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VIKINGS AND CIVILIZATION

Peter G. Foote and David M. Wilson, *The Viking Achievement. The Society and Culture of Early Medieval Scandinavia*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989.
London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1989.

The Viking Achievement is part of a Great Civilizations Series written for the general reader but also recommended for university students. Co-authored by an archaeologist and a professor of Scandinavian studies, it focuses on society and culture in Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Iceland in the period between 800 and 1200. It was a time when men of the north went to the Dnieper valley first as traders and then as mercenary soldiers. In the process they founded or took over a number of Russian towns. They traded down the Volga river making contact with trade routes from the Far East and down the Dnieper to Constantinople until they were disrupted by Mongol conquests. Danes established a kingdom in York in 866 and in time controlled all of eastern and much of southern England. They also expanded into Frisia and along the southern Baltic shore. Norwegians called Vikings invaded parts of England, Ireland, and Scotland, settled the Shetlands, the Orkneys, the Hebrides, the Isle of Man, the Faroe Islands, and Iceland. Icelanders went to Greenland, and Greenlanders reached the North American coast nearly 500 years before Columbus landed in the Caribbean. Swedes went into Finland. The Danes who settled Normandy and became known as Normans conquered southern Italy and Sicily, tried to take over the Balkans, and took over England in 1066.

History, as everyone knows, is written by the victors. People who are "not us" are called pagans, infidels, heretics, or barbarians. Thus, the Vikings who terrorized the Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts suffered a "bad press" for a very long time. More recently, revisionist scholars such as the authors of this book have been tallying their virtues and accomplishments.

The most famous Viking achievement was to devise a wide variety of boats and ships, described in Chapter 7. Their nautical words were widely borrowed in western Europe, and they were skillful sailors, much as the Mongols were skillful horsemen. They travelled widely by land as well as by sea, using skates, skis, or horses wearing decorated bridles and drawing wheeled vehicles or sledges.

Vikings took over existing towns or planted new ones. Towns grew from the trading stations they established along the north coast of Germany. Ireland's first cities, including Dublin, were founded as forts by the Vikings and grew into international markets.

The arts of war (chapter 8) loomed large in the lives of Vikings. Their economy was based primarily on agriculture, fishing, and hunting, but once they had settled in a new land they "quickly became acclimatized to its political structure and with their adventurous background became competent traders." (p. 196) Merchants

banded together into guilds. Their activities "stimulated the general European economy." Their "adventurous voyages opened up new markets and produced fresh materials in which trade could be carried on." (p. 231) Slaves were the most common trading commodity. Their trade extended not only into various parts of Europe, Russia, and Constantinople, but also to North Africa.

Viking society was based on large family groups. The despised class of slaves, who did the dirty work, was disappearing by the 13th century. In around 800 "the most effective larger unit ... was the province, ... sometimes under independent leaders, kings, or earls, sometimes in a federation under the domination of a single dynasty." (p. 3) Later came centralized monarchies. Chapter 4 is about Viking chiefs, earls, and kings. The people did have some voice in government, and legal knowledge was widespread.

In this pre-Christian pantheistic age, the Vikings worshipped many gods. The most powerful god was Thor, who ruled the sky and weather and was "pre-eminently the god of physical strength." (p. 390) Odin, the god of strife, had valkyries as servants. The gods had splendid houses and possessions and met in assemblies for discussion, ritual, and games. (p. 388) These authors tell us: "Not all pagans were devout. Some may have been atheists, others may have believed in the existence of gods but put no trust in them." (p. 403) These authors say the Vikings were not inhospitable to Christianity.

The Viking value-system emphasized individual responsibility and self-reliance, a belief in the immortality of fame, and an admiration for heroism. "Family and personal honour, maintained by fulfilling the duty of vengeance, required possession of sensibility, vigour and valour." (p. 430) Christian missionaries tried to discourage the traditional Viking emphasis on vengeance.

Before 800, the language common to Scandinavians had become less like German. Differences among the various Scandinavian languages evolved slowly thereafter.

The book is well endowed with photographs and line-drawings depicting Viking art. Functional objects were carefully ornamented in a style characteristic of Germanic northwest Europe after the Roman empire collapsed. Chapter 10 is about Nordic poetry, which loses some of its fire in translation. Viking gentlemen played the harp. There were games in abundance. There are chapters on social structure, women and children, and daily life.

While the purpose of this book was not to cover every detail about the Vikings that might be of interest to advanced scholars, it is a useful and readable introduction to the subject.

For any civilizationist who might be prone to a parochial view of the world looking out from a Near Eastern vantage point, books like this one may help to enlarge perspective.

Corinne Lathrop Gilb