

# The Vikings and Norse

## c. 800 – 1472 AD



*Viking ship found at Gokstad in Norway. Ships of this sort could sail long distances*

The Vikings were people from Scandinavia (Denmark, Norway, and Sweden) who traveled across Europe in the Early Historic period raiding, trading and settling in different places. Those that came to Scotland were mainly from the area that is now Norway, and there are still strong connections between Norway and northern Scotland today. The Vikings are often depicted as violent barbarian savages out to kill and rob. However, they had a sophisticated society and system of law, and were extremely successful navigators whose shipbuilding skill would not be surpassed for hundreds of years.

The earliest Viking activity in Scotland that we know of was in 795 when there was an attack on Iona monastery just off the Isle of Mull. Irish written sources state that into the 800's Vikings continued to raid Scotland and started to settle, particularly in Shetland, Orkney and the Western Isles. The Vikings were probably responsible for the raids at Portmahomack, around 800, where sculptures were destroyed at the monastery. A few skeletons dating to this period have blade wounds.

Little settlement evidence has been found on mainland Scotland, although on the Northern and Western Isles there are both Viking Age settlements and burials. Isotope analysis has shown that some native women from Eigg were buried in accordance with Viking customs and clothing styles.

Pagan (non-Christian) graves have provided some of the most important Viking archaeology from Scotland. They were often furnished with goods like swords, shields and jewellery, as well as more everyday items like spindle whorls and fire-striking tools.

The Vikings eventually took control of the Northern Isles and parts of the north mainland under the Earls of Orkney. As this happened two important changes took place. Firstly they converted to Christianity and by around AD 900 people were buried in the Christian fashion with no grave goods. Secondly the area under the control of the Earls of Orkney formed part of the Kingdom of Norway, and so archaeological finds here are referred to as 'Norse' rather than Viking. At its greatest extent northern Scotland as far south as the Moray Firth was under Norse control. This is why a large portion of the northern mainland is known as 'Sutherland', meaning 'south of Orkney'.

Scottish Kings continued to fight for control until the Treaty of Perth, signed in 1266, ended military conflict between Norway and Scotland, with the Western Isles forming part of Scotland. The Northern Isles continued to be Norwegian until 1472. It is unclear exactly when Caithness and Sutherland came under the control of the Scottish monarchs.

### **Things to think about:**

***How might incoming cultures affect native communities?***

***What lasting legacy did the Vikings have in Scotland?***

### **See also:**

Box 3 object sheets: Viking Ring Money and Arabic Coins  
CT Silver Currency Production

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