

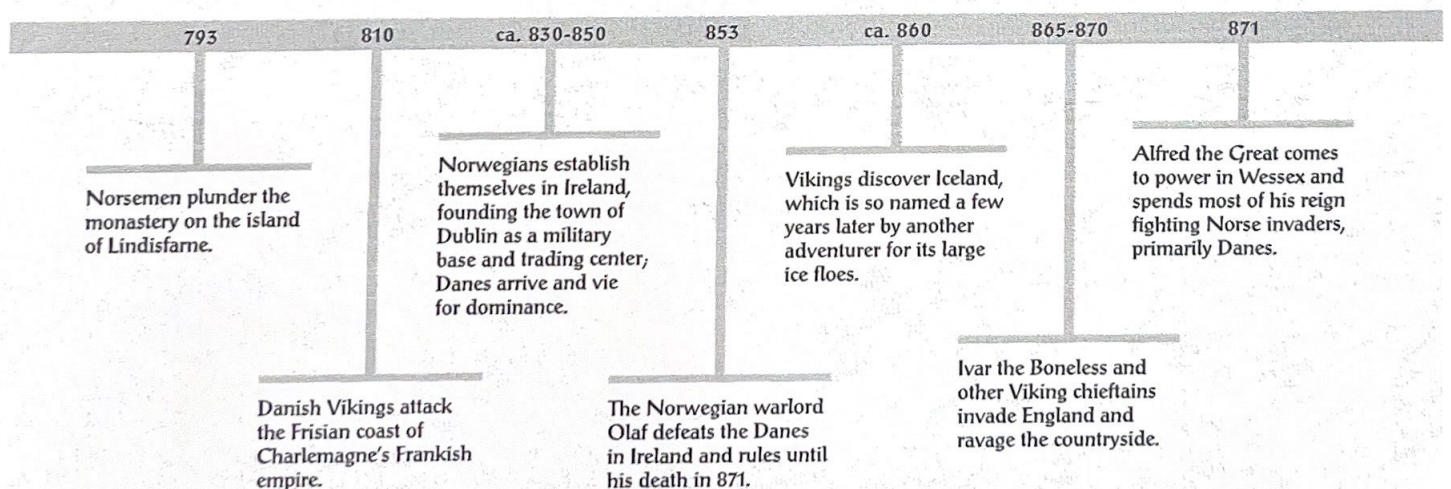
THE VENTURESOME VIKINGS

“Like men they traveled far for gold,” proclaimed a memorial stone honoring a band of Swedes who died in battle while seeking fortune in a distant land. Such restlessness and daring were characteristic of the Vikings—the name applied today to all Scandinavians, at home or abroad, who lived during the expansive era of raiding, trading, and colonization that dawned around AD 800. That era began with devastating attacks by Norsemen against monasteries and other vulnerable targets along the coasts of England and the Continent, and the Vikings were portrayed ever after as bloody marauders. But they were settlers as well as invaders, explorers as well as plunderers, merchants as well as conquerors, creators as well as destroyers.

Long before they took the world by force, the Scandinavians were energetic traders. As early as 1500 BC, they

were exchanging goods across the North Sea with the peoples of Ireland and England. By the first century AD, they were trading with the Romans, and by the fifth century, they were hosting foreign merchants at bustling Scandinavian market towns. Trade exposed them to the wealth of others and fed dreams of plunder and conquest.

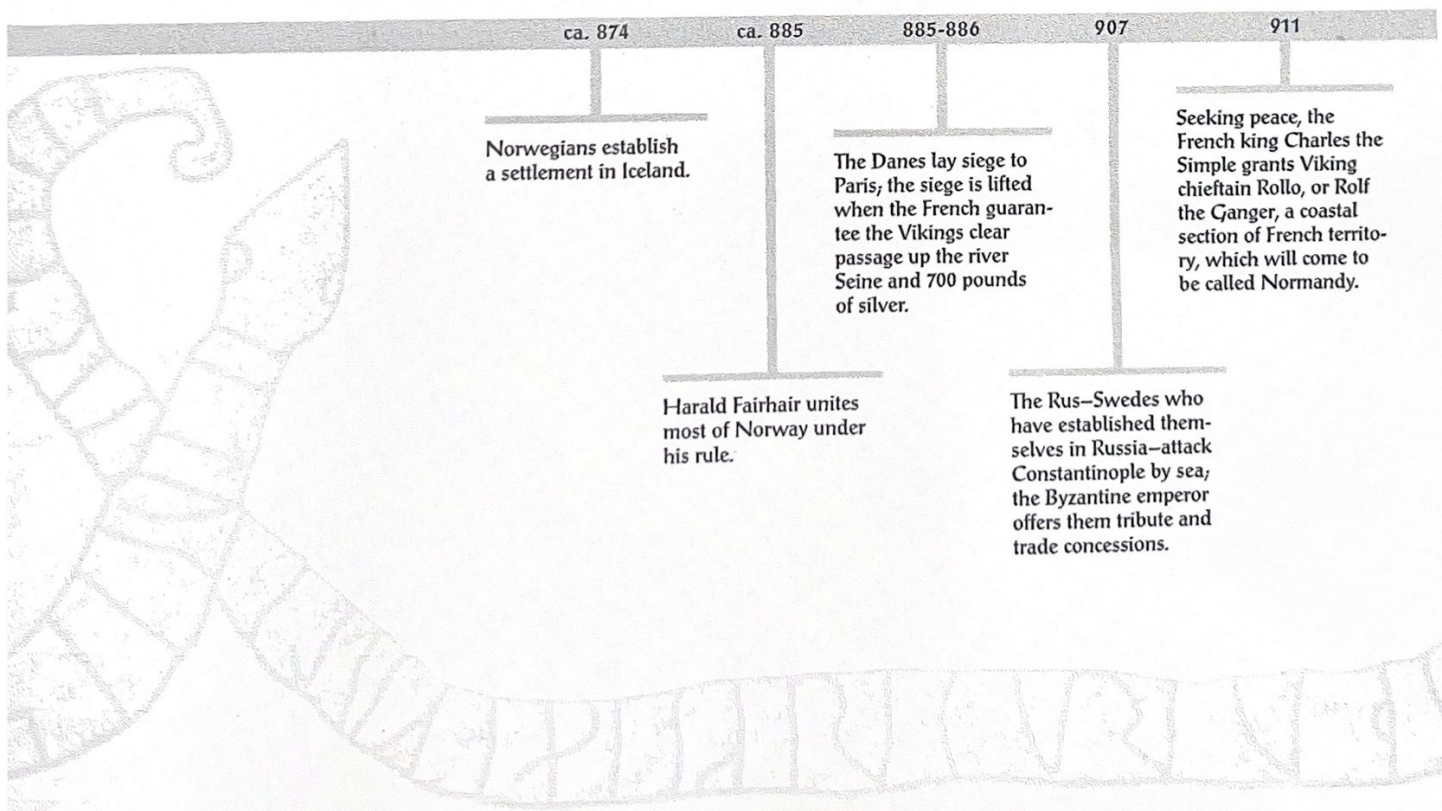
To realize those dreams, the Scandinavians first had to master the art of shipbuilding. They had long crafted boats without sails in which they traversed their native fjords and even crossed the seas in good weather. But by the eighth century, they had evolved a formidable sailing vessel, the longship—fast, nimble, seaworthy, and capable of being beached along coasts or rowed far up rivers. The longship opened the world to the Vikings, and thousands of them seized the opportunity, driven by a hunger for land, adventure, or plunder.



On a June day in AD 793, Norsemen in longships descended on the island of Lindisfarne off the east coast of England and pillaged its treasure-laden monastery, killing many of the monks there and enslaving others. The assault shocked Christian Europe and marked the beginning of the violent Viking age. At first, the raids were limited to coastal areas and carried out by small bands, who retreated quickly with their booty. But before long, well-organized war parties from the emerging nations of Denmark, Sweden, and Norway, led by ambitious chieftains and kings, were invading foreign lands, exacting tribute, and seizing territory. In 810 the Danish king Godfred attacked the coast of Frisia (the Netherlands), then part of Charlemagne's empire. Buoyed by his initial success, Godfred talked of conquering Germany, but he died before he could carry out his plans, and Charlemagne

strengthened his defenses against future Viking threats.

The British Isles, divided into many rival kingdoms, were more vulnerable. During the course of the ninth century, Norwegian Vikings gained control of large parts of Ireland and founded Dublin, among other towns. Danish warriors vied with the Norwegians in Ireland for a while but made their greatest gains in England, claiming much of the country before King Alfred the Great, of Wessex, drove them out of southern England and relegated them to a large area in the north and east known as the Danelaw. Tens of thousands of Danes then turned their hostile attentions to France, venturing up the Seine River and laying siege to Paris in 885. Those invaders ultimately retreated, but Vikings became so well established along the coast that the French king later ceded to their chieftain, Rollo, the area known as Nor-

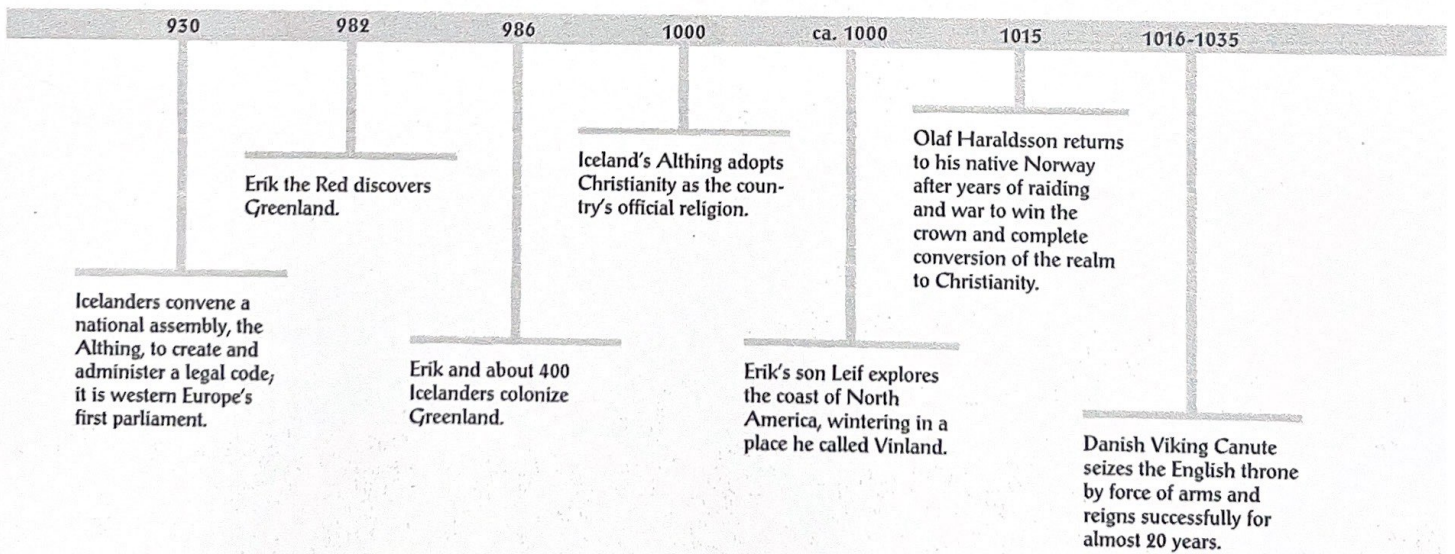


mandy, named for the occupying Norsemen. Armed Swedes, meanwhile, were delving deep into Russia to collar slaves and trade with merchants from the Byzantine and Arab worlds at places such as Bulgar and Kiev, which became a Swedish stronghold. In time, Vikings reached all the way to the Mediterranean and the shores of North Africa.

Part of the impetus for this remarkable expansion came from unrest in the Scandinavian homeland, where assertive rulers such as Harald Fairhair of Norway were uniting their kingdoms at sword-point and displacing rival chieftains, some of whom then ventured abroad with their followers. The rise of Harald Fairhair was one of several factors that impelled thousands of Scandinavians—most of them Norwegians—to cross the North Atlantic and settle Iceland between 870 and 930. But the Vikings did not stop there. In 982 Icelander Erik the Red ventured westward and explored

Greenland, where he founded a colony a few years afterward. Carrying on in the tradition of his father, Erik, Leif Eriksson sailed off from Greenland into the unknown around the year 1000 and reached the shores of North America, charting the way for a short-lived Viking settlement at a place known as Vinland.

Back in Europe, meanwhile, the Viking age of conquest was building to a climax. By the 11th century, Christianity was supplanting the traditional Norse religion in Scandinavia, thanks to the determined efforts of Christian rulers like King Olaf Haraldsson (later known as Saint Olaf), who ascended the throne of Norway in 1015 and set about completing the conversion of his country by force. As his campaigns demonstrated, the advent of Christianity did nothing to pacify the region. Having consolidated their kingdoms, the monarchs of Scandinavia vied for supremacy with one



another and with the rulers of England and Normandy. Among the most successful of those Viking warrior kings was Canute, who at one time ruled his native Denmark as well as Norway and England. The English throne subsequently reverted to local control, but England remained a bone of contention, coveted by outsiders who hoped to emulate Canute's feat. In 1066 a great struggle for control of England was played out between the English king Harold Godwinson, the Norwegian king Harald Hardradi, and William, duke of Normandy. The defeat of the Norwegians by the English—who then lost out to the Normans under William—signaled the end of the Viking era of expansion, for the victorious Normans had long since shed their Norse identity and embraced French ways.

Iceland and Greenland would remain lonely outposts of Viking culture until the 13th century, when they surren-

dered their independence and became possessions of Norway amid worsening weather conditions and other travails. Deeply attached to the old Norse traditions, the Icelanders set down in writing the sagas that elaborated artfully on their history and offered future generations a sweeping panorama of the Viking world—a place where stout-hearted women defended the interests of their households and sometimes drove their men to violent deeds, where lawspeakers and peacekeepers struggled heroically to resolve disputes and restore order, and where outlaws redeemed themselves by ranging abroad and claiming bountiful new lands for their followers. Those stories, together with the revealing works of Norse artisans that people carried with them to their graves, offer us a rich and rounded portrait of the Vikings—a people who owed their success as much to their adaptability and ingenuity as to their notorious ferocity.

1030

Olaf Haraldsson dies trying to regain his lost kingdom from Canute, who seized it in 1028; Olaf Haraldsson is subsequently canonized as Saint Olaf, patron saint of Norway.

1066

Norwegian king Harald Hardradi is killed by England's Harold Godwinson at the Battle of Stamford Bridge; Normandy's William the Conqueror then defeats Harold at the Battle of Hastings.

ca. 1200

Icelanders begin recording the Norwegian and Icelandic sagas transmitted orally since the 800s.

1261

Greenlanders surrender their autonomy to Norway in return for trade concessions after their economy is disrupted by worsening weather conditions.

1264

Internal dissension and economic problems bring an end to Iceland's independent government, and the king of Norway assumes control.