

# The Vikings

## The Viking Age

In 793, Vikings in longships attacked a monastery on an island off the coast of England. This was the beginning of the Viking Age in England.

The monastery was a center of learning famed throughout Europe. The monastery was burnt and the monks were killed or thrown into the ocean to drown or brought back as slaves. The treasures contained in the monastery were carried back as plunder.

From around the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Viking raiders attacked villages and monasteries all over Europe. They moved swiftly over the ocean in their longships and appeared suddenly along the coast.

They were fierce warriors who used spears, swords and axes to attack their foes. For protection they had large round shields and they also had helmets though it is a misconception that their helmets had horns.

The English phrase 'go berserk' means to 'go crazy'. This term comes from the Vikings: the fiercest of their warriors were called berserkers. They waited at the front of the boat and rushed out to attack as soon as the boat landed.

## The Viking Age

- (1) What happened in 793?
- (2) Where was the monastery?
- (3) Why was the monastery famous?
- (4) What happened to the monastery?
- (5) What happened to the monks?
- (6) What happened to the treasure within the monastery?
- (7) When was the Viking Age?
- (8) What did Viking raiders do?
- (9) Why did the villagers have little time to escape the Vikings?
- (10) What weapons did the Vikings use?
- (11) What did they use for protection?
- (12) What is a common misconception about Vikings?
- (13) What does the term 'go berserk' mean?
- (14) Who were the berserkers?

# The Vikings

## Viking Trade and Culture

Vikings are often portrayed as bloodthirsty raiders, but they were more than that: they were also seafaring explorers and traders with their own cultural traditions.

Viking trade routes extended from Northern Europe all the way down to the city of Constantinople, where they traded slaves and amber for silk and spices. They also brought furs and walrus tusks (ivory) from Greenland to the towns of Europe.

In fact, archeologists have found numerous Arab coins in Viking graves scattered around Europe, which shows the extent of the Vikings' trade network.

When Vikings weren't trading, they were telling stories called sagas around the fire. A saga is a long story about the life of a great hero.

Along with their sagas, the Vikings also had their own mythology. The English words for the days Tuesday to Friday come from Norse\* mythology. Thursday for example means Thor's Day. Thor was the Norse god of thunder.

## Viking Trade and Culture

(1) How are Vikings often portrayed?

(2) What else did they do?

(3) Where did Viking trade extend to?

(4) What kinds of things did Vikings trade in Constantinople?

(5) What kinds of things did Vikings trade in Europe?

(6) What has been found in Viking graves?

(7) What did Vikings listen to around the fire?

(8) What is a saga?

(9) Where do the days Tuesday to Friday come from?

(10) What does Thursday mean?

(11) Who was Thor?

Note: Vikings are also called Norsemen, which means men of the north. Tuesday comes from the Norse god Tyr (the god of war), Wednesday comes from the Norse god Woden (Odin, the chief god), and Friday comes from the Norse god Freya (the goddess of beauty)

# The Vikings

## Viking Explorers

500 years before Christopher Columbus crossed the Atlantic Ocean, Viking explorers had already reached the eastern coast of North America. The most famous of these Viking explorers are Erik the Red and his son Leif Erikson\*.

Erik the Red's story began when he was banished from Iceland for killing his neighbor. He was told to leave Iceland for 3 years. Erik had heard of a mysterious land discovered by another Viking named Gunnbjorn when his ship was blown off course in a storm.

In 982, Erik found the mysterious island and called it Greenland. After three years, he went back to Iceland and convinced other people to follow him to Greenland where they started two colonies. In these colonies, the Vikings built farms and even hunted up around the Arctic Circle. These colonies lasted for around 500 years.

Using Greenland as a base, Erik the Red's son, Leif Erikson explored even farther to a land he called Vinland, which was on the coast of Canada.

## Viking Longships

- (1) How many years before Christopher Columbus did the Vikings reach North America?
- (2) Who were the two most famous Viking explorers?
- (3) Why was Erik the Red banished from Iceland?
- (4) How long was he told to leave Iceland?
- (5) Did Erik discover Greenland first?
- (6) Why did Gunnbjorn go to Greenland?
- (7) In what year did Erik reach Greenland?
- (8) What did Erik convince other people in Iceland to do?
- (9) How many colonies did they set up?
- (10) What did they do around the Arctic Circle?
- (11) How long did the colonies last?
- (12) Where did Leif Erikson explore to?

\*There are various spellings of these names. Erik is often spelled Eric for example.