

We Call Them Vikings

May 17 to November 11, 2014

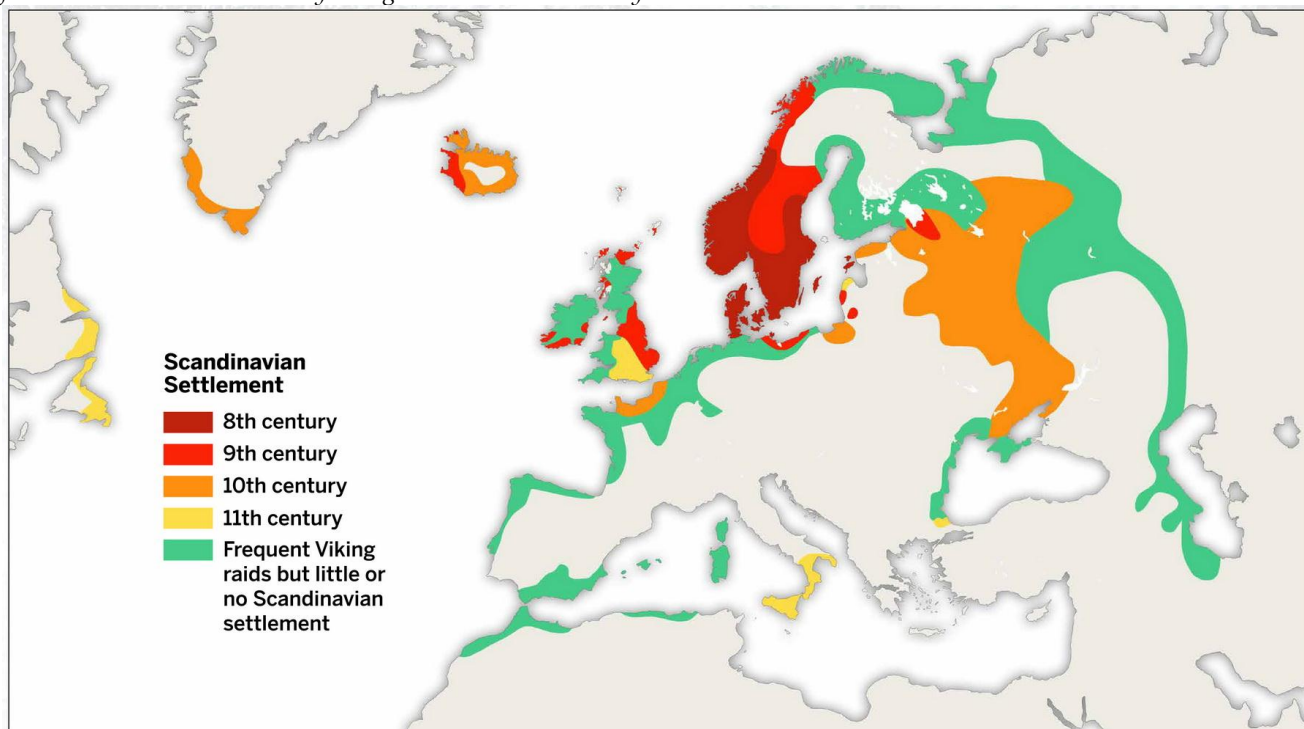
Produced by The Swedish History Museum in Sweden and MuseumsPartner in Austria

Warriors, Valkyries, explorers and merchants – what do we really know about those we call Vikings? *We Call Them Vikings* begins with the period between 750 and 1100 CE in Scandinavia, known as the Viking Age, and events in nearby Europe more than a thousand years ago.

The exhibition includes more than 500 artifacts – jewellery, swords, axes and clothing – some rare, and many which have never before been shown outside Scandinavia. It provides insights on domestic life, death rituals, the significance of craft, the power of mythology and the symbolism of ships, some of which challenge our commonly held beliefs about Vikings.

Though the word ‘viking’ appears in Old Norse sources, it is mainly used to describe an activity. Men and women went ‘on a viking’ – a commercial trip or raid. People seem to have referred to themselves as a Viking only when involved in this activity.

This map shows the wide extent of Viking activity and Scandinavian settlement across Europe and the North Atlantic from the 8th to the 11th century. Image: The Swedish History Museum.



Our knowledge of their world has changed as a result of recent archaeological discoveries. Their story is told with the help of a large number of unique objects that have rarely been shown outside Scandinavia. Different themes in the exhibition provide insights into Viking domestic life, death rituals, the significance of their craft, the power of mythology and the symbolism of their ships.

Viking fleets used rivers and coasts for trading, raiding and settling in new areas. Scandinavians moved into Russia, and also travelled eastward to Byzantium and to what is now the Middle East. By the end of the 8th century they were raiding in France, the British Isles and Ireland, south into the Mediterranean and into North Africa. Other journeys took them to Iceland, Greenland and even to Newfoundland. These new lands brought exotic goods as well as cultural influences. Among the hundreds of artifacts in the exhibition are an Irish cross, a Buddha figurine from India, a Coptic ladle from Egypt. Over time, these voyages to other areas contributed to belief systems, ideology and objects taking on other shapes and forms of expression.

Viking Age society was hierarchical, but not rigidly so. The greatest difference between people was that which existed between the free and the unfree (thralls). Women generally had a more equal position in society, sometimes being involved directly in trade or colonization.

During this time, people in Scandinavia had two very different religious systems – the indigenous Old Norse religion or the more recent Christianity. The former involved worship of many gods and goddesses while the latter focused on one supreme god. These belief systems were often merged, and the results are shown in this exhibition in many examples of fine jewellery that include Christian crosses and fish as well as the symbolic tools or animals of the Old Norse gods. The names of many of these gods live on in our English names for the days of the week. Thor, the god of thunder, has a name that survived as ‘Thursday’ or Thor’s day.

Representations of these Norse gods are among more than 500 objects in this exhibition, from exquisite filigree-work jewellery to rune-inscribed spearheads, from silver embroidered silk fabric to the oldest known crucifix in Sweden.

The artifacts often speak for themselves, but for a deeper understanding there are also many films, sounds and hands-on activities. Interactives include board games, building a Viking ship, or dressing a Viking – putting on each piece of multi-layered clothing in the right order.

These activities are extended beyond the exhibition in a series of learning programs developed by the Royal BC Museum and its partners, including the University of Victoria, to complement the exhibition. Families can sleepover Viking-style, adults can enrol in a course in Viking archaeology or take in a lecture, and kids can attend a Viking-themed summer camp.

Many more details will be available closer to the exhibition opening on May 17, 2014.

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