

1. What was the period when the Vikings were considered at their “peak”?

2. What is the common stereotype of the “Vikings”?

3. What made the Vikings boats special or unique?

4. Where did William the Conqueror come from and what type of boat did he sail into England in 1066?

5. How did Vikings in Greenland live?

6. What happened in Minnesota?

7. What’s the story behind the horned helmets the Vikings wore (it doesn’t directly state, you have to infer from the term “strictly Wagnerian” (go to <http://www.thenagain.info/webchron/westciv/Wagner.html> to find out who Wagner was)?

Vikings: To the Sea They Went, Roving and Raiding

By JOHN NOBLE WILFORD

At the center of everything in the gallery there is the ship, where it should be. The exhibition, after all, is about the Vikings, people of the sea, traders and raiders of the coasts of the known world, explorers and settlers out in the unknown.

The Vikings were everywhere, intrepid and often menacing, from about A.D. 800 to 1200. At home in Scandinavia they were herdsmen, blacksmiths and merchants. But when they went a-viking, their expression for the early raiding parties, these adventurous people sailed to all the ports of Europe, east to Russia and south to the Mediterranean and Middle East. A millennium ago, 500 years before Columbus, their advances across the North Atlantic brought Leif Ericson to North America at a place he named Vinland, probably Newfoundland and the region around the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

And now the Vikings, whose exploits also included founding the old town of York in England in the ninth century, are landing in the newer York.

The exhibition "Vikings: The North Atlantic Saga" opens tomorrow at the American Museum of Natural History and runs through Jan. 21.

The exhibition was organized by archaeologists at the National Museum of Natural History in Washington and shown there during the spring and summer. Drawing on recent archaeological finds and new interpretations of historical documents, the original curators sought to present a revised picture of Viking culture. The stereotype of pillage-and-plunder Vikings wearing horned helmets, it seemed, was an unfair exaggeration. The more than 300 artifacts in the exhibition - silver and bronze inlaid swords, jewelry and textiles, maps and manuscripts - were chosen to make a case for the Vikings as a more complex and constructive society with the vigor and vision to expand human horizons.

Dr. William W. Fitzhugh, the archaeologist who led the development of the original exhibition, said previous museum shows and books "had failed to communicate the depths of Viking culture, especially in lands west of Europe."

Showmanship was behind the one important change for the show's New York run. David Harvey, the American museum's vice president for exhibitions, felt that the Washington exhibition was cramped and lacked an arresting focus.

"We wanted a really monumental centerpiece," Mr. Harvey said. "What else but a boat would you think of having in a Viking show?"

Walking through the fourth-floor gallery a few days ago, Dr. David Hurst Thomas, an anthropologist and the museum's curator for the show,

headed for the 40-foot-long representation of a Viking merchant ship that dominates the exhibition. A partly furled square sail is rigged to the single mast. The broad hull is varnished with acrylic to give the appearance of the pine-tar paint that the Vikings would have used. The huge steering oar, known as the styri, is mounted on the vessel's right side, the styrabord, which is the origin of the familiar nautical term starboard.

"We don't call it a model or replica," Dr. Thomas said of the three-quarter scale ship. "It's a piece of museum furniture. It gives us a sense of scale we didn't have in the original exhibition."

A sense of perspective, too. If the Vikings had not been master shipbuilders, their imprint on history would have been shallow indeed.

Yet little was known of their maritime technology until the late 19th century, when a number of well-preserved vessels began to be excavated from burial mounds. One contained burial goods and the remains of a Viking queen and a female servant. In the exhibition, an excavated ship model from Gokstad, Norway, represents the kind of vessel required for long ocean voyages in the 10th century.

Studies of these artifacts show that Viking ships were, as an exhibit label reads, "quick under sail and nimble when rowed." They enabled raiders to strike coastal villages and monasteries or strike deep inland up fjords and rivers. (The oldest object in the exhibition, the famous Lindisfarne Stone, depicts the 793 Viking invasion of the Lindisfarne Priory on the English coast. The front of the stone shows seven Viking warriors holding weapons over their heads; the reverse side pictures the Last Judgment.) An average size ship carried about 30 men; some larger ones held 100 men and several horses.

The role of Vikings and their ships at one particularly critical point in history is illustrated in a detail from the famous Bayeux Tapestry, on display at the show. These seafarers not only raided coastal towns but also often settled there, as happened in western France. The region they seized and made home became known as Normandy, or "land of the Northmen." In 1066, the Norman leader William the Conqueror successfully invaded England, and in the tapestry their ships in full sail were in the Viking style.

With the assistance of the Viking Ship Museum in Roskilde, Denmark, workers at the American Museum designed and constructed the 40-foot ship, more or less a reproduction of a 54-foot freighter that 11th-century Vikings sailed and rowed in places like the North and Baltic Seas. It is several times larger than other ship models on display. And it is meant to be touched as well as looked at.

"Our intent is to get a real tactile sense of a Viking ship," Mr.

Harvey said. "You can even come up and hug a Viking ship."

Much of what is known about the Vikings comes from their own stories of travels and events, which were passed on orally from generation to generation and later written down as sagas. Scholars no longer dismiss the sagas as tall tales.

"The more we learn, the closer everything bears out the sagas," Dr.

Thomas said.

From their new base in Iceland, Vikings in the 10th century took the next step over to Greenland. In the 1960's archaeologists discovered ruins in southwestern Greenland and, examining the sagas, realized that this was the site of the first Norse settlement there, the farm of Erik the Red and his wife, Thjodhild. As told in the sagas, Erik never converted to Christianity but his wife did, and she had a small church built near their home. Archaeologists uncovered the turf-walled church and a graveyard.

The exhibition includes the skulls and bones of 13 men and a child, which were found in a mass grave at the church. Scientists studying the bones noted signs of severe skull wounds, suggesting that these men were possibly on the losing side of a violent Norse blood feud. Other studies of human remains at the site indicate that the people of Greenland generally led healthy, relatively disease-free lives.

The sagas also told of Erik's son, Leif, sailing beyond Greenland to shores of the Canadian Arctic and down to the place called Vinland. Any doubts that this indeed happened were laid to rest by other archaeological work in the 1960's. The first and so far only verified site of Viking occupation in America was found at L'Anse aux Meadows, at the northern tip of Newfoundland.

On display in the show are some of the site's artifacts: a stone oil lamp and soapstone spindle whorl, ship rivets, a bone needle and a whetstone. The section also describes how a community of 70 to 90 people occupied a cluster of longhouses with workshops and outbuildings for perhaps several winters, around the year 1000 - much as the sagas had recounted.

These remains are the first physical evidence to confirm a pre-Columbian European presence in the Americas. Although the camp did not lead to a permanent settlement, and no other Norse sites have been found, Dr. Fitzhugh has observed, scores of artifacts have since been found in eastern Canada at a dozen or more Indian archaeological sites and in Maine, where a Norse penny has turned up.

An Inuit wooden figurine known as the Bishop of Baffin, showing a clergyman in European attire, is displayed as striking evidence of actual face-to-face contact between Vikings and Indians in the centuries after Leif Ericson and well before Columbus.

The exhibition also seeks to clear up misconceptions about the Vikings.

They did not, as has often been claimed, build the old stone tower at Newport, R.I. It was actually erected in the mid-1600's by an English governor. A replica of the Kensington Runestone is displayed with a label warning that experts have concluded that the inscription, found on a Minnesota farm in 1898, was actually carved in that same century, and thus could not be evidence of a Viking presence that far west in the 14th century.

And those Viking helmets with horns? Strictly Wagnerian, experts say, and the exhibition has some fun with pictures of the Norwegian soprano Kirsten Flagstad wearing a winged helmet and brass breastplates for her role as the Valkyrie Brynnhilde.

For the opening of the exhibition this weekend, the American Museum is recreating a Viking village beneath the enormous whale in the Hall of Ocean Life. Some 30 Viking re-enactors from Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland and Iceland will be dressed in Viking garments and using the

tools and musical instruments of Viking times. Lectures and symposiums on Viking culture are scheduled through the run of the exhibition.

The millennial anniversary of Leif Ericson's explorations of North America has turned into a time for re-examining the role in history of these people of the sea.