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Vikings

(36 lectures, 30 minutes/lecture)
Course No. 3910

Taught by **Kenneth W. Harl**
Tulane University
Ph.D., Yale University

As explorers and traders, the Vikings played a decisive role in the formation of Latin Christendom, and particularly of Western Europe.

In this course, you will study the Vikings not only as warriors, but also in other roles for which they were equally extraordinary: merchants, artists, kings, raiders, seafarers, shipbuilders, and creators of a remarkable literature of myths and sagas.

Professor Kenneth Harl synthesizes insights from an astonishing array of sources: *The Russian Primary Chronicle* (a Slavic text from medieval Kiev), 13th-century Icelandic poems and sagas, Byzantine accounts, Arab geographies, annals of Irish monks who faced Viking raids, Roman reports, and scores of other firsthand contemporary documents.

Among the topics you will explore in depth are the profound influence of the Norse gods and heroes on Viking culture, and the Vikings' extraordinary accomplishments as explorers and settlers in Iceland, Greenland, and Vinland. With the help of archeological findings, you will learn to analyze Viking ship burials, runestones and runic inscriptions, Viking wood carving, jewelry, sculpture, and metalwork.

From 790–1066, virtually invincible Viking fleets fanned out across Europe, raiding, plundering, and overwhelming every army that opposed them.

By 1100, however, the Vikings had disappeared, having willingly shed their identity and dissolved into the mists of myth and legend. How did this happen, and how should we remember this formidable civilization that, for being so formative, proved so transient?

A Wide-Ranging Story, a Versatile Historian

The Vikings were a people whose history stretched from the Vinland settlements in Newfoundland to Baghdad. Accordingly, the telling of their story requires a historian of Professor Harl's considerable powers.

As he has shown in his other Teaching Company courses, **The World of Byzantium, Great Ancient Civilizations of Asia Minor, The Era of the Crusades, and Rome and the Barbarians**, Dr. Harl has a special knowledge of Europe and the Near East, from antiquity through the Middle Ages. His expertise on nearly all of the peoples the Vikings encountered enables him to endow his lectures with the nuance and detail only a trained specialist can deliver.

The Past Is Never Dead: Scandinavian Beginnings

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Should I Buy Audio or Video?

This course works well in any format. The DVD version contains more than 400 photographs and illustrations of Viking battles, weaponry, jewelry, crafts, coins, runestones, ships, and much more, including more than 50 illustrations by trained archeological illustrators, some created especially for this course. It also contains more than 200 maps and plenty of helpful on-screen text such as definitions, biographical information, and dates.

Course Lecture Titles

1. The Vikings in Medieval History
2. Land and People of Medieval Scandinavia
3. Scandinavian Society in the Bronze Age
4. Scandinavia in the Celtic and Roman Ages
5. The Age of Migrations
6. The Norse Gods
7. Runes, Poetry, and Visual Arts
8. Legendary Kings and Heroes
9. A Revolution in Shipbuilding
10. Warfare and Society in the Viking Age
11. Merchants and Commerce in the Viking Age
12. Christendom on the Eve of the Viking Age

13. Viking Raids on the Carolingian Empire
14. The Duchy of Normandy
15. Viking Assault on England
16. The Danelaw
17. Viking Assault on Ireland
18. Norse Kings of Dublin and Ireland
19. The Settlement of Iceland
20. Iceland—A Frontier Republic
21. Skaldic Poetry and Sagas
22. Western Voyages to Greenland and Vinland
23. Swedes in the Baltic Sea and Russia
24. The Road to Byzantium
25. From Varangians into Russians
26. Transformation of Scandinavian Society
27. St. Anskar and the First Christian Missions
28. Formation of the Kingdom of Denmark
29. Cnut the Great
30. Collapse of Cnut's Empire
31. Jarls and Sea Kings of Norway
32. St. Olaf of Norway
33. Kings of the Swedes and Goths
34. Christianization and Economic Change
35. From Vikings to Crusaders
36. The Viking Legacy

Professor Harl begins with a virtual tour of the unique Scandinavian terrain that determined that Viking civilization would be a culture like no other, a land and people apart from the rest of the world. Scandinavia was cut off by dense forests that kept individual settlements isolated from one another. The Scandinavian way of life was inherently temporary, for agriculture would not progress beyond the slash-and-burn technique until the end of the Viking Age. Villages lasted only a generation before soil exhaustion forced their abandonment, negating the possibility of permanent towns or lasting structures, political or otherwise. Anyone seeking wealth rather than mere subsistence had to look to the sea.

In this early part of the course you will also study in great detail the origins of the Vikings' ancient Germanic religion. You will learn the stories of the Norse gods and how the Vikings sought to honor them.

The lectures also examine how Scandinavians venerated their ancestors, great heroes of the past whom they emulated in life. Professor Harl demonstrates how we can glean the ambitions of the great Viking sea kings by examining the legendary exploits of their role models, such as the saga of the great ride of Hrolf Kraki, the 6th-century king of legendary Hleidr, a great Danish hall.

The Viking Edge

But culture only takes us so far. The Viking Age would have been impossible had the Scandinavians not possessed superiority in shipbuilding and warfare, and Professor Harl devotes two in-depth lectures to this achievement.

You will explore in detail how the design features of Viking ships allowed them to ride the waters rather than fight the waves, to be dragged across land from river to river, and to be beached in any port and sail almost anywhere. Many Viking victories resulted from the fact that their ships could sail several times faster than opposing armies could move on foot.

Contrary to the stereotype of slashing homicidal maniacs in horned helmets, Professor Harl discusses a precise, organized, battle-hardened army of men trained in warfare since boyhood. Vikings were extraordinarily fit, skilled in boarding ships, in leaping and jumping, archery, swordsmanship, and the wielding of axes. Even more frightful, they were fearless, regarding battle as a state of ecstatic joy and expecting thrill in victory or glory in Valhalla as they rushed at their foes.

Traders and Raiders

Viking warfare wasn't driven by any primitive, atavistic malice, or undirected rage. To them, it just made economic sense. We go a long way towards understanding Scandinavians' motivation and debunking popular stereotypes by seeing Viking raids as a logical extension of trading activities.

You will follow the Vikings as merchants who exploited trade routes in the Baltic, the North Sea, and on the river systems of Western Europe. They operated from the Arctic to the Mediterranean, selling everything from sealskin, whalebone, and amber to slaves.

Raiding was simply trade by other means. Vikings raided towns throughout the Latin West, and then set up impromptu markets to sell back the booty. They were indeed shocked to find a novel commodity in abbots whom the Christians paid handsomely to get back.

In Professor Harl's lectures we see the great adaptability of these Scandinavians, their willingness to evolve according to their local environment. Consider the divergent fortunes and destinies of just a few of the Northern peoples that left their Scandinavian homeland:

- Under a deal negotiated with King Charles the Simple by their sea king Hrolf, the Vikings were awarded land in Normandy in exchange for protecting the Franks. Hrolf's descendants preserved their military prowess; they conquered England and Italy, eventually cutting off their ties to the sea and adopting the French language.
- Swedish Vikings, known as "Rus," established outposts in Kiev and Novgorod. They used their Slavic subjects to clear the forests, allowing market towns to evolve into great cities, and a Rus king, Vladimir, would adopt Christianity as the official religion of the Rus state.
- In a lightning campaign, the mostly Danish Great Army conquered three English kingdoms from 865–878 and settled in the northern half of England. They exerted a profound influence, transmitting 600 words into modern English and innovating the jury system that eventually passed into English law.

Because stereotypical images of the Vikings have long obscured the Vikings' importance in European history, you may learn something new in nearly every minute of these lectures. Did you know that:

- We have Iceland to thank for preserving most of our information about what a pure Viking society was like. Icelanders preserved the old Norse traditions through storytelling during the long Icelandic winters. They eventually wrote down these poems, myths, and legends

to create literature considered to be one of the miracles of the Middle Ages, deserving a place beside the Greek and Roman classics in the Western tradition.

- Iceland functioned successfully without cities, taxes, or a complex government. You will study the simple yet effective political system—the *Thing*, the *Althing*, and the Law Rock—that made Viking Iceland a remarkable experiment in self-government.
- An early Icelandic settler, Helgi the Lean, once remarked with characteristic Viking pragmatism and typical Icelandic wit, "On land I worship Christ, but at sea I worship Thor." A jest though it may have been, it seems prescient in light of the Scandinavian tendency to slough off the ancient gods at the water's edge.

The Beginnings of Modern Scandinavia

In the last part of the course, Professor Harl discusses how a variety of factors—wealth gained through Viking adventures, the creation of ever more professional Viking armies, increasingly better ships, and notably, conversion to Christianity—enabled Scandinavian monarchs to impose control and set up territorial kingdoms.

The creation of kingdoms and national churches was a testimony to the organizational skills of the Scandinavians, who lacked a history that connected them to the benefits of urban-based Roman civilization.

Who were the Vikings? Much more, perhaps, than you may have thought: raiders, seafarers, kings, and writers, a people who truly defined the history of Europe, and whose brave, adventurous, and creative spirit still survives today.

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