Piracy in Medieval Europe

During the Middle Ages (also called the medieval era, which began in the late fifth century and continued through the end of the fifteenth century), northern Europe became one of the world’s foremost arenas of sea raiding. In the eighth century sea-going raiders from Scandinavia (present-day Norway, Sweden, and Denmark) called Vikings became the most-feared pirates of the time. As the threat of Viking raids subsided in northern Europe in the tenth and eleventh centuries, an increase in overseas trade, near-constant warfare, and some unfortunate decisions of European rulers led to an increase in piracy in the waters surrounding the Germanic kingdoms, the British isles, and France. The troubles in the North and Baltic Seas and the English Channel—and the popularity of these early pirates in the common imagination—foreshadowed things to come in later eras of piracy.

Europe before the Vikings

During the centuries immediately preceding the Middle Ages, the Roman Empire had established a relatively peaceful rule throughout a vast area. At its height in the second century, the empire’s borders went well beyond the Mediterranean coastal regions of Africa, Asia, and Europe, extending throughout western Europe and across the North Sea to include England. However, the stability achieved in this enormous area under one rule would not outlast the empire.

In the beginning of the fifth century, groups of Germanic tribes such as the Vandals, Goths, and Franks began to move from Northern Europe into regions of the vast Roman Empire. As wave after wave of these migrating tribes pushed across the borders of the empire, long, violent, and extremely destructive battles erupted. Rome’s power weakened in the constant fighting, and the Germanic tribes were able to establish kingdoms in Spain and Northern Africa. From their new kingdoms, they
sacked (captured and plundered) cities in Italy, including Rome. The sacking of Rome in 476 marks the collapse of the western Roman Empire and the dawn of the Middle Ages.

The eastern part of the Roman Empire, which would soon become known as the Byzantine Empire, remained strong. Its capital was Constantinople (present-day Istanbul, Turkey). In the early centuries of the Middle Ages, the Byzantine Empire struggled against the many varieties of pirates in the Mediterranean region. Its powerful navy was able to keep the trade routes more or less secure, although it never completely stopped the piracy. Later in the Middle Ages, the rise of the Islamic religion and warfare between the Christians and the Muslims (followers
of Islam) led to a fierce new age of piracy in the Mediterranean called the age of the Barbary Corsairs. (For more information, see The Barbary Corsairs.)

In northern Europe, the collapse of the Roman Empire led to an era often called the Dark Ages. With the lack of a strong central rule, small, isolated kingdoms arose. The Catholic Church linked these kingdoms with a common religion, but they had few other economic or political connections. Kings and queens of these states were less powerful than the local lords, who were the primary rulers of the people in the countryside surrounding their estates. Few of the monarchs had significant military or naval forces. Without laws or regulations to provide security in the seas and with little means to enforce laws even if they had existed, trade diminished in the early Middle Ages, coming to a standstill in some places. The lack of strong sea trade might have discouraged most pirates, but at the end of the eighth century, the Vikings stepped in and took advantage of the times.

The Vikings strike

On June 8, 793, on a small island off the coast of northeast England, monks at the religious center known as Lindisfarne rose up in alarm when a group of longboats suddenly appeared off their shores. As the boats arrived on the island’s sandy beaches, foreigners armed with swords and axes poured out and swarmed into the unprotected monastery. The raiders stabbed and hacked at anyone in their path as they proceeded to loot the church’s abundant treasures. They killed many of the clerics (members of the clergy, or church order), took others as slaves, and terrorized the rest. Simeon of Durham, a twelfth-century historian, describes the brutal scene, as quoted by Philip Pulsiano and Kirsten Wolf in Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia:

The pagans [people who did not believe in the Christian religion] from the northern regions came with a naval force to Britain like stinging hornets and spread on all sides like fearful wolves, robbed, tore and slaughtered not only beasts of burden, sheep and oxen, but even priests and deacons, and companies of monks and nuns. And they came to the church of Lindisfarne, laid everything waste with grievous plundering [robbing by force], trampled the holy places with polluted steps, dug up the altars and seized all the treasures of the holy church. They killed some of the brothers, took some away with them in fetters [chains or...
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The Vikings raided Lindisfarne, a religious center in northeast England, in 793. This attack marked the start of annual pirate raids along the coasts of England, Scotland, and Ireland. HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES.

shackles for the ankles or feet, many they drove out, naked and loaded with insults, some they drowned in the sea.

For several decades after the pillaging of Lindisfarne, the Vikings launched many annual pirate raids along the coasts of England, Scotland, and Ireland. They usually arrived in small expeditions of about one dozen ships, and their targets were frequently churches and other sacred sites, although they attacked villages and towns as well. They used the tactic of surprise as often as possible, sneaking up on unprepared and
poorly defended targets. Their raids were notoriously bloody and vicious. Some Viking fighters, called berserkers (or berserks), fought in such a furious and unstoppable manner that people described them as mad wolves or raging bulls. Throughout Europe, people believed that berserkers possessed magical powers, and that no lance, knife, or club could kill them.

Terror of Vikings became a fact of life in the British isles. The prayer A furore Normanorarum libera nos (From the fury of the Northmen [Vikings] deliver us) was to be heard throughout the land. The Vikings were well pleased with their monstrous reputation. People’s fear was so great that they often surrendered without a fight.

The Narentines of the Adriatic Sea

The medieval Narentine people of southern Dalmatia (present-day Croatia) are best remembered for their piracy. During the eighth and ninth centuries, around the same time the Vikings were raiding ports in northern Europe, the Narentines were raiding coastal towns and merchant ships in the Adriatic Sea, an arm of the Mediterranean Sea that separates the Italian and Balkan Peninsulas. The Narentines’ home base was called Pagania by the nations that surrounded it, because the Narentines were pagans, or people who chose not to accept Christianity.

The Narentines raided for profit. Like the Vikings they used hit-and-run tactics, raiding and then fleeing before their targets could defend themselves. They were especially skilled at the slave trade and took many human prisoners to be sold as slaves. By the ninth century, their tactics were so successful that the Adriatic was considered a very dangerous place to sail.

The Narentines were extremely good seamen. Their primary type of ship was a sagena, which resembled the Vikings’ drekar. Sagenas were long, narrow, shallow vessels with sharp bows (fronts) built for speed. They were propelled by as many as forty rowers. Like Viking crews, the Narentine rowers were also skilled warriors, ready to fight once they reached their target.

The Narentines’ favorite targets were the coasts of southern Italy and the Venetian trading ships that passed in the Adriatic. During the ninth century, the powerful republic of Venice dominated the Adriatic Sea. The Narentines, who had no desire to fight the Venetians, waited until the Venetian navy was occupied in a distant conflict and then raided in the Adriatic at will until its return. In 846, while the Venetian naval forces were away, the Narentines managed to sack a port city within the republic. Fourteen years later they kidnapped two important officials of the Catholic Church. At that point, the Byzantine Empire took military action, not only stopping the pirate raids, but also forcing the Narentines to accept Christianity. Although their piracy was greatly reduced, the Narentines remained proud of their pirate tradition and were known to go out on occasional raiding expeditions for the next two centuries.
The Vikings as pirates

The word *Viking* applies to raiders from present-day Norway, Denmark, and Sweden. The term probably comes from the Norse word *Vik*, which means inlet or creek, perhaps because many of the Vikings surprise attacks were launched from the small rivers they followed inland from the sea in their longboats. The Norse word for a man who went out raiding was *vikingr*. The Viking raiders were, at least in the early years, people who plundered for their own profit, not for political or religious reasons.

When Vikings of the ninth and tenth centuries went to sea on raiding expeditions, they pillaged and looted a region, and then returned to their homes or other bases with their booty. (Booty is goods stolen from ships or coastal villages during pirate raids or attacks on enemies in time of war.) This type of activity is piracy. In the later part of the Viking age, though, the Vikings began to invade foreign territory, attacking with military strength and then remaining, often as rulers. They assimilated, or blended in, with the rest of the people of the region, marrying into local families and adopting the Christian religion. While the invasions were frequently very brutal, as most wars were in that age, the Vikings would go on to contribute greatly to their new cultures. These invasions and the later Viking migrations and explorations, do not necessarily fall under the definition of piracy. Viking history is full of illegal raiding intermixed with acts of war.

Masters of the sea

Most Scandinavians were farmers, fishermen, artisans, or traders, and did not go out on pirating expeditions. For reasons not entirely clear to historians, in the late eighth century pirating became an attractive means of getting ahead for many Scandinavian men (and perhaps a woman or two). This was partly because Scandinavia had become overpopulated and there was not enough farmland to sustain everyone.

An important factor in the sudden surge in Viking piracy in the eighth century was the Vikings’ mastery at sea. Their well-designed boats gave them supreme power and range. Viking vessels were clinker-built, meaning that they were constructed with overlapping oak planks. Skilled Viking shipbuilders began with a strong oak keel, the beam that extends along the entire length of the bottom of the ship and supports the frame. They fixed a few shaped timbers to the keel, using clinch bolts...
to fasten them. (Timbers are the frames or ribs of a ship that are connected to the keel and give the hull its shape and strength.) The rest of the framework was added on to this structure, with rows of oak planks, each overlapping the one below. Waterproofing was then applied between planks. Viking vessels were long, narrow, and shallow, making them navigable in inlets and rivers, and they were easy to pull ashore. This gave Vikings the capacity to raid towns and religious centers that were far inland.

The smaller Viking longboats that were used in the early years of raiding generally had from ten to thirteen oars on each side. The larger Viking ships, called drekar, or dragon ships, might have had as many as sixty oars, and they were also equipped with large square sails to be raised when the winds were favorable. These ships could travel swiftly across the open sea using their sails, and the crews could then switch to their oars for coastal attacks. Viking ships were far more efficient than other northern European ships, making the Vikings’ hit-and-run attacks along the coastline very difficult to stop.

Historians say that Vikings were the most skillful navigators (people who chart the route of their ships) in Europe at the time. They were able to cross open seas using acute visual observation of distant shores. They also used their knowledge of tides, winds, and currents to orient
themselves at sea. They frequently relied on island hopping, or crossing from island to island, until a distant destination was reached.

**The motley crew**

Each member of the crew on a Viking ship had many skills; seamanship was only one part of the mission. The rowers were also trained warriors, ready to jump ship and plunge into their raids. They were armed for this purpose with swords, axes, clubs, spears, and bows and arrows. The sides of the ship bore their shields, each with its owner’s emblem (an image that represented him), and most Vikings were protected by a helmet and coat of armor.

Nearly invincible at sea, the Vikings undoubtedly found pirating a great deal more profitable than trading. They apparently had little remorse about attacking Europe’s cathedrals and abbeys, with their storehouses of sacred treasures and their lack of organized defense. The coastal villages and towns were equally defenseless. With easier targets, the Vikings were able to attack more communities.

**The Vikings expand their raids**

The trip from Scandinavia to the British isles was too difficult for the Vikings to attempt during winter weather, so the Vikings set up bases on nearby islands. This allowed them to raid the British shores year-round. They also began to take their longboats up rivers, sailing farther inland for their raids. Over decades of raids, they caused such great destruction to England, Scotland, and Ireland that eventually there was little left for them to take. At that point, they turned to the European continent.

Vikings began their attacks on the continent by raiding the large Frankish kingdoms, which covered much of present-day France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Germany. Beginning around 799, Vikings sailed up the Seine River to raid the region along the North Sea coast known as Frisia (later Dorestad), an important trading city in what is now the Netherlands, and Rouen, in present-day France. In 843 the Vikings raided Nantes, on the Loire River, and set up a permanent base near the mouth of that river. A similar base appeared a few years later on the island of Oissel, in the Seine River in France, and in 845 the Vikings attacked Paris. The Frankish rulers paid the Vikings tribute money to stay away, but the Vikings took the money and continued raiding. Terrified Franks moved inland and monks carted off church treasures to protected cities.