

History 101

“The Vikings

...When you heard *that* during the Terrible Centuries, 800-1100, you ran for your life!...And with good reason! Ah, the Vikings! They’re always a popular topic in the classroom. Now, they can be a popular category in your collection, as well, but you might want to know a little more about those big, cuddly, fun-loving Scandinavians.

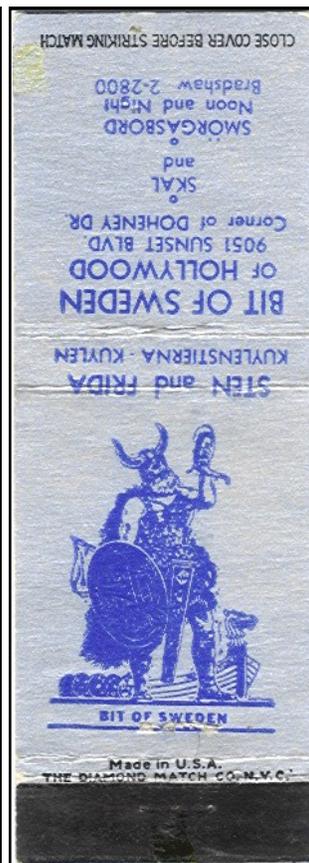
The classic Vikings came from Norway, Sweden, and Denmark during the 300 years from 800-1100. They were there before that, of course, but by 800 there was an overpopulation problem, and many were second, third, and fourth sons with no way of getting ahead in their society, because, under Viking inheritance customs, everything went to the older son. Added to that, especially in Norway and Sweden, there was a lack of available farm land. What to do? What to do?

By the beginning of the Viking Age, or “Terrible Centuries”, the Vikings were the best sailors and shipbuilders in the world. Thus, combining need with skill, the first recorded Viking raid was in 783, on a monastery on the English coast. Returning loaded down with plunder, one can well imagine how that set the example to other Vikings seeking to find fame and fortune. Interestingly, monasteries remained the favorite target of Vikings for the next three centuries, because they knew there wouldn’t be any soldiers there and because Medieval monasteries were often used as vaults by local nobles.

An example of a typical Viking raid was one that involved a Viking fleet of 62 ships that started from the Loire River in France in 859. A typical Viking ship was 70’ long and 16’ wide and carried 100 men. They looted the Spanish coast, entered the Mediterranean, pillaged villages along the N.

African coast, burned the Italian city of Pisa, and went as far as Egypt before turning for home. By the time the fleet returned home in 862, 40 ships had been lost, but the survivors were set for life.

Once the Vikings started raiding, they quickly established a reputation for terror, rape, and mayhem. Initially, at least, Viking raiders characteristically worked solely as individuals. Once a warrior’s boots hit the beach, he was on his own.



Are Coming!”

Whatever he could

bring back to the ship was counted as his. Backed up by their Norse religious beliefs that exalted the hero and promised immediate entrance into Valhalla for any who fell with a sword in his hand, these Vikings fought with complete abandon. They were called “berserkers”, which is where we get the word “berserk.” After taking over a village, weary raiders would sometimes kick back and relax, playing with the local children—tossing infants into the air and catching them on the ends of their spears!

They had a number of interesting customs, in fact. Men commonly washed up in the morning from the same tub of water, going in turn by rank. Each would wash his face and hands and blow his nose in the water...and then pass the tub to the next man. Too gross? OK, about a little human sacrifice? Nothing on the scale of the Mayans, Aztecs or Incas, just occasionally. Oh yes, wives were expected to be killed and buried with their husbands. *[I wonder if that went for ex-wives?...I just had a shiver go down my spine...locked up for eternity with my ex-wife!]*.

Amidst their watery wanderings, the Vikings made a number of discoveries and contributions in history. Most famous of these was the discovery of N. America, first by Biarni Heriulfson in 986, and then by Leif Ericson in 1001...both of these basically 500 years before Columbus. In 1960, Canadian park rangers discovered the remains of the New Foundland colony that Ericson had attempted to start (the Vikings were chased out by the Indians). Earlier, Leif's father, Eric the Red, had discovered Greenland c. 985. The Vikings also discovered Iceland; settled in Ireland, Iceland, Greenland, SE Britain, and Normandy; founded the city of Dublin; started the countries of Iceland and Russia; gave us words such as:

‘Tuesday’ (Tiw’s Day)

