the north in Norway, the Faeroes were three hundred miles to the west across sea open to the Atlantic on one side and the Arctic Ocean on the other. The Vikings sailed regularly to Iceland, yet another three hundred miles across the Atlantic and then on to Greenland. All these were ocean passages.

Voyages down to the Mediterranean might seem easier, because then the coast may always be near on the left hand side and it might seem that the boats could follow it easily from headland to head-
A Swedish runic stone with involved design.
(Above) This comb in a case and belt buckle, both made of bone, were found in England, near York.

(Below) A fine piece of Viking jewellery, found in Russia, where the Swedish Vikings were once powerful.
(Above) Viking treasure trove discovered in the Isle of Man, once an important Viking base.

(Below) The Vikings used much jewellery; these arm-rings and finger-ring are made of silver.
A tortoise brooch, typical of the kind of ornament liked by the Vikings. It was found at Barra, in the Hebrides.
land or round the bays. But seamen know better than this. Clinging to a coastline is most dangerous, and more so then than now; for there were no charts showing the hidden rocks and sandbanks, no lighthouses or buoys warning of dangers. Moreover, when the wind strikes hard towards the coast a ship is in danger of being blown helplessly ashore, driven perhaps against the foot of high cliffs that cannot be climbed. The Vikings no doubt often did hug the coast, and equally without doubt galley after galley was wrecked, forced ashore by wind or current, or stranded upon a submerged rock. So, too, were the ships often lost in deep water out of sight of land, swamped perhaps in a rising sea, or even remaining afloat, lost and without sense of direction, while the crew starved. The sagas occasionally tell us about such tragedies. When in the year A.D. 990 Erik the Red sailed with a fleet of twenty-five ships from Iceland bound for Greenland, eleven ships failed to arrive, some foundering at sea, others losing themselves and turning back. In later years a disaster overtook a fleet in which a pilgrimage was being made to the Holy Land.

There must have been a moment of misgiving each time in a voyage when the land went out of sight and the rolling ship became a world on its own at the centre of a great circle of blank, heaving seas. Yet somehow the Vikings made their prodigious voyages; and while ships were often lost, many others made their landfall, though sometimes not where intended. Yet we know very little about the special skills that enabled them to do this—
skills now perhaps wholly lost. No navigational instrument of the Vikings has survived until today, and the sagas tell us only a little about such technical matters. But we have been able to piece together enough information to give us a vague idea at least of how the ships voyaged so far, and so often reached their intended landfall. One reason why we have difficulty in gathering knowledge on this subject is that the methods of navigation were in those times regarded as a close trade secret, one that could bring wealth and power, and deny it to the rival.

The greatest problem when voyaging out of sight of land is that of keeping a sense of direction. Today the compass solves that problem. But it appears unlikely that the Vikings knew anything about the magnetic compass and the secret of direction that could be solved by the freely swinging magnetized bar, which will always point towards the earth’s magnetic pole. Indeed, we can discover very little about the origin of the compass. The Chinese may have first known about it, but even they apparently made no use of it until the Viking age was over. But we cannot be sure. The Arabs may have had a form of compass. Possibly they knew of the compass needle when the Vikings sailed and rowed into the Mediterranean, and the latter may have learned of the secret from them. There is even a theory that the Vikings themselves invented a sort of compass. They had vast experience in the use of iron, and they may have discovered its directional power. Certainly, living far
to the north, in the region of the long light nights where no stars could shine in the pale sky to guide the mariner, they had especial need of such a navigational aid. But if they did invent it, they have kept it a secret from us. Nothing like a compass has been found buried, and no mention of it is made in their literature. We shall be wise to assume that they knew nothing of the device. How then did they find their way over the oceans which have no signposts?

Certain accidents of nature which they recognised helped them. Let us remember that in those days summer was the time of seafaring. In winter the boats were laid up on shore, and while continual westerly gales blew outside and the Atlantic was turbulent, the fires were lit in the wooden houses, the beer drawn, and the storyteller summoned to the fireside—the men who told the tales which have come down to us today in the sagas and enabled us to learn so much about their voyages.

But in summer those far northern seas, even to the north of the Arctic Circle, are inviting to seamen. Gales rarely occur, and the atmosphere is wonderfully clear. And if the sun which never sets during the summer on those latitudes denies the stars as a guide to the mariner, at least it gives him light for twenty-four hours. Far-off coastlines may throw a reflection into the sky from the ice covering their mountains, which may be seen for a distance of seventy miles. The atmosphere and the peculiarities of northern light helped the Vikings.

Without the compass, the seamen of those days
had other means, now almost forgotten, to give them the sense of direction. The birds came to their aid. There were countless auks which would come out to sea to find their food of fish and then return to the land with their beaks gripping their family's next meal. Birds, with a sense of direction that man has lost during the thousands of years of evolution, pointed the way to land. The Vikings followed the auks towards it. One of the sagas tells of how, on one of the earliest voyages from Norway to Iceland, ravens were carried in the ship and while on board were fed none too well. When it was wished to know the direction of land, a hungry raven was released. Rising higher in the air, it might sight a coastline invisible to those a few feet above the water's surface; or perhaps that sense, unknown to man, which directs the birds unerringly on their migrations, guided them. When, with confidence, a raven set off in a certain direction the Viking ship far below altered course and pointed the same way.

The Pole Star helped them, but perhaps not much, for those light nights dimmed or hid it altogether. Then the Viking would turn to the sun instead. What he wished to know when sailing westward across the Atlantic was whether he was far to the north or south of his proper course. For he might spend days drifting in fog or being driven before a high wind. Finally, the sun would reappear. At noon, when at its height, the length of the shadow it cast across the boat would be able to tell him whether he was to the north or south of his
course. If a Viking wished to sail due west or east—and fortunately much of his voyaging was made in these two directions—he knew that the shadow of a vertical stick or post cast by the sun at mid-day should remain the same length as he sailed. If wind or current drove him to the north, the sun would be lower in the mid-day sky and the shadow longer; if he strayed to the south, it would become shorter. Then he would have to alter course towards the north or south, relying perhaps upon the steadiness of the wind to judge and hold the new direction, or even upon clouds, and later in the day upon the direction of the sunset. Yesterday, he might remember, the ship had held the sunset a little on the starboard side of the soaring bow with its figurehead; today, wishing to work up towards the north, it must be on the port side.

When visible, the stars would help him. The height of the Pole Star (which he may have had a crude instrument to measure, though more likely he relied on his eye) would tell him whether he was too far north or south of his course, as the sun could tell him by day. But it was when for days and nights the sky was covered with cloud, when high winds blew him far off course, or when perhaps also for days the ship, with sails hanging in folds, would lie unmoving on a flat sea in a windless world of blinding fog, that all sense of direction would be lost. We read of such events in the sagas, and we know that they must have occurred often and that many ships failed to reach the end of their voyage, perishing far out to sea, lost.
The problems of navigation do not end when land comes in sight. An entirely new set of difficulties now face the mariner, solved for him today by charts marking rocks and depths of water, by lighthouses flashing at night the warning of danger, and by elaborate books of sailing directions giving all the information that is known about the coast and adjacent seas.

The Vikings had no charts, and they were piloting their vessels round the coast hundreds of years before the first lighthouse was built. But we know that they had sailing directions, descriptions of how to get along the coast from here to there, how far they had to go, and in what direction. They had need of such assistance, for much of their time was spent rowing or sailing along coastlines, among the islands of the Baltic, round the British coasts or those of Iceland and Greenland, and in the Mediterranean.

We know something about their sailing directions from the very old Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*. This was written down some time late in the tenth century, at the time when the Vikings were raiding and colonizing far and wide over Europe and had established themselves in Iceland, the saga island that was to be. But *Beowulf* is the story of days long before this time, and scholars, by identifying characters in the story with real people known to history, have established the date as being early in the sixth century—some four hundred years before the story was written, and two hundred before the Vikings made their first raids on the lands to the
south and west of their fjords. But skills and techniques changed slowly in those days, and what the Northmen did in the days of Beowulf they were no doubt doing in much the same way centuries later.

There are many descriptions of sea voyages in the poem, though as always in such writings we long for more details. By great good luck, however, we have some sailing directions, such as the Vikings used, preserved for us in notes written by a Danish monk on a blank page in a book sometime late in the thirteenth century. Here instructions are given for various coastal voyages in the Baltic along the Swedish coast and out to the Gulf of Finland. Distances to be rowed or sailed are given in “turns”, and this we know to be an expression derived from the fact that, when rowing, the oarsmen in a Viking ship changed sides every two hours. A “turn” was the distance that a ship went in the space of each two hours, and by working back from the old description to a map it has been found that a turn was about six nautical miles. So the Vikings steered from point to point along a coast checking distances as they went.

How they measured the distance accurately, we are not certain, but we can be sure that knowing their ship’s behaviour as they did, they would be able to judge closely her speed under sail, and when under oars long experience had told them—as we now know from the expression “turn”—that they made about three knots.

We may assume, too, that they used a sounding
pole or even a lead line for discovering the depth of the water.

We must remember also that in those days before men read and when they gathered their knowledge through their eyes and experience, they retained certain abilities which the modern town-bred man has lost, though they are still to be found among more primitive peoples, or even, until lately, amongst the fishermen who worked from our own ports. They had a better sense of locality and direction than ourselves, and a wonderful memory for view and scenery. They would look at a headland or bay, a hill inshore visible from the sea, or a rock standing out in the sea, and the sight would become engraved on their minds so that when, perhaps years later, they saw it again, they would remember it and know where they were.

Even their sense of smell would help them. You may smell the land, if you have a good nose, from far out at sea; it has been said that people have smelt birch trees from twenty miles away. Many such odd navigational aids of which we only get hints in the sagas, song, and story, or no mention at all, but which we can deduce from the evidence of later seafarers, were used by the Vikings.

You may wonder why we have gone to such lengths into the way they navigated. It is because they owed everything that made them a conquering people to these skills. They had the ships and the knowledge of how to cross oceans or cruise along shorelines from place to place with reasonable certainty of getting to the journey's end, and so
AREAS OF VIKING PENETRATION
they could dance rings round the other land-bound peoples of Europe, and moving swiftly from place to place become the masters of lands far from their own.

The most interesting question about the later Vikings is whether any of them ever reached America. Until recently the idea that they had was regarded as mythical. For unhappily the only evidence that we possess is what we have called "literary evidence" and it was once considered that the sagas could not be relied upon so far as any of the more surprising statements made in them were concerned. Had we ever found in America a single unmistakably Viking object, a broad axe or one of their long iron swords, even a piece of Irish jewellery or English silver of the period showing that only the Vikings could have carried the object across the Atlantic, their discovery of the continent would be proved.

Best of all would it be to find the sites of the old huddled encampments which the saga stories tell us were established in America, and which now might be excavated and tell us so much. Indeed, it has been suggested by Professor Brønsted that an aerial survey by low flying slow speed aircraft along parts of the Atlantic coast of Canada might give evidence of these now buried camps, should they ever have existed; for what is buried may show in outline from the air. Archaeologists have learned much from survey by aircraft. But this has not yet been done, and though from time to time rumours
are heard of Viking remains being found in North America, the claims have never yet been justified.

However, certain parts of the saga stories are now more and more coming to be accepted as true. For one thing, the fact that the Vikings may have reached America years before Columbus would not really be surprising. Compared with Columbus they had so short a distance to go.

Once they had colonized Greenland, you will see that they had only about two hundred and fifty miles of sea between them and the nearest point of what is now called Baffin Island to the north of Hudson Bay. They had to sail farther than this from the nearest part of the Scandinavian coast to reach Britain. Poor Columbus, starting off so far to the south, had to sail more than a thousand miles. Now, it seems likely, almost certain, that Vikings landed in North America, and actually tried to colonise it; which, had they succeeded, would certainly have altered the history of the world. But the rather happy-go-lucky manner of the sagas, where facts are concerned, makes it impossible for us to be sure exactly where they reached.

Perhaps the first man from Europe ever to set eyes on America was Bjarni Herjulfsson, who, one saga tells us, sailed from Iceland to join his family who had settled in Greenland. He had never voyaged westward of Iceland before, and does not appear to have liked the idea of the difficult voyage. The facts came up to his expectations. They were blanketed in fog soon after leaving Iceland; and
you will recall from what we said about the methods of Viking navigation that the mariner was indeed blinded then when fog came down. So the weather remained for many days, as it may in that northern area. There was a wind from the north, and by the time the welcome sun reappeared, Bjarni decided he must be far to the south of Greenland.

Sailing on, they sighted a wooded coastline so unlike the snow-covered Greenland they hoped to find that without venturing ashore they altered course, leaving the land on the port side, and sailing to the northward. That land, we may presume, was some part of the North American coastline. It has even been suggested that it was as far south as Newfoundland.

A few days later they again sighted land, and again it was wooded and without snow or mountains. This could not be Greenland either; so they pushed on once more over the restless seas which rose and fell in long waves to a wind that drove them from the stern. Yet a third time land was found, now remarkably like Greenland, for it showed both snow and mountains. But for reasons that must remain for ever a secret, Bjarni Herjulfsson again decided that it was not Greenland. They rolled on out over the grey seas with a rising wind and, according to the saga, after three days and nights and with an increasing gale they came again upon land, and this time it was the south coast of Greenland.

The harassing voyage occurred in the year A.D. 986 and the account of it is in the Olaf Saga,
written centuries later. In this case we cannot blame the saga for being a little vague about the facts, for Bjarni himself did not know where he had been. It does seem likely, however, that he had looked on America.

That is only the first of saga tales about America. News of Bjarni’s voyage spread, and there was much curiosity about the new lands that had been found. The outcome was the voyage of that most widely known of all Vikings, Lief Ericsson, “a big, strong man of manly looks, and besides a wise and careful man in all things”. He set off to the westward with the deliberate idea of exploration, in Bjarni’s ship as it happens which he had purchased, and manned with a crew of thirty-five men. What the saga treats as a short voyage brought them to the cold and mountainous country which they identified with Bjarni’s last landfall before he reached Greenland. Here a landing was made and the place was given the name of Helluland, meaning Stoneland. It was an uninteresting spot, so they sailed on again, making their next landfall in a wooded country where they again went ashore. It was named Markland, meaning woodland, and some authorities have suggested that it may have been Newfoundland or Nova Scotia. Now, the nearest point of Newfoundland is some seven hundred miles south of the southern-most point of Greenland; Nova Scotia, some four hundred more: which would mean that the ships must have worked a long way south and not at all to the west since leaving Greenland. This would seem
unlikely; yet the sagas pass over navigational
details so lightly that almost any supposition may
be justified.

Here a wind rose which hardened into a gale
from the north-east, before which the ship ran for
two days—she was therefore sailing presumably on
a southerly or south-westerly course, and approxi-
mately parallel to what is now the coast of Maine,
U.S.A. They sighted an island separated from the
mainland by a narrow strait, in which they ran
aground, but fortunately floated off again at high
water. Here they went ashore and found forests of
maple and rivers with larger salmon than they had
seen before; so having timber available for build-
ing their log cabins, and with what appeared to be a
pleasant climate, they decided to winter in the
place. And pleasant it proved to be, warm through-
out the winter, without long nights, and—most
surprising of all—providing a crop of grapes. The
grapes have become the best known part of this
well-known story; and as a result of them, the
place was named Vineland or Wineland.

Where was Vineland? Apart from the grapes, the
description of the sagas might reasonably apply to
the Maine coast with its wooded foreshores and its
mild climate. It has been suggested that the log
huts built by Lief Ericsson and his men, which were
to play such a big part in the saga stories of later
voyages to Wineland, may have been situated even
farther south than the Maine coast, and possibly in
Massachusetts Bay. From their base the expedition
sent out an exploration party (when the grapes
were discovered). They also loaded their ship with timber.

When winter was over they sailed home to Greenland. An accurate account of that voyage might give us clear guidance as to where the ship’s company had wintered. But the saga passed swiftly over the voyage, which apparently was assisted by a fair breeze all the way. Had they been on the Massachusetts coast, the distance to be covered would have been some two thousand miles and have required about sixteen to twenty days at sea.

The next voyage to Vineland, according to the sagas, was made by Lief Ericsson’s brother Torvald. Vineland had now become for the Vikings in Greenland a land of romance and high expectations. So Torvald set forth to extend his brother’s work of exploration, in the same ship and with a crew of thirty. The voyage south was quickly made, the log huts left by Lief’s expedition instantly found, and here the ship was hauled out and the company settled in for the winter. They spent the next summer exploring, and again the next winter, and in the following summer their ship was wrecked while working close inshore. The keel was broken; but with this repaired, they continued the voyage, eventually returning with their load of tales to Greenland. Torvald was not with them; he had been killed in an encounter with natives of the land they had left—presumably the first meeting of Europeans with native Americans.

Other voyages followed, and here we meet one of the most fascinating “might-have-beens” of
history: the possibility that the Vikings might have colonized the land and brought it within the range of European knowledge. This they failed to do. What actually happened was that darkness fell once more upon America. It became as though the Vikings had never been there. News was easily lost in those days.

What are we to make of these saga stories? The saga, it must be confessed, is not ideal as an historical document, written as it was long after the events it describes, created in moods of romance and intended to hasten the pulse of excitement, the emotions of admiration and pity, rather than to satisfy those who want facts.

It is difficult to make the story of an uneventful sea voyage interesting to the average landsman, even if the facts of the voyage are known. Nautical and navigational detail are lacking in the sagas, though the ship worship is expressed; geographical matters provide colour rather than information. And in places, we find what seems most improbable in the stories: the ease, for example, with which in voyage after voyage from Greenland to Vineland the ships unerringly found, with no recorded difficulty, the hutted encampment left by Lief Ericsson after his first voyage. This might seem a navigational miracle in days when there were no navigational aids, no coastal lights, and no knowledge of tidal set or currents.

Before Columbus set out across the Atlantic, five hundred years after Lief Ericsson had passed the winter in Vineland, he had made many voyages,
and one of them is believed to have been to Iceland. It used to be suggested that here he learned from the sagas the story of Lief Ericsson and the later voyages to Vineland. For various reasons this is most unlikely.

Nevertheless, though the saga stories were not at one time considered reliable evidence of America’s discovery by the Vikings, this view is now changing. We may not know where it was that Lief Ericsson, his son, and those who followed in their trail, actually landed and lived. But we believe that the encampment of log huts was actually established in North America five hundred years before the rest of Europe had learned that America existed.

By the time the sagas were actually written down in Iceland, where the Vikings were still remembered, they were for most of Europe just a memory. The sea empire of the Northmen had collapsed long ago. England was ruled by people who called themselves English, though many of them had ancestors who had arrived in the Viking galleys to plunder or settle. And likewise Normans were Frenchmen, and no less forgetful of their grandfather’s grandfather, who may have been born beside the fjords and gone a-Viking with his father. The three small countries that had produced the Vikings, Norway, Sweden and Denmark, no longer sent out raiders; and though they remembered their forefathers they cared no more, perhaps wisely, for the old kind of greatness, and the lands of the pagan raiders who had terrified Europe became small Christian nations with little influence
in Europe. But when, in 1863, our King Edward VII while Prince of Wales married a gay and lovely Danish princess, who became Queen Alexandra, England called her "The Sea King's Daughter". The Viking memory was not quite forgotten.
INDEX

Adam of Bremen, 29, 30
Alfred, King, 39, 62
Als, S. Jutland, 46
America, 130-7
Angel of Death, 80, 81
Arabs, 54, 55, 74
Arctic Circle, 31, 123
Atlantic, 51
Axes, 106, 107, 108

Bayeux tapestry, 109, 110
Beowulf, 126, 127
Bergen, 40
Birka, 85
Borre Ship, 76
Bronze Age, 40, 42, 43

Cadiz, 54
Canute, 64
Cart, 74, 104, 105, 106
Caspian Sea, 55
Charlemagne, 14, 30
Charts, 126
Christianity, 11–14, 30, 31
Clinker construction, 40
Clothes, 15, 108
Coins, 106
Columbus, 131
Compass, 122, 123
Copenhagen, 46
Crete, 112

Danelaw, 63, 64
Denmark, 25, 28
Dnieper, 55

Edda Stories, 37
Erik the Red, 121
Eskimo, 37

Faeroes, 57
Feudal System, 11
Franks, 14
Frey, 30
Funeral, 79–82

Glomma burial mound, 77
Gods, 42, 82–91
Gokstad, 68–73
Gokstad ship, 71–3, 93, 99–101
Gosforth Cross, 90
Grave robbers, 83–5
Greeks, 88, 112
Greenland, 27, 121, 131–2

Hedeby, 111
Holy Island, 13, 18, 19, 23
Holy Land, 121
Horses, 74, 81, 106
Houses, 110–12
Human sacrifice, 87

Ibn Fadlan, 79–80
Ice Age, 25
Iceland, 58
Ile de Paris, 27
Iona, 13, 23–4
Ireland, 51, 58–60
Iron Age, 48
Isle of Man, 57

139
Keel, 49
King’s Mound, 69

Lief Ericsson, 117
Lindisfarne, 18–19, 23
Lisbon, 54
Loki, 91
Longfellow, 99

Mediterranean, 27
Missionaries, 12–13

Navigation, 120–8
Nimir’s Well, 86
Normandy, 66
Norway, 25, 28, 31, 47
Notre Dame, 27
Nydam ship, 47–8

Oars, 47
Odin, 30, 86
Olaf Saga, 132
Old English Chronicle, 63
Orkneys, 51, 55
Oseberg, 73
Oseberg ship, 73–6, 92–3

Paddles, 47
Paris, 62, 117
Peterson, Kaare, 38
Phoenician, 54
Pisa, 54
Pole Star, 124–5
Portland Race, 53

Ragnar Lodbrog, 117–18
Raz de Seine, 53
Rock Carvings, 36–8, 42–5, 49, 87–8, 112

Rome, 9
Roman Empire, 26, 88, 112
Rouen, 62
Routes, 52–3
Rudder, 49, 98
Runic Stones, 57, 93, 113–15

Sagas, 86–9, 117–19, 121
Sails, 50
Saxons, 30
Scapa Flow, 56
Schleswig, 47
Seine, 27, 117
Seville, 54
Shetlands, 51
Shipbuilding, 94–102, 34–50
Ships, 32–50
Skagerrak, 42
Sledge, 74, 105–6
Snorro Sturlason, 57
Sounding Line, 127–8
Stone Age, 37–41
Stonehenge, 61
Suffolk ship burial, 76
Sunmore, 39–41, 48
Sweden, 25, 28
Swords, 106–7

Tapestry, 109–10
Temples, 88–9
Thames, 107
Thor, 30, 86
Thora, 117
Thorberg Skating, 99

Valhalla, 82, 86
Vineland, 134–6
Volga, 55

William the Conqueror, 25
Wood carving, 108–9
A book that is what is but a block.

Please help us to keep the books clean and moving.

Central Archaeological Library
Govt. of India
Department of Archaeology
New Delhi