

41. THE VIKINGS (800-1010 AD)

Look, a monastery.

A large group of monks live there.

An aged man with snow-white hair is their supervisor. He is the abbot and responsible for this monastery.

Therefore, all the monks are subject to his guidance and must listen to him.

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

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

Wanderers, beggars, travellers, and anyone who knocked on the monastery gate were 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. The terrifying sound of blow after crashing blow echoes 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!" roar 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 people they visited. Now, all that wine falls into the hands of the Vikings. Those rough invaders greedily drink that precious wine, making them even more violent. Finally, after dragging off everything of value, they set fire to



Vikings raiding a village.

<https://weaponsandwarfare.com/>

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. They did not even have a moat to slow down invaders. The houses are separated from each other and are exposed with no protection. 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 desperately. Without 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 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 for the sheer love of killing. Indiscriminately, 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 quickly. When the Vikings are gone, only the stillness of death is left. Behind them lay the ruined, smouldering remains of the monastery, with the charred bodies of the monks buried under the rubble while the village fires continued 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 and earning a living for their families. Now, apart from the crackling flames and some roofs caving in, an eerie stillness reigns.

The few people who fled and hid in the fields return to see if anything is left. They wander around in a daze, looking through the heaps of rubble that were their former homes, sobbing as they look for the charred remains of their wife and children or parents.

This destruction is the terrible, beastly work of those cruel 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 came from the extreme north of Europe, including Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. The soil in those countries is not very suitable for farming. Extensive forests covered most of their land, making it difficult to gain a livelihood from it. Hunting and fishing didn't produce 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



The Vikings on raiding expeditions. Getty Images

Norway! They sail south. Abundant treasures await them! Food, gold, and silver, as much as they want, are there. The pagan Saxons and Frisians, who had fled from Charlemagne years before, had told the Vikings about this. 'Not enough food for us? We'll go and find some!'

Courageously, 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 raided all the coastal towns, they penetrated 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, 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, powering 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 at Aachen. 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 "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 the 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. 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, 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 Vikings' aim was not only to steal gold and silver but also all kinds of booty. Oh no. They also had an intense hatred for Christianity. The pagan Frisians and Saxons who fled to Scandinavia during Charlemagne's reign had told them that paganism had almost disappeared there. They said they were no longer allowed to serve Wodan



Louis the Pious

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

but had to worship the crucified God 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!"¹ 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 case, four times in four years!

The struggle was horrendous. The number of victims was awful. Later, they excavated some of these towns and cities and found so many human



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

bones that they had to be removed by the truckload!

City after city, town after town, 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 that 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 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

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ruQw7ieoGJM>

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 one of my territories, 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 '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 Frisian 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 help from anyone finally directed their eyes heavenward. In the evenings, they knelt beside their beds and cried:

"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 answered those prayers! Eventually, the number and intensity of the invasions became 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 their own armies to defend themselves against the enemy when they came and attacked. This strategy caused the opposition to the Vikings to increase over time. The Viking losses increased.

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.



Godfred ?-810. King of the Danes. Wikipedia

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. Though heavily battered and devastated, the church of God emerged triumphant from this inhumane struggle. 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.

The outcome might have been very different if his rule had not preceded these events.

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