

A dramatic painting of Viking longboats on the sea, filled with birds in flight. The scene is set in a narrow channel or bay, with two large longboats visible. The sky is filled with a dense flock of birds, possibly seagulls or terns, flying in various directions. The water is a mix of blue and green, with whitecaps. The overall atmosphere is one of chaos and intensity. The title 'VIKINGS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN' is overlaid in large, white, sans-serif capital letters. Below the title is a thin horizontal line, followed by a paragraph of text. Another thin horizontal line is below the paragraph, followed by the author's name.

VIKINGS

IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

In 859 Viking longboats headed south. After raiding the coasts of France and Spain, they entered the Mediterranean and unleashed their fury on Muslim and Christian communities who once thought themselves safe from the "Northmen."

ANTONIO RATTI

RULING THE WAVES

Albert Goodwin's 19th-century painting reflects the deep impact the Vikings made on the European imagination. Throughout the ninth century, their raids expanded across western Europe, entering the Mediterranean in A.D. 859.

BRIDGEMAN/ACI





MOTLEY CREW

A Viking party prepares to raid England (above), in a miniature from a 12th-century work on St. Edmund. The Morgan Library & Museum, New York

FINE ART/ALBUM

Kringla heimsins, sú er mannfolyt bygdir . . . These are the words that open the 13th-century *History of the Kings of Norway*. Written in Old Norse (the language spoken in medieval Scandinavia), it means “The orb of the world, which mankind inhabits.”

Penned by an Icelandic chronicler, Snorri Sturluson, the *History* is an important source on the Vikings, who held Europe in thrall from the eighth to the 11th centuries.

Their trading and raiding sent them to the far horizons of that “orb,” sailing west to Britain, then Greenland, and even reaching North America. As well as their infamous brutality, Viking

success depended on navigational skills, essential not just to navigate Europe’s rivers and Atlantic coastline, but also to venture south from their homeland all the way to the Mediterranean: “That great sea,” as Snorri Sturluson describes it, “that goes in through the Straits of Gibraltar all the way to the land of Jerusalem.”

Evidence of Viking settlements in England, Ireland, and Russia and their trade routes as far as present-day Istanbul and “Serkland” (the land of the Saracens, i.e., Baghdad) is plentiful; the Vikings’ Mediterranean foray, however, is a more shadowy affair. According to the handful of sources available, it took the form of a remarkable, and audacious, raiding voyage led by a hell-raising naval commander, who brought terror to Muslim Spain, France, and Italy. He sent his boats south probably with the ultimate objective of sacking what must have seemed a tempting prize: Rome.

The Northmen Arrive

In the late 700s farming communities in today’s Denmark, Norway, and Sweden were overpopulated, which fed the desire to expand and seize goods. In the following centuries, the people of Scandinavia used their longships to carry out lightning raids, as well as establish far-flung trade routes. Despite how they are discussed today, these people did not call themselves Vikings—thought to mean “pirate” or “bay-dweller.” They most likely would not have seen themselves as a united people.

The Viking age is often said to begin in 793, the year of the raid on a wealthy Christian community of Lindisfarne in northeastern England. In the following decades the Vikings secured a trading post in Ireland. Later raids against the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of England led to Viking settlements in parts of northeast England,




HAMMER OF THE GODS, GOLD AND SILVER AMULET, 10TH CENTURY, SWEDEN. THE SWEDISH HISTORY MUSEUM, STOCKHOLM
INTERFOTO/AGE FOTOSTOCK

WHEN THE NORTHMEN SAILED SOUTH

843

Following years of coastal raids on France, Vikings settle the Breton island of Noirmoutier from where they launch raids into mainland France.



FROM THE LAND OF ICE AND SNOW

A replica of a Viking ship passes along the Sognefjorden, the deepest and longest fjord in Norway. Living in a landscape dominated by water, the Vikings of the Scandinavian peninsula became expert boatbuilders and navigators.

ALAN WYACI

844

France-based Vikings sail south to raid Muslim Seville (in modern-day Spain), entering the city from the Atlantic.

845

Viking raiders sail the Seine River to sack Paris. A decade later, Viking warlord Björn Ironside also sacks Paris.

859

Chronicles claim Björn Ironside enters the Mediterranean and sacks cities in Spain, North Africa, and southern France.

860

After wintering in the Camargue (in southern France), Björn's crew raids cities in Italy before returning north.

Settled Territory

Ranges in the east are approximate. Rus settlement in those areas was sparse, mixing with local tribes.

- by A.D. 800
- 900
- 1000
- Circular fort
- Ship burial
- DANES Native Viking ethnic group

0 mi / 0 km 200

Modern-day drainage and political boundaries are shown.



Raiders, Traders, and Explorers

- Areas raided repeatedly during the Viking age
- Recorded Viking attack
- Major battle

- Major trade center
- Route of exploration, plunder, or trade
- IRISH Ethnic group in contact with Vikings

A F R I C A

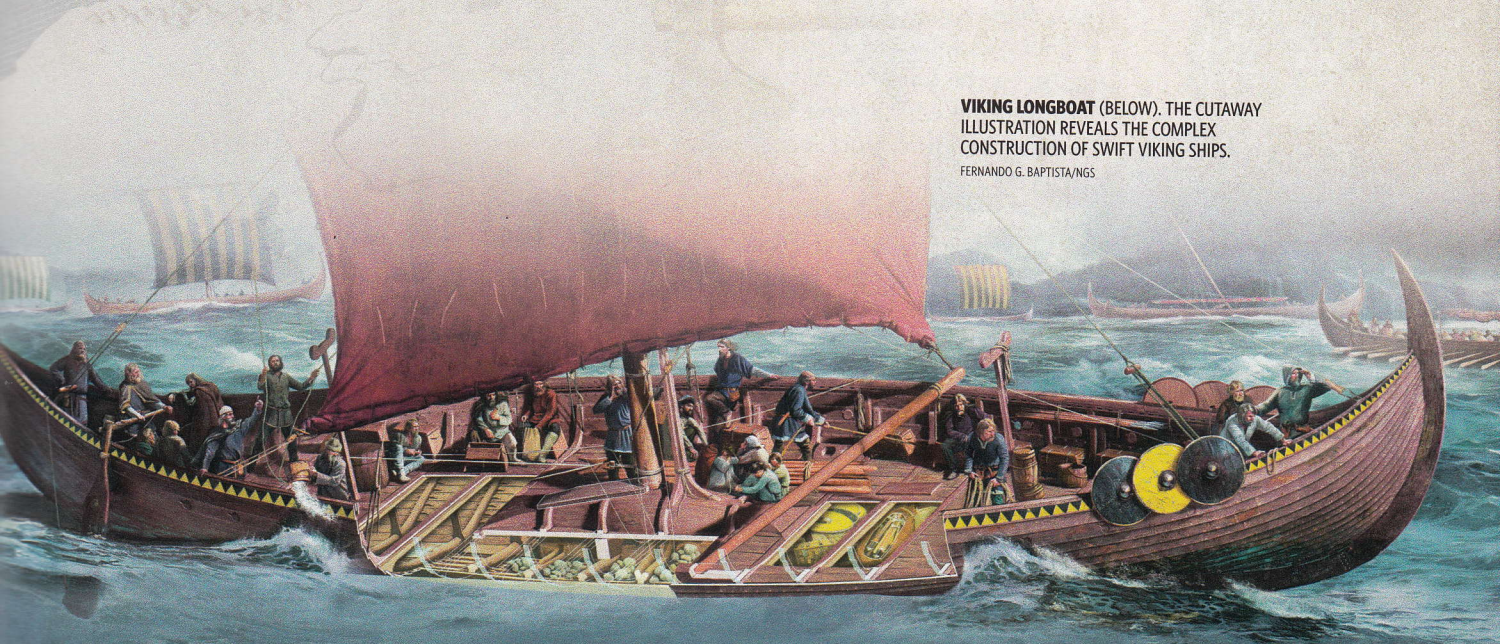
A VIKING ODYSSEY

One example of the ease with which Norse warriors moved across western Europe in the ninth century is provided by **Björn Ironside**, a leader of the Viking expedition to the Mediterranean in 859-860. Of Danish origin, it is believed that Björn was the son of the hero **Ragnar Lothbrok** and that his nickname alluded to his seeming invulnerability. In 856-57 Björn and **Sigttrygg**, another commander, joined forces in a punitive expedition against the Frankish king **Charles the Bald**, who was trying to drive the Vikings from their settlements at the mouth of the Loire. After rowing up the Seine, Björn and Sigttrygg sacked Paris and captured a high-profile hostage, **Louis, abbot of Saint-Denis**. Björn Ironside successfully ransomed the abbot for 686 pounds of gold and 3,250 pounds of silver. Next, Ironside joined **Hastein** on the great southern expedition that was perhaps aiming to reach Rome, and returned north in 860 after unleashing much destruction in the western Mediterranean. His fate is unclear, but many believe he survived a shipwreck in the English Channel and later died somewhere in Frisia (today a cultural region in the Netherlands).

MAP: FERNANDO G. BAPTISTA/NGS



BRONZE BROOCH (ABOVE), 10TH CENTURY, VIKING BURIAL SITE, NEAR SMOLENSK, RUSSIA
JIM BRANDENBURG/AGE FOTOSTOCK



VIKING LONGBOAT (BELOW). THE CUTAWAY ILLUSTRATION REVEALS THE COMPLEX CONSTRUCTION OF SWIFT VIKING SHIPS.

FERNANDO G. BAPTISTA/NGS



CÓRDOBA IN SOUTHERN SPAIN WAS THE CAPITAL OF THE MUSLIM UMAYYAD DYNASTY THAT CONTROLLED MUCH OF THE PENINSULA IN THE NINTH CENTURY. ITS CITIES WERE RAIDED BY THE VIKINGS IN 844 AND 859.
SEAN PAVONE/DEPOSITPHOTOS

GODS AND HEROES

This 10th-century stela (below) represents either a fallen warrior in the afterlife or the god Odin. It was found on Gotland, Swedish History Museum, Stockholm

DEA/SCALA, FLORENCE



centered on the old Roman fort of Eboracum, which the Vikings called Jorvik—York.

Meanwhile, the Northmen were expanding eastward, too, developing trading posts in Russia, a country whose name derives from the Rus, a Viking tribe. The Vikings used the Volga and Dnieper Rivers to reach the Caspian Sea, and from there, traded with Baghdad.

These indefatigable raiders also looked south, to the lands once ruled by Emperor Charlemagne. At this great king's death in 814, France, Belgium, northern Spain, western Germany, and Austria became vulnerable as division and weakness quickly seeped into their lands. The Vikings recognized an opportunity and regarded France as a particularly valuable prize.

In 843 Vikings took over the Breton island of Noirmoutier, using it as a base to launch more attacks on the French mainland. In 845 Viking longboats sped up the Seine, sacking numerous cities, and finally Paris. Charlemagne's grandson, Charles the Bald, responded in what would become a standard method of dealing with the Vikings: He paid them to go away.

Moving Toward Rome

The Viking scourge, however, continued. Little by little, the Northmen gained a foothold in northwest France, in Normandy, the peninsula that bears their name. Familiarity with France may have tempted Viking leaders to move farther south. In 859 they turned their attention to the Mediterranean.

Historians rely on four main sources that document this voyage, which was commanded by Björn Járnsíða—Björn Ironside—so named because of his invincible reputation. Before his Mediterranean foray, he had established a fearsome track record, sacking Paris circa 857. These chronicles describe how in 859, Björn Ironside and another chief, Hastein, joined forces and sailed down past the Atlantic coast of the Iberian Peninsula, then largely controlled by the Muslim Umayyad dynasty.

They were not the first Vikings to venture so far south; sources attest to a raid on Seville in 844. Following in the wake of that earlier voyage, Björn's crew sacked towns on the coast of modern Portugal. The fleet then passed through the Strait of Gibraltar, becoming perhaps the first Vikings to enter the Mediterranean.



REMAINS IN SPAIN

Carved from deer antler in the 10th century, the San Isidoro container is the only artifact of Viking origin discovered in Spain. Royal Collegiate Church of San Isidoro, León

J.A. GARCÍA CASTRO/EDUARDO MORALES

VIKING PRISONER
KING GARCÍA I ÍÑIGUEZ OF
PAMPLONA WAS CAPTURED
IN 859. 17TH-CENTURY
PORTRAIT, PRADO
MUSEUM, MADRID
COLECCIÓN REAL (PALACIO DEL BUEN
RETIRO, MADRID), MUSEO DEL PRADO



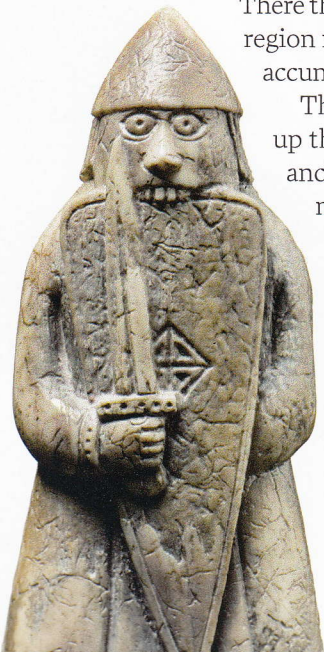
CAPTURING THE KING

THE CHRONICLE of Spanish Muslim historian Ibn Hayyan, written in Córdoba in the 11th century, narrates how Vikings entered the Christian north of Spain and “ragged against the Bashkunis [Basques], killing many and taking prisoner their king, Garsiya ibn Wannaqo [García I Íñiguez, king of Pamplona].” The Northmen, Ibn Hayyan wrote, demanded a ransom of 70,000 dinars. This hostage-taking is believed to have happened in 859. Although there is some uncertainty as to where the king was captured, historians believe the perpetrators were likely the same Viking crew who entered the Mediterranean that year. The Arabic word used by Ibn Hayyan and Muslims in Spain for the Vikings was *al-Madjus*, meaning “magi,” the Zoroastrian priests of Persia. This usage was based on the mistaken belief that the Vikings, like the Zoroastrian magi, were fire-worshippers.

BITE-SIZE

A Viking warrior biting his shield is a chess piece (below) from a 12th-century set found on the Isle of Lewis, Scotland, in 1831. National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh

BRIDGEMAN/ACI



At Algeciras they burned down the mosque; then they moved to the southeast of the Iberian Peninsula. After a diversion to North Africa where they took on slaves among the “blue-men” (a Viking term used to describe Africans), they sacked Spain’s southeastern coast, then the Balearic Islands. Continuing northward across the Mediterranean, they reached the kingdom of Roussillon, in what is now southwest France. There they established a camp in the Camargue region near Nîmes, where they overwintered, accumulating loot.

The following year, 860, after a diversion up the Rhône River, the Viking expedition anchored off the coast of Italy, where the most colorful of the Viking exploits took place: the looting of Luni, near the modern Italian city of La Spezia. Founded by the Romans, Luni had become prosperous during the Middle Ages and had a strong system of defenses. According to the main source for this story, the early 12th-century chronicler Dudo of Saint-Quentin, the Vikings mistook Luni, in its splendor, for Rome.

Faced with Luni’s mighty fortifications, the Vikings relied, Dudo claimed, on trickery to get inside. After faking Hastein’s death, the Northmen sent several messengers to the city gates asking if their leader, who had converted to Christianity, could be buried in hallowed ground within the city walls: “Wailing is heard [from the Vikings] the clamor of deceitful grief. The Bishop summons the people from throughout the city. The clergy came dressed in their vestments . . . the women came in throngs, soon to be led into exile.”

With the trap sprung, the “corpse” of Hastein sprang to life, killed the bishop, slew the people, and opened to his shipmates the gates of what they took to be Rome. On discovering it was not the Eternal City, the Vikings supposedly lost heart and embarked for the long voyage home.

Facts From Legend

Most historians believe the Viking “confusion” of Luni for Rome, and the Viking spin on the story of the Trojan horse to enter the city, is exactly what it sounds like—a good yarn, with little basis in fact. Dudo of Saint-Quentin is considered an unreliable source. The three other



MISTAKEN IDENTITY

The Roman ruins of Luni stand in northwestern Italy. According to the chronicles, the Vikings raided the city in 860 after mistaking it for Rome. Despite the Northmen's raid, Luni continued to flourish in the medieval period.

ANGEL VILLALBA/GETTY IMAGES

A DRAGON HEAD, ONE OF FOUR FOUND AT THE OSEBERG SHIP BURIAL, EARLY NINTH CENTURY, THE VIKING SHIP MUSEUM, OSLO, NORWAY

WERNER FORMAN ARCHIVE/
SCALA, FLORENCE



DRAGONS OF THE SEA

THE VIKINGS' expansion west, south, and east was facilitated by the longboat. These narrow vessels, powered by oar and sail, could resist the fury of the Atlantic while their shallow draft enabled them to travel vast distances along rivers. Overlapping planks created a watertight shell strengthened by ribbing, a design adapted for different purposes. To hold more cargo, trading ships were broader in the beam, while raiding craft needed to be lighter and faster. Ship burials, such as that excavated at Oseberg, Norway, in 1904, provide clues on Viking ship engineering. Buried circa 834, the Oseberg craft was a high-status ship, adorned with intricate carvings. Normal ships were simpler, but some did have the dragon-headed prow, a feature likely to leave a deep impression on those people the Vikings encountered.

NORMAN LEGACY

Two Norman warriors (below) are depicted on this capital from the 12th-century cloister of the Cathedral of Monreale, Sicily.

DEA/ALBUM



main sources that mention Björn's incursions in the Mediterranean—Saxo Grammaticus's *Deeds of the Danes*, in Latin, and the Icelandic works *The Tale of Ragnar's Sons* and *The Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok*—are all from the 12th and 13th centuries, written long after the ninth-century events they recount. Björn is described as the son of Ragnar Lothbrok, who is probably an amalgamation of several Viking warlords.

Historians believe that Björn did exist, and documentary evidence elsewhere suggests the broad details and route in the chronicles are based on fact, even if the command of such a fleet by Björn Ironside cannot be definitively established. Spanish sources confirm violent Viking incursions in 859, while Arab sources describe a Viking raid around this time in Nekor in North Africa.

In circa 858 the abbey at Arles-sur-Tech in Roussillon was indeed raided, probably by "Norsemen," and historians have found evidence of a Viking

winter camp in the Camargue near Nîmes. Other sources suggest that Pisa was sacked by a Viking fleet, and that between the summer and autumn of 860, the Vikings reached Fiesole.

Although the Mediterranean never became a major theater for Viking raids, Björn's successors would later follow in his footsteps. In France the Viking presence in what became Normandy evolved. The wild men of the north settled down, adopted Christianity and the French language, and became Normans, retaining their Viking fierceness and prowess in battle.

Before and after their invasion of England in 1066, Norman warriors seized swaths of southern Italy from the Byzantines, and Sicily from the Muslims. The magnificent churches they built there in the Norman style are a lasting legacy of their Mediterranean adventure, an echo of the audacious voyage undertaken by their kinsman, Björn Ironside, two centuries before. ■

HISTORIAN **ANTONIO RATTI** WRITES ON MEDIEVAL EUROPE AND NOMADIC SOCIETIES IN CENTRAL ASIA.

Learn more

Children of Ash and Elm: A History of the Vikings
Neil Price, Basic Books, 2020.



THE BRITTANY LANDINGS

Viking warriors disembark at Guérande on the coast of Brittany in A.D. 919, in a French illuminated manuscript circa 1100.

GRANGER