The Vikings: Terror of Europe

Directions: Read and annotate the documents and answer the questions.

In the Viking homelands, society was rural and agricultural. Most people worked as fishers or farmers. Although the sea provided plenty of fish, Scandinavia’s soil was not very fertile. Viking farmers often had trouble growing enough grain to keep people fed. As Scandinavia’s population grew, food shortages became a common problem. Looking for new sources of food and wealth, some Viking leaders decided to take what they needed from other people. Thus began the Viking raids.

Source: Susan Elizabeth Ramírez, World History: Human Legacy

1. Why did the Vikings begin their attacks on Europe?

These monks are... going to mass, and up out of the sea come these dragons. And the Vikings came on them just like a storm and cut them down, carried off everything, and burned the place.

Source: Cecelia Holland, Historical Author

The number of ships grows: the endless stream of Vikings never ceases to increase. Everywhere the Christians are victims of massacres, burnings, plunderings: the Vikings conquer all in their path, and no one resists them.

Source: A monk from Noirmoutier, France (primary source)

The monks... described it often as if the devils from hell are being unleashed on them. The Vikings were warriors, there was no doubt, but they lived by intimidation, fear, and terrorism.

Source: Professor Kelly DeVries, Loyola College, Maryland

2. What technique did the Vikings use during raids, such as those on Christian monasteries?
“They were perhaps the best pirates, the best raiders the medieval world had ever seen. I think it was the unexpectedness of their arrival. You really couldn’t tell where they might show up, because their ships were both seaworthy for ocean voyages, but because of their shallow draft (only a few inches deep into the water), they could sail right up the rivers to cities that were far inland and didn’t expect to be subjected to water-borne raids.”

Source: Professor Thomas Martin, College of the Holy Cross

3. How did Viking shipbuilding technology give them an advantage over their enemies?

“...The monks had to face more fearsome foes in the heathen Vikings... In the ninth century Christian Europe was under siege. Ireland, England, and the north of Gaul (France) were ravaged by the Northmen (Norse Vikings). Abbeys (monasteries) near the coasts or on inland waterways of those areas were [defenseless] targets. [The monasteries at] Lindisfarne, Clonfert, and Clonmacnoise were among the first to be sacked. The more accessible abbeys near the coast of northern Gaul and along the valleys of the Seine, the Meuse, and the Loire [rivers] fell victims to the onslaught of the predators.”

Source: C. H. Lawrence, Medieval Monasticism, 1996

4. Monasteries, where Christian monks lived together to study and worship, were frequent targets of Viking raids. Why do you think the Vikings attacked them?
“In an attempt to fend off the Vikings, the Carolingians (Franks) began to pay them protection money. And these payments were so enormous that there were years when the empire had no currency anymore. There was no money to be had, it had all been shipped off to the Vikings, and people had to barter for what they needed. This was a significant setback for the recovery of Europe.”

Source: Professor Philip Daileader, College of William and Mary

5. How did the Viking raids weaken the Frankish Kingdom?

The Vikings were not only warriors but also traders, farmers, and explorers. They ventured far beyond Western Europe. Vikings journeyed down rivers into the heart of Russia, to Constantinople, and even across the icy waters of the North Atlantic. A Viking explorer named Leif Ericson reached North America around 1000, almost 500 years before Columbus, establishing the short-lived colony of Newfoundland. Vikings began to establish settlements in different parts of Europe. About the same time, the Viking reign of terror in Europe faded away. As Vikings gradually accepted Christianity, they stopped raiding monasteries. Also, a warming trend in Europe’s climate made farming easier in Scandinavia. As a result, fewer Scandinavians adopted the sea-faring life of Viking warriors.

Source: World History: Patterns of Interaction, McDougal Littell (adapted)

6. Why did the Viking attacks on Europe end? Give at least two reasons.

7. Use the map on the previous page to find the locations of these sites. How might geography have influenced where the Vikings settled?

MAJOR VIKING SETTLEMENT SITES

- Throughout the British Isles, such as Dublin and York
- Normandy, France, named for the Northmen (Vikings from Norway)
- Novgorod and Kiev, founded by the Rus tribe from Sweden (gave name to Russia)
- Southern Italy, known as Norman Italy
- Iceland, Greenland, and parts of Canada

Summary Question: “How did the Vikings change Medieval Europe?”