

VIKING CULTURE

A variety of sources highlight culture, activities, and beliefs of the Vikings. Although they were generally non-literate and produced no literary legacy, they had an alphabet and described themselves and their world on runestones. Most contemporary literary and written sources on the Vikings come from other cultures that were in contact with them.

The purpose of this article is to enrich our knowledge about the unique culture of the Vikings.

Research objectives:

- to analyze different findings about the Vikings;
- to study what impact the Vikings had on other nations.

Since the mid-20th century, archaeological findings have built a more complete and balanced picture of the lives of the Vikings. [1, pp. 16-22] The archaeological record is particularly rich and varied, providing knowledge of their rural and urban settlement, crafts and production, ships and military equipment, trading networks, as well as their pagan and Christian religious artefacts and practices.

The most important primary sources on the Vikings are contemporary texts from Scandinavia and regions where the Vikings were active. Writing in Latin letters was introduced to Scandinavia with Christianity, so there are few native documentary sources from Scandinavia before the late 11th and early 12th centuries.

The Scandinavians did write inscriptions in runes, but these are usually very short and formulaic. Most contemporary documentary sources consist of texts written in Christian and Islamic communities outside Scandinavia, often by authors who had been negatively affected by Viking activity.

Later writings on the Vikings and the Viking Age can also be important for understanding them and their culture, although they need to be treated cautiously. After the consolidation of the church and the assimilation of Scandinavia and its colonies into the mainstream of medieval Christian culture in the 11th and 12th centuries, native written sources begin to appear, in Latin and Old Norse. In the Viking colony of Iceland, an extraordinary vernacular literature blossomed in the 12th through 14th centuries, and many traditions connected with the Viking Age were written down for the first time in the Icelandic sagas. A literal interpretation of these medieval prose narratives about the Vikings and the Scandinavian past is doubtful, but many specific elements remain worthy of consideration, such as the great quantity of skaldic poetry attributed to court poets of the 10th and 11th centuries, the exposed family trees, the self images, the ethical values, all included in these literary writings.

Indirectly, the Vikings have also left a window open to their language, culture and activities, through many Old Norse place names and words, found in their former sphere of influence. Some of these place names and words are still in direct use today, almost unchanged, and sheds light on where they settled and what specific places meant to them, as seen in place names like Egilsay (from Eigils Ø meaning Eigil's Island), Ormskirk (from Ormr kirkja meaning Orms Church or Church of the Worm), Meols (from merl meaning Sand Dunes), Snaefell (Snow Fell), Ravenscar (Ravens Rock), Vinland (Land of Wine or Land of Winberry), Kaupanger (Market Harbour), Tórshavn (Thor's Harbour), and the religious centre of Odense, meaning a place where Odin was worshipped. Viking influence is also evident in concepts like the present-day parliamentary body of the Tynwald on the Isle of Man.

Common words in everyday English language, like some of the weekdays (Thursday means Thor's day), axle, crook, raft, knife, plough, leather, window, berserk, bylaw, thorp, skerry, husband, heathen, Hell, Norman and ransack stem from the Old Norse of the Vikings and give us an opportunity to understand their interactions with the people and cultures of the British Isles.

In the Northern Isles of Shetland and Orkney, Old Norse completely replaced the local languages and over time evolved into the now extinct Norn language. Some modern words and names only emerge and contribute to our understanding after a more intense research of linguistic sources from medieval or later records, such as York (Horse Bay), Swansea (Sveinn's Isle) or some of the place names in Northern France like Tocqueville (Toki's farm).

Linguistic and etymological studies continue to provide a vital source of information on the Viking culture, their social structure and history and how they interacted with the people and cultures they met, traded, attacked or lived with in overseas settlements.

It has been speculated that several place names on the west coast of southern France might also stem from Viking activities.[2] Place names like Taillebourg (Trelleborg, meaning City of Thralls or Castle of Thralls) exist as far south as the Charente River.[3] Gascony and vicinity is an active area of Viking archaeology at present.[4] A lot of Old Norse connections are evident in the modern-day languages of Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, Faroese and Icelandic. Old Norse did not exert any great influence on the Slavic languages in the Viking settlements of Eastern Europe. It has been speculated that the reason was the great differences between the two languages, combined with the Rus' Vikings more peaceful businesses in these areas and the fact that they were outnumbered. The Norse named some of the rapids on the Dnieper, but this can hardly be seen from the modern names.[5]

A consequence of the available written sources, which may have coloured how the Viking age is perceived as a historical period, is much more known of the Vikings' activities in western Europe than in the East. One reason is that the cultures of north-eastern Europe at the time were non-literate, and did not produce a legacy of literature. Another is that the vast majority of written sources on Scandinavia in the Viking Age come from Iceland, a nation originally settled by Norwegian colonists. As a result, there is much more material from the Viking Age about Norway than Sweden, which apart from

many runic inscriptions, has almost no written sources from the early Middle Ages.

The Norse of the Viking Age could read and write and used a non-standardized alphabet, called runor, built upon sound values. While there are few remains of runic writing on paper from the Viking era, thousands of stones with runic inscriptions have been found where Vikings lived. They are usually in memory of the dead, though not necessarily placed at graves. The use of runor survived into the 15th century, used in parallel with the Latin alphabet.

The majority of runic inscriptions from the Viking period are found in Sweden and date from the 11th century. The oldest stone with runic inscriptions was found in Norway and dates to the 4th century, suggesting that runic inscriptions pre-date the Viking period. Many runestones in Scandinavia record the names of participants of Viking expeditions, such as the Kjula runestone that tells of extensive warfare in Western Europe and the Turinge Runestone, which tells of a war band in Eastern Europe. Other runestones mention men who died on Viking expeditions. Among them are around 25 Ingvar runestones in the Mälardalen district of Sweden, erected to commemorate members of a disastrous expedition into present-day Russia in the early 11th century. Runestones are important sources in the study of Norse society and early medieval Scandinavia, not only of the Viking segment of the population.

Runestones attest to voyages to locations such as Bath, Greece, Khwaresm, Jerusalem, Italy (as Langobardland), Serkland (i.e. the Muslim world), England (including London), and various places in Eastern Europe. Viking Age inscriptions have also been discovered on the Manx runestones on the Isle of Man.

In conclusion, we want to admit that Viking culture is an integral part of the world culture and history. Its study will contribute in a better understanding of nations who lived many centuries ago.

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