

41. THE VIKINGS

Look, a monastery.

A whole group of monks live together in that monastery.

An aged man with snow-white hair oversees it all. He is the abbot and is responsible for this monastery.

Therefore, all the monks are subject to his guidance.

In those days, the monasteries were still a blessing to the nation. Almost every monastery had a convent school where the monks instructed boys from the area.

Other monks went out very early every morning while the dew was still on the fields, clearing the land and turning it into fruitful fields. Other monks visited the sick in the surrounding areas. They cared for the ailing and helped the distressed.

Wanderers, beggars, travellers, and anyone who knocked on the monastery gate was sure to be admitted and cared for in a kind manner. As a result, hundreds, maybe even thousands of these monasteries were built during the reign of Charlemagne.

THE VIKINGS ATTACK

Suddenly the tranquil stillness is rudely disturbed. We can hear savage yelling near the locked gate of the monastery. A band of Vikings is demanding entrance! But this time, the gates remain closed!

The monks hide, trembling, and anxiously await the outcome of this unwelcome visit. As nobody opens the gate, the Viking chief smashes his heavy axe into the gate. The sharp axe cuts deeply into the solid wood. Blow after crashing blow echoes with a terrifying sound through the arches of the monastery, spreading fear and consternation among the occupants. The door cracks.

Woodchips fly in every direction. Finally, the heavy gate gives way under the mighty blows of the Viking axes.

With a triumphant yell, the gang of invaders storm through the gate. Now the entrance is open, they charge in, eager for booty, thirsty for blood. They spread out through the monastery, holding their weapons ready. They force their way into the large hall where the monks have come together, trembling, awaiting certain death. The white-haired abbot stands among them.

"Odin! Odin!" scream the advancing invaders.

Then follows a scene that we cannot describe. Without mercy, the invaders cruelly murder all the monks. The barbarian intruders show no respect for the old abbot. Without exception, everyone, young and old, is ruthlessly killed. Blood covers the rough stone floor. Finally, everyone is dead. The horrible massacre is over.

Then the murderers spread throughout the building.

They rob everything they can find.

They take away gold and silver ornaments and anything else of value. They find wine in the cellar. The monks used this for the sick and frail



Vikings raiding a village.

<https://weaponsandwarfare.com/>

The Norse raiders initially concentrated their attacks on monasteries as this was the best chance of gaining the richest plunder

people they visit. Now, all that wine falls into the hands of the Vikings. The invading Norsemen greedily drink that precious wine which makes them even more violent. Finally, when they have dragged off everything of value, they set fire to the monastery. Soon the building is entirely engulfed by flames. Heavy clouds of smoke float away. The crackling of burning wood is all that's left as the plunderers continue their march with wicked, satisfied grins. Their awful shout of "Odin, Odin!" fills the air.

Some distance away lies a village. It is unprotected, as towns and villages did not have heavy walls or strong towers to protect their inhabitants. Not even a moat to slow down invaders. The houses are separated from each other and lie exposed with no protection at all. The invading Vikings quickly approach this village. They kill everyone they meet. Poor, poor inhabitants! Who will help them? They try to defend their town, their property, their wives, and their children. They fight with the strength of desperation. Without any fear of death, they attack the invaders, but nothing helps. The Vikings are too many and too strong. They murder many people, and when those left see that any hope of victory is lost, they flee to the open country. The destruction of the village is horrible to see. The Vikings, having killed the inhabitants, ravage the place. Again they rob everything of value: gold, silver, furniture, ornaments, coins, and many other things. They also take cattle for food and often kill the rest of the stock just for the sheer love of killing. Without discrimination, they brutally club down and murder men, women, children, the old and the young. Soon the streets are littered with dead bodies. The Vikings only keep the sturdiest and strongest young men and the pretty young girls, rounding them up to take them along as slaves. When they are back home in the Scandinavian countries, they will force them to work for hard, cruel masters, either in their homes or out in the fields.

As the invading Vikings leave the village, they set fire to the ruined remains. The houses, mostly made of wood, burn easily. When the

Vikings are gone, only the stillness of death is left. Behind them lies the ruined remains of the monastery with the charred bodies of the monks still smouldering, while here, the village fires continue to rage.

When night falls, the sky is coloured red from the flames devouring the remaining houses. The day before, hundreds and even thousands of people lived here. Children had roamed around and played in the streets. Artisans had been busy plying their trade, earning a living for their family. Now, apart from the roaring flames, an eerie stillness reigns.

Only the few people who had fled and hidden in the fields return to see if anything is left. They wander around in a daze, looking through the heaps of rubble that was their former home, sobbing as they look for the charred remains of wife and children or parents. This destruction is the terrible work of those invading Vikings.

But how is this allowed to happen?
Where is Charlemagne, the mighty protector of Christianity?
Why aren't these murderous invaders punished?
How can they get away with this?
Who are these Vikings, anyway?

BACKGROUND

The Vikings come from the extreme north of Europe, from Denmark, Norway and Sweden. The soil in those countries is not very suitable for farming. Extensive forests covered most of the terrain, making it difficult to gain a livelihood off the land. Hunting and fishing didn't produce



The Vikings on raiding expeditions. Getty Images

enough food for the people. So rather than suffer hunger, the Vikings, who knew that things were better in the south, went on raiding expeditions.

See the mighty Viking ships, operated by heavily armed soldiers, leaving the coast of Denmark and Norway! They sail south. Abundant treasures await them! Food, gold, and silver, as much as they want, is there. The pagan Saxons and Frisians, who had fled from Charlemagne years before, had told the Vikings about this.

The armed men sailed across the seas in rough wooden ships, with dragon figureheads on the bow and a crude mast with a large sail in the centre. As they plough through the waves, with the water foaming at the bow, they head out and bring death and destruction wherever they go. They leave a terrible trail of blood, fire, and smoke wherever they go ashore. They plunder the coasts of England, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, and Germany. They even venture as far as the Mediterranean Sea. Once they have raided the coastal towns, they penetrate deeper into the countryside. They steal the horses and wagons they need to transport all the stolen loot back to their ships. They plunder and destroy churches,



Louis the Pious

<http://www.lindhout.cc/Lindhout/Lodewijk.html>

monasteries, towns, and villages. They massacre the people. And then, as suddenly as they have come, they disappear again. They retreat to their boats and leave before defending armies can catch them. The wind fills their sails, and their ships slip away before anyone can get an army together and retaliate. And if there is no wind, many strong muscular hands grasp the long oars, and they power their ship along, cutting through the surging waves.

KING LOUIS THE PIOUS

Charlemagne is no longer alive. He died in 814, and his body lies buried in his grave at Aachen. Now his son Louis the Pious reigns, and Charlemagne's concern for his empire has become a reality. It would have been better if Louis had earned the name of "Louis the Brave" or "Louis the Viking killer". But that was not the case!

Louis was not a strong prince.

He was practically powerless against the pirate Vikings.

When he heard news that the Vikings had invaded somewhere, he called his main army together. But by the time he had his army organised, it was always too late. The raiders were long gone every time!

Louis the Pious had three sons. While their father was still alive, those three sons demanded their share of the country for themselves. Louis granted them their wish. He divided his enormous empire into three sections. The brothers did not get on very well and soon became jealous of each other. Each of them wanted to enlarge their territory at the cost of the other. This attitude resulted in bloody civil wars, which weakened and exhausted the country even more. The Vikings cleverly used this situation to their advantage. They kept coming back! Initially, they came with small bands, but later on, they arrived with large armies and caused terrible destruction. On one occasion, they even came with an army of more than one hundred thousand men!

The aim of the Vikings was not only to steal gold and silver and all kinds of booty. Oh no. They also

had an intense hatred for Christianity. The pagan Frisians and Saxons who fled to Scandinavia while Charlemagne reigned had told them that paganism had almost disappeared from those lands. They said that they were no longer allowed to serve Wodan but that they had to worship the God of the cross of the Christians. And so, the Vikings also came to restore the ancient worship of the pagan gods in its full glory. The name of their main god was Odin. That's why they always went to war with the battle cry "Odin! Odin!" During their raids, they mainly targeted the Church of God. Satan, the prince of darkness, used the pagan Vikings to try to exterminate Christianity. The gospel, brought to these countries with so much heartache and enormous cost, had to be swept away! Here we see something of the terrible warfare between Christ and Satan. Satan always wants to destroy the work of God. The number of monks and clergy satan's henchmen murdered during those expeditions was enormous. God only knows how many. Those destructive invasions went on unchecked for a long time. Some towns were repeatedly attacked, ransacked, and burned; in one instance, four times in four years!



The Vikings god Odin
<https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Odin>

The struggle was horrendous. The number of victims was awful. Later, they excavated some of these towns and cities, and they found so many human bones that they had to be removed by the truckload!

City after city, town after town, all in all, vast areas of Europe were laid bare by the marauding Vikings.

Every time, they would take everything of value, murder most of the population and burn the entire city. They would even sow thorns and weeds to make the area a wilderness.

The people suffered indescribable misery. The struggle was intense. The Vikings even penetrated the German city of Aachen. They turned the beautiful cathedral where Charlemagne had listened to the preaching of the gospel into a horse stable. Where people used to hear God's Word, one could now only hear the noise of neighing horses. That's how they defiled the holy places.

Further along the river Rhine, the city of Cologne was attacked and ravaged. The lonely farmhouses fell victim to robbing and murdering gangs.

These gangs hung the farmers and their servants off the branches of their own trees and cruelly murdered the women and children.

They emptied the cattle stalls and destroyed the harvest in the fields by trampling it underfoot.

All the prosperity and flourishing conditions which existed during the time of Charlemagne disappeared, and bitter poverty took its place. The sense of security Charlemagne had provided for his people turned into insecurity and uncertainty. The mighty empire of the Franks lay open, exposed, and defenceless before the plundering Vikings. Resistance was non-existent or useless.

If only there had been a navy to stop the ships before they got to shore! But as there was no navy, most of the inhabitants fled in terror whenever they saw the Vikings approaching. On one occasion, the coastal inhabitants combined

forces and, with the courage of desperation, fought against the invaders. For once, the Vikings were repulsed, suffering heavy losses. The Vikings were careful not to return to those locations.

Unfortunately, such resistance seldom occurred. Usually, everyone fled in panic, and the Vikings could do as they pleased.

A CLEVER GIFT?

As I wrote before, Louis the Pious stood helpless. The Vikings were too quick for him. When Louis understood that he could not resist the Vikings, he thought: "If I give those Vikings some of my territory, perhaps they will stop plundering. Then they can come and settle down here. This territory will become their new country. Maybe then the raids will stop. And maybe we might just become friends with the Vikings." With this reasoning, he gave Walcheren, in the Netherlands, to a prince of the Vikings.

Another Viking prince, Godfred, invaded Friesland with his army and settled there. By this time, Louis the Pious was dead. His three sons were constantly arguing with each other and did nothing to try to drive Godfred out. They actually



Godfred ?-810. King of the Danes. Wikipedia

"loaned" him the province! They hoped that this would make the Vikings more friendly and humane. However, this was a sad mistake. The opposite happened, and the Friesian people suffered terribly at the hands of the barbaric Godfred.

He and his men forced the Frisians to walk around with halters across their shoulders. They also had to re-direct the doors of their houses to the south, and they had to be very low so that when the Frisians wanted to enter their homes, they would have to bend right down. This way, they were forced to bow deeply towards the north – towards the country their oppressors came from. What a humiliation for the proud Frisians who had always loved their liberty so much!

These countries had to suffer dreadfully for two hundred years. Those poor people who didn't get any help from anyone finally directed their eyes heaven-ward. In the evenings, they knelt beside their beds and cried out, "O God, deliver us from the Vikings!"

Only God knows how many prayers were sent to heaven, to His Almighty throne, pleading for deliverance and relief out of that great distress!

And the Lord did answer those prayers! Eventually, the number and intensity of the invasions became less and less. This lessening had two reasons.

We already know that Charlemagne had divided his vast empire into many provinces. A count ruled each province in the name of the emperor. When the Vikings invaded a count's province, he called Louis the Pious for help and, after he died, one of his sons. But the emperor did not send help, or it came too late. And so, the counts took things into their own hands. They began to raise armies themselves to defend them when the enemy came and attacked. This strategy caused the opposition to the Vikings to increase over time. Their losses became heavier.

That was one reason why the Viking invasions decreased. They soon became discouraged by the ever-increasing opposition.

The last Viking invasion took place in 1010.

There was also a second reason. Brave missionaries risked their lives to venture into the lands of the pagan Vikings. They brought God's Word, but that's the topic for the next chapter.

The Viking invasions lasted about two hundred years. During this time, God's people suffered terribly, but the Vikings could not destroy the work of the Lord. The Church of God emerged triumphant out of this inhumane struggle, though heavily battered and devastated. Satan's devilish attempt to destroy God's Church gathering work was a complete failure. Again, the prince of darkness suffered defeat. It should also be clear that the reign of Charlemagne had great significance. If his rule had not preceded these events, the outcome might have been very different. Christianity would not have been strong enough to endure such a trial.

GOD reigns!

QUESTIONS

1. Who were the Vikings? What motivated them to leave their countries?
2. How did the Vikings treat the people they met?

3. What attempts did Louis make to ward off the Vikings? Were these attempts successful?
4. How did the quarrels of Louis' sons further weaken the country?
5. How did the Vikings regard Christianity?
6. Identify Odin.
7. Describe the unusual persecution of the Frisians.
8. The Lord answered the prayers of the persecuted nations. What two means did He use to bring peace to the nations?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Explain how the actions of the Vikings gave rise to feudalism in Europe.
2. How did this movement affect the Church?



Count Odo defends Paris against the Vikings, painting by Jean-Victor Schnetz (1837), Galerie des Batailles