



Viking Myths

Everybody has heard about the fearsome Vikings in their pointy hats and long boats. We all know that they conquered Europe and sent people running and hiding wherever they went. Or did they? A lot of what we think we know about the Vikings might actually be based on myth, rather than facts. Let's take a look at some of the most common mistakes people make with the Vikings.

Vikings were vicious attackers

Vikings explored the world in ways that not many tribes had done before them. They sailed impressive long ships and navigated most of what they called the "known world". However, when they reached distant lands, they didn't just attack. More often than not, the Vikings preferred to trade with the locals. They established cities in many of the countries they landed in and used these to trade and barter with the people who lived there. In fact, the Vikings were the first westerners to set foot on North America. They regularly visited Canada for food and timber. Don't be mistaken, though. If the Vikings wanted to take control of a city, they were prepared to go into battle for it. They proved this when they took over Paris in 845 CE.



The Vikings were well-travelled

This one is definitely true. As well as settling in North America, the Vikings spread through most of Europe. They also travelled south into North Africa and east to Russia. On top of that, they built settlements in Constantinople and the Middle East. However, they didn't necessarily conquer all of the countries. They were quite happy to live alongside the locals as well.

Horned helmets were worn in battle

This one is definitely a myth. Even though Vikings have been wearing horned helmets in films and cartoons for decades, they almost certainly didn't wear them in real life. They would have been heavy and tended to fall forwards, and would have made fighting almost impossible. Instead, they often wore cone-shaped helmets made from wood and leather. Other helmets were made with iron and a mask made of chain mail. The idea of horned helmets is relatively recent - the first time it appeared in books was in the 1800s.

Vikings were filthy savages

The truth appears to be much different from this common myth. When the Saxons invaded Britain, they undid a lot of the Roman habit of keeping yourself clean. Britain became a very dirty place, indeed. So, when the Vikings invaded, it is interesting to hear what the British thought of them. The Vikings that invaded Britain were described as being excessively clean. They bathed at least once a week and kept their hair and nails well-groomed. This was the complete opposite of the Anglo-Saxons, who rarely bathed at all.



Vikings were seasoned warriors

This one definitely seems to be untrue. At the time, the word “Viking” was a verb meaning to raid somewhere. Most Vikings were young men who were heading out for an adventure before settling down with a family. They didn’t intend to be a warrior forever. In the tales told at the time, older warriors who had never settled down were always the disruptive characters who nobody liked. Perhaps it’s easier to think of being a Viking as a bit like a gap-year spent travelling the world!

RETRIEVAL FOCUS

1. Give two things that the author assumes everybody knows about Vikings.
2. When did the Vikings take over Paris?
3. In which country in the east did the Vikings settle?
4. True or false: Vikings wore helmets made of iron.
5. Who were cleaner, Anglo-Saxons or Vikings?

VIPERS QUESTIONS

- S** How did the Vikings keep clean?
- V** If something is a “myth”, what does that tell us about it?
- S** What does the section “The Vikings we well-travelled” tell us?
- E** How does the author build up the article to be a shock to the reader?
- I** What does the section “The Vikings were well travelled” tell us about their personalities?