The Vikings! - Crash Course World History 224

Crash Course: World History
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Hi I'm John Green; this is Crash Course World History, and today we're gonna talk about one of our most requested topics ever, the Vikings.

Me from the past: Mr. Green! Mr. Green! Finally we get to talk about Thor and Mjölnir. This is one of my areas of expertise! I've read all the comics! Like both Thor and The Avengers.

John: Here's a crazy thing that happens in the next twenty years me from the past, the Avengers and Thor become like, not nerdy. Like right now me from the past, in 1994, you are suffering mightily for your love of Mjölnir, Thor's hammer, but in the future loving Mjölnir is like, cool.

(Intro)

Alright so this is Crash Course, so we're mostly gonna skip the blood and guts and thunder and lightning and sailing and dragons and all that stuff that you can get in Game of Thrones.

Instead we're gonna try and figure out what we actually know about the Vikings and how we know it.

As it turns out, we actually know quite a bit about the Vikings. They were people from Scandinavia, modern day Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, who sailed around the North Atlantic and Baltic regions and briefly to North America, raiding, trading and spreading their influence to places as diverse as Ireland and Greenland and Normandy and Kiev during the so-called "Viking Age" between 750 and 1100 C.E.

The Vikings were great sea men. What did you think I was gonna make it through this video without saying seamen once?

They were able to cross the Atlantic without the aid of a compass or triangular sails. They were fearsome warriors. Although their reputation as bloodthirsty wild men of the North is probably exaggerated. You gotta remember that history is shaped by those who wrote it, and all of those like bloodthirsty men of the North narratives were written by like victims of Viking raids. So history isn't always written by the winners, but when it's written by the losers, they're really bitter about the winners.

Viking expeditions were a mixture of raiding for booty, trading for goods, and eventually searching for land to settle on.

Like most people in most places at the time the Vikings were primarily agriculturalists, and when they settled in places like Iceland and Greenland it was to grow crops and raise animals.

So how do we know all these things? Basically the same way we know about most of the pre-modern world, through a combination of archaeology and writing.

There is of course guest work involved as with most pre-modern history, and some modern history, and we need to be careful not to take what we dig up or read at face value, but we do have a pretty good record about the Vikings.

Like archaeology tells a lot about how the Vikings lived. The most dramatic examples are, of course, the ships that have been discovered through which we know a lot about what the Vikings like to trade, for instance.

But with the Vikings we also have a pretty substantial written record. Although we need to be careful with it for a number of reasons, the first is timing. Much of what was written about the Vikings comes from the 13th century, after the Viking age.

And it was written by authors who had an interest in making the Pagans seem as different from them as possible to highlight the civilizing role of Christianity.

Now the Vikings were not illiterate; people knew how to read and write runes, but most of these runic inscriptions are really short and don't tell us that much about Vikings.

It's nothing about like about Thor's hammer or what ever it's all like "I trade three sheep for two loads of lumber!"

Some of you Viking fans, and I know that's most of you, are saying, "but what about the sagas?" We tend to use the word saga to describe anything that's long and drawn out but when you're talking about Vikings it means something very specific.

A saga is a long, narrative epic written in Old Norse from the 13th century or later. And the date tells you something right away, the sagas were written centuries after the Viking Age. So we have to be careful when using them as historical sources.

The sagas we associate with the Vikings are called the sagas of the Icelanders, which look like this in Icelandic. And they purportedly describe Viking travels and adventures in the 10th and 11th centuries.

People used to see them as relatively accurate historical documents, but now most historians recognize them as fictions. Like Viking historian Teva Vidal, who provided much of the information for this episode, says it's best to think of the sagas as a kind of pseudo history.

They don't provide a completely accurate picture of what it was like to be a Viking or what happened to Vikings, but they can provide some useful detail.

Alright let's go to the Thought Bubble, and while you're there by the way I'm gonna grow a Viking beard and change shirts.

Now your stereotypical Viking is a burly blonde or redheaded fellow with a big beard and a bigger sword who learned the important lesson that it's not about killing dragons; it's about learning to train them so they can execute your wishes.

But the real stereotypical Viking was probably a hard bargaining trader enmeshed in a complex network of pan-European trade. I know how you guys like it when I talk about trade.

So at the beginning of the Viking age, the Viking's primary interaction with the rest of Europe was through raiding.

Alright, hold on Thought Bubble; the Vikings didn't have horns on their helmets. Sorry.

Anyway, this bit about raiding was especially true on the coast for obvious reasons. In heavily forested places without many large settlements, raiding was not a very good option.

The earliest recorded Viking targets were often monasteries, like the one at Lindisfarne that was attacked in 793. Monasteries made good targets because they were relatively isolated, full of treasure, and monks usually aren't very good fighters, except, of course, for Shaolin monks.

Now the Vikings were able sailors, but they didn't quite make it far enough afield to raid kung fu monasteries.

Anyway, this brings up two important points. First, the Vikings were not motivated by religion even though they sacked monasteries;

they were after loot. Second and more importantly, Viking raids were not intended to destroy people or towns, although, they have that side effect.

So after an initial phase of raiding and terrorizing, the Vikings realized there were better ways to get rich. One was extortion; they built up such a reputation that often times they didn't need to actually raid a place to get them to give up their goods.

Eventually, though, the Vikings turned to trade and settlement. Which as we've seen over and over are the most reliable paths to wealth. Not necessarily the most fun. Thanks, Thought Bubble, and thanks for getting some of the blood and the guts and especially dragons in there.

So Viking settlements, like their raids and trading missions, were about gaining wealth, this time in the form of usable agricultural land. Like they weren't colonizers interested in creating Viking states or a Viking empire, and how much Vikings influenced the places that they raided was pretty varied.

In England, where the Vikings established a territory called the Danelaw, there was a hybridization between the Britons and the Scandinavians, while in Normandy and Russia, where Vikings were always a small minority, they blended with the dominant culture very quickly. In regions where they could become a majority of the population like Iceland and Greenland, Scandinavian culture came to dominate which is why we see such close cultural affinity between these regions of Scandinavia proper today.

Like those Icelandic sagas we were talking about? People living in Iceland can read them today because they're written in the same Icelandic. Whereas if English readers try to read the Canterbury tales, which were written hundreds of years later, it's difficult to even get the fart jokes.

So much of the reason we seen Greenland, Iceland, and the Faroe Islands as part of a larger North Atlantic Viking world is because they were all tied together by trade.

The Vikings established trade in manufacturing hubs in places as diverse as Hedeby, Roskilde, Birka, Dublin, and York. So the Vikings- ohhhhh! It's time for the open letter.

But first let's see what's in the globe today. Oh look, it's a Viking longboat beating against the current, borne back ceaselessly into Nova Scotia.

Hey there Leif. So your dad, Eric the Red, was exiled from Iceland to Greenland because of manslaughter. Now I know what you're thinking, kicked out of Iceland for manslaughter? I thought that's how people got TO Iceland. I'm just kidding, Iceland, I visited you once and you were amazing!

Anyway, Leif, you decided that Greenland was not far enough afield and you took the Vikings all the way to North America. Where in North America? We're not quite sure, but we're pretty sure that you did go there. There was some raiding, some trading, some strife with the indigenous people. And then, you didn't settle the land and kill 95% of American Indians, and for that Leif Erikson, I say good job! Best Wishes, John Green.

So anyway the Vikings traded all sorts of things including tools and weapons and jewelry and building materials and also soapstone which they use to make cooking vessels, whereas like we would probably use, like, ceramic pottery, or these days you know steel or that wizardry that non-stick pans are made out of.

Man, it would suck to be a Viking. You've got soapstone pots, no horns on your helmet, and like all you can do is travel from Dublin to York. Best case scenario, you get to go to Canada, which, you know, not that great.

But Viking trade was often able to turn what had been a cultural bathwater into like a big important commercial center. Kiev was probably one such center before it had been a Khazar trading post.

Another was Dublin, which was probably a fishing Village before the Vikings turned it into a thriving center of trade. Dublin eventually grew so large and powerful that the Dubliners, not the James Joyce short story collection, but the actual Dubliners, were able to kick the Vikings out.

Okay wait we should also probably talk a little bit about mythology and the Norse pantheon because you know, Thor.

As with much of our knowledge about the Vikings, our understanding of Norse mythology mostly dates from after the Viking age. There are some artifacts like Thor's hammer pendants and picture stones from Goathland. But most of the myths that you might know come from later, written accounts like the Prose Edda from Iceland and you know, Marvel Comics from New York.

So most of the people who were describing Viking religion were Christians, and they characterized the Vikings as Pagans because, you know, they could only describe religions in terms they knew of and that was like Christianity, or Pagan Greco Roman you know Gods of Olympus.

So it can be tempting to draw an equivalence between Norse mythology and Greco Roman mythology, but that's not really about Viking religion; it's more about like the way Christians imagined Viking religion.

Yes, I realize that the Greek pantheon and Roman pantheon are different. I just want to emphasize that any resemblance between the Greco Roman and Norse mythologies are mostly coincidental.

I mean yes, there is a God responsible for thunder in both of them, but there is a God responsible for thunder in most polytheistic religions. Now of course we know thunder, as my four and a half year old son told me, is dinosaurs walking around heaven.

So in the end when it comes to Viking religion, we have a lot of stories from after the Viking, but we don't have a lot of knowledge about how they actually practiced and worshiped.

So there's a brief introduction to the role of Vikings in world history. I know you probably wanted more blood and guts; there was a little bit of blood and guts but, you know, it's mostly trade.

The eventual success and influence of the Vikings was really about settlements and the exchange of goods, and, in the process, the exchange of cultures.

But of course fighting and killing get a lot more attention than trade, which maybe one of the reasons that we remember the Vikings so vividly. I mean, they made their biggest influence in Greenland and Iceland, and nothing against Greenland or Iceland, but we're talking about a combined populations somewhere in the neighborhood of half of Columbus, Ohio.

So we may remember the mythology and the barbarian attacks because that's kind of what humans are wired to remember, but for me, the real lesson of the Vikings is that they show in microcosm something that happens again and again in world history. When raiding gives way to trading, good things often happen.

Thanks for watching. I'll see you next week.

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