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Episode #096

The Vikings

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[00:00:00] Hello, hello hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:00:11] The show where you can listen to fascinating stories, and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:21] I'm Alastair Budge and today we are going to be talking about The Vikings, the warriors from Scandinavia who [terrorised¹](#) large parts of Europe for [the best part of²](#) 300 years.

[00:00:35] You probably know something about the vikings already, but today we are going to go a little deeper, talking about who they really were, why they did what they did, how they actually did it, and we'll discover that the story of the vikings is actually quite different to how it is represented in popular culture.

¹ deliberately frightened by threatening

² most of



The Vikings

[00:00:58] Before we get right into that though, let me quickly remind you that you can get all of the bonus episodes, plus the subtitles, the transcripts, and the key vocabulary for this episode and all of our other ones over on the website, which is leonardoenglish.com.

[00:01:14] This is also where you can also check out becoming a member of Leonardo English, and join a community of curious minds from all over the world, doing meetups, exchanging ideas, and generally, improving their English in a more interesting way.

[00:01:31] So if that's of interest, and I certainly hope it is, then the place to go to is leonardoenglish.com.

[00:01:40] OK then, let's get started, and talk about the vikings.

[00:01:45] When you think about the vikings, you might imagine **barbarian**³ men with large beards, red hair, helmets with **horns**⁴ on, jumping out of boats, killing innocent people, **raping**⁵ and running off with women, and generally **terrorising** anyone they came across.

[00:02:05] Indeed, this is how the story of the vikings is often taught. The story of the vikings is actually one of my first memories of a subject that I covered in school - I think

³ a member of a group from a different country

⁴ the hard pointed things that grow on the heads of some animals, e.g. cows

⁵ forcing someone to have sex when they do not want to



The Vikings

we must have done a project on it when I was about 5 years old, and you can see why it appeals to a young child.

[00:02:26] The problem is that not all of this is true, and it's a [gross⁶ oversimplification⁷](#) of the story of the vikings.

[00:02:34] In reality, the vikings were a [sophisticated⁸](#) group of people, a group that had made some [admirable⁹](#) technological advances, probably the first Europeans to arrive in The Americas, five hundred years before Christopher Columbus, and they operated a [sophisticated](#) system of trade that stretched all the way to modern-day Baghdad.

[00:02:59] But they were also murdering warriors.

[00:03:03] Until the year 793, people in the British Isles, the modern day UK and Ireland, they didn't know much about the vikings, about the people who lived across the sea from them in Norway and Sweden.

⁶ very large

⁷ a description of something that is too simple and ignores facts

⁸ having a lot of knowledge and experience

⁹ worthy of praise



The Vikings

[00:03:18] There is a small island just off the north-east coast of England called Lindisfarne. It's considered a holy island, and there was a [monastery¹⁰](#) on it where Christian [monks¹¹](#) passed their days studying the bible and praying.

[00:03:35] Then on the 8th of June 793, three long ships arrived, carrying foreign men, men who we now refer to as vikings.

[00:03:48] They [rushed out¹²](#) of their boats, swords and [spears¹³](#) in hand. They [massacred¹⁴](#) a large proportion of the [monks](#), and they destroyed the [monastery](#) and church, taking with them all the treasures of the holy buildings.

[00:04:03] The local population didn't know what had hit them, and they weren't to know that this was just the start.

[00:04:13] These [raids¹⁵](#) would continue for the next 300 years, and extend all over modern day England, Wales and Ireland, as well as France, Spain, Germany, Poland, Russia, and even parts of Italy.

¹⁰ a place where monks live

¹¹ a member of an all-male religious group that lives apart from society

¹² ran quickly (out)

¹³ a pole with a sharp point

¹⁴ killed

¹⁵ short, sudden attacks



The Vikings

[00:04:28] So, who were these invading warriors, who were the vikings, and why did they start attacking [monasteries](#) in Britain?

[00:04:38] They came from Scandinavia, modern day Norway, Sweden, and Denmark.

[00:04:43] Historians are divided over exactly why they decided to get in their boats and sail across the dangerous North Sea to the British Isles in the first place.

[00:04:55] Some have said it was due to [overpopulation](#)¹⁶ in Scandinavia, that there wasn't enough farmland for people to make a living, and so they set off for [pastures new](#)¹⁷, for new land.

[00:05:09] Others have said it was to [seek](#)¹⁸ women, for men to find wives.

[00:05:15] It's thought that rich Scandinavian men used to have multiple wives, and dying during childbirth was sadly pretty common back then, which led to a big [imbalance](#)¹⁹ between the number of men who wanted a wife and the number of available women.

¹⁶ the situation of having too many people

¹⁷ new of exciting places or activities

¹⁸ look for

¹⁹ a situation where two things aren't equal



The Vikings

[00:05:35] So they set off in search of [brides](#)²⁰, and that's why they would capture women on their [raids](#) and take them back to their [settlements](#)²¹.

[00:05:45] There's another theory that it was actually out of revenge.

[00:05:50] The Christian emperor Charlemagne had forced non-Christians to convert to Christianity, and had murdered and [terrorised](#) anyone who hadn't.

[00:06:02] The vikings were [pagan](#)²², they weren't Christian, and so there's a theory that they went on these [brutal](#)²³ [raids](#) out of revenge for what Charlemagne did.

[00:06:14] And there's another theory that they just saw that there was this opportunity, that the British Isles and large parts of Western Europe didn't have strong defences, but were full of treasures, so why not give it a try?

[00:06:30] Whether there was one [overarching](#)²⁴ reason, or it was a combination of various different factors at different times, the viking invaders soon found that going on [raids](#) was a very [profitable](#)²⁵ activity, and these [raids](#) continued in various shapes and forms until the 11th century.

²⁰ women to marry

²¹ groups of houses where people live

²² belonging to a religion that worships many gods

²³ cruel and violent

²⁴ main

²⁵ able to produce lots of money



The Vikings

[00:06:52] But while in a lot of popular culture the vikings are [depicted](#)²⁶ as getting in their boats, sailing over to Britain, jumping out, killing people, [snatching](#)²⁷ women, stealing treasure and sailing back again, as the years went on, their [expeditions](#)²⁸ actually got a lot longer, both in terms of the time spent and the distances they traveled.

[00:07:18] After attacking a town or city, naturally killing anyone who resisted them and taking possession of anything that [caught their eye](#)²⁹, they would often stay in the area, trading with the local people.

[00:07:31] Although this might seem strange, Scandinavia is a long way away from Britain. At its absolute closest point it's 300km, and from where most of the vikings came from, in modern-day Sweden, it's about three times that.

[00:07:48] So, it was a long trip, and if you are superior [militarily](#)³⁰, if you can stay, why not?

²⁶ represented

²⁷ catching, often by force

²⁸ long and careful journeys

²⁹ attracted them

³⁰ relating to armed forces



The Vikings

[00:07:57] Some would just stay for the winter, and there were other viking communities that would [settle](#)³¹ for anything from a few months to a few years to permanently.

[00:08:09] They would use these [settlements](#) as places from which to launch attacks further [inland](#), using their boats to head [inland](#) up rivers, attacking large parts of the south of England, as well as going up the Seine and attacking Paris in the year 845, after having formed a base at Nantes, a town just [inland](#)³² from the west coast of France.

[00:08:35] The fact that they could travel such distances with such [relative](#)³³ [ease](#)³⁴ was due to the technological advances that they had made with their boats.

[00:08:46] You can probably picture a viking boat. It's long, has a sail, and would also have [oars](#)³⁵, so it worked whether there was wind or not.

[00:08:57] But the main technological advances were really things that you don't immediately see.

³¹ go and live in a new place

³² in the middle of a country, away from the sea

³³ comparable

³⁴ simplicity

³⁵ the long pole with a flat part at the end, used to row a boat



The Vikings

[00:09:05] Firstly, the vikings are thought to have invented the [keel](#)³⁶, the piece of wood that extends downwards under a boat to make it more [stable](#)³⁷.

[00:09:17] The ships were also very low, so they didn't need to have large [hulls](#)³⁸, the part of the boat that is under the water. This meant they could travel in water that was just 1 metre deep, which comes in [handy](#)³⁹ when you need to [rush up](#)⁴⁰ onto a beach, or [navigate](#)⁴¹ rivers [inland](#).

[00:09:37] The boats were also [double-ended](#)⁴², they could travel in either direction, which was very [handy](#) if you needed to quickly go into [reverse](#)⁴³.

[00:09:47] The ships were also, in many cases, very beautiful, and would have dragon heads [carved](#)⁴⁴ into them, and big, red painted sails. But if you lived in a coastal town in northern Europe and you saw one of these beautiful ships with a big sail in the distance, well, I don't imagine you would be admiring the artwork.

³⁶ the long piece of wood along the bottom of a boat

³⁷ firmly fixed, not likely to move

³⁸ the bottom of a boat

³⁹ useful

⁴⁰ go quickly towards

⁴¹ to find a way to where you want to go

⁴² with two ends

⁴³ backwards

⁴⁴ cut (into something)



The Vikings

[00:10:10] As news of the [spoils⁴⁵](#) to be had, of the treasures to be taken, as it reached the communities back in Scandinavia, more and more men joined these [raiding⁴⁶](#) [parties⁴⁷](#).

[00:10:23] While it might have been 3 ships that first attacked Lindisfarne, the [raiding](#) [parties](#) ended up being as large as 30 ships, full of warriors ready to jump out and run into battle.

[00:10:36] It's worth spending a little bit of time talking about how they actually fought, because this is also interesting.

[00:10:45] Firstly, one of the biggest [misconceptions⁴⁸](#) about vikings is that they wore helmets with [horns⁴⁹](#) on.

[00:10:54] They didn't.

[00:10:55] There is absolutely no evidence that they wore these in battle. There has only been one [horned](#) helmet ever found, but it's thought to be [ceremonial⁵⁰](#), not used for actual fighting.

⁴⁵ things taken by a victorious party in war

⁴⁶ see 'raid'

⁴⁷ groups

⁴⁸ ideas that are wrong

⁴⁹ with horns on

⁵⁰ related to a ceremony



The Vikings

[00:11:08] The second interesting fact about vikings in battle is that there are reports about them going [berserk⁵¹](#), going mad, and rushing towards the enemy screaming like they were completely crazy, completely unafraid of dying.

[00:11:25] It's thought that the warriors would often go into a kind of [trance⁵²](#) state, a sort of state of madness, to frighten the people they were attacking.

[00:11:37] It's now believed that they were probably either just incredibly drunk or on some kind of [hallucinogenic⁵³](#) drug, perhaps [hallucinogenic](#) mushrooms, and this would send them into a sort of [otherworldly⁵⁴](#) state that made them act like madmen and be completely unafraid of death.

[00:11:59] That's one theory, but they could have just been genuinely unafraid of being killed in battle.

[00:12:06] Our knowledge of viking culture does tell us that there was this strong idea of death in battle being the ultimate honour.

[00:12:15] If a viking died in battle, he might be welcomed by the god Odin to Valhalla, a mythical huge hall that was so big it had 540 doors.

⁵¹ mad

⁵² a temporary condition when someone isn't fully conscious

⁵³ a hallucinogenic drug makes you see things that don't exist

⁵⁴ relating to things that don't exist in the real world



The Vikings

[00:12:28] And what happened in Valhalla?

[00:12:30] Well, mainly fighting and eating.

[00:12:33] Every day in Valhalla the dead would fight against each other, and every night their [wounds](#)⁵⁵ would heal and they would do it all over again the following day.

[00:12:45] Now, this might sound like not that much fun to me or you, but evidently for a viking, it was, literally, heaven.

[00:12:54] In addition to the ability to fight all day long, there were drinking [horns](#) that never emptied, so you could drink alcohol all day long, and a [wild boar](#)⁵⁶ that would be eaten by the warriors and come back to life over and over, so they would never run out of food.

[00:13:13] So you can understand that if, culturally, there was this huge obsession with fighting, and if you died fighting then you would have the chance to go to Valhalla and fight all day long, then the Vikings were not just pretty keen fighters, but afraid of nothing.

[00:13:31] Evidently, this made them quite a [formidable](#)⁵⁷ enemy.

⁵⁵ damaged area of the body

⁵⁶ a wild pig

⁵⁷ very impressive



The Vikings

[00:13:37] But the vikings weren't just about violence. They were also **accomplished**⁵⁸ traders, and there is evidence of them going all the way to modern day Baghdad to trade.

[00:13:49] They would take slaves from Britain and France, and then take them to the middle east to be sold.

[00:13:56] The Quran **forbade**⁵⁹, it didn't allow muslims to be kept as slaves, but foreign slaves were fine. So the vikings found very **willing**⁶⁰ buyers in the middle east, and they would return north with **piles**⁶¹ of silver, which they had got in exchange for the slaves.

[00:14:15] When they weren't out on **raids**, and were back home, in Scandinavia, viking culture was divided across three **broad**⁶² social classes.

[00:14:25] Thralls, Karls and Jarls.

[00:14:29] Thralls, the lowest class, were essentially slaves, and they made up about 25% of the total population. The Thralls would be **tasked**⁶³ with things like

⁵⁸ skilled

⁵⁹ did not allow

⁶⁰ happy to do something

⁶¹ large amounts

⁶² general

⁶³ given a piece of work to do



The Vikings

construction, building [settlements](#), as well as being household servants to the [higher-ranking](#)⁶⁴ members of society.

[00:14:50] Above them came the Karls, who were the free [peasants](#)⁶⁵. They worked the land, farming.

[00:14:57] And the Jarls were the viking royalty, the top of the [pecking order](#)⁶⁶. They ruled over their lands, and would keep Thralls as their slaves. When a Jarl died, their Thralls would often be killed and buried with them as a sacrifice.

[00:15:14] We do know quite a lot about the Vikings but our knowledge of them comes mainly from [archaeology](#)⁶⁷.

[00:15:21] They didn't have a strong written culture, although there are some stones, called [runestones](#)⁶⁸ with [Norse](#)⁶⁹ symbols on them [dotted around](#)⁷⁰ Norway and Sweden.

⁶⁴ more important (in society)

⁶⁵ people who own or rent small pieces of land

⁶⁶ an informal order of society

⁶⁷ the study of ancient societies by looking at what remains of their buildings, graves, tools etc.

⁶⁸ stones with Old Norse carved on them

⁶⁹ the language spoken by the people of ancient Scandinavia

⁷⁰ in various different places



The Vikings

[00:15:33] If you can't imagine Old [Norse](#), the language that the vikings would have spoken, it might surprise you to know that you probably have seen it before, and you probably have some [Norse](#) on the [device](#)⁷¹ that you're listening to this episode on.

[00:15:50] Now, I thought that this couldn't be true until I did a little bit more research and confirmed it, but the symbol for Bluetooth, you know the wireless system that your headphones might connect to your phone or laptop, that symbol actually comes from the name of a legendary viking warrior, Harold Bluetooth.

[00:16:12] If you look closely at the logo for Bluetooth, it becomes obvious, but it's actually two different [Norse](#) characters on top of each other.

[00:16:22] And when it comes to English, the Vikings have left an impressive [legacy](#)⁷² on the language.

[00:16:28] The names of several days come from the Old [Norse](#) of the vikings.

[00:16:33] Thursday means the day of Thor, the [Norse](#) god of Thunder.

[00:16:38] Friday is the day of the goddess of Freya, a [Norse](#) god associated with love, beauty, [fertility](#)⁷³, sex, war, and gold.

⁷¹ an object or machine

⁷² something that exists because it was left by someone

⁷³ the quality of being able to produce young or fruit



The Vikings

[00:16:48] Wednesday comes from Woden, or Odin's day. Odin is one of the most famous [Norse](#) gods, and is Thor's father.

[00:16:57] And there are hundreds of other words with old [Norse](#) origins, from knife to window, husband to Hell. The legacy lives on through the language we use.

[00:17:10] A question that is often asked is 'how did the vikings end?', and the reality is that there wasn't one single event, or dramatic reason for the end of the viking [raids](#).

[00:17:25] The links between the vikings and the people that they had been attacking for 300 years had grown stronger. Vikings had spent months and years away from Scandinavia, and they had brought back some British and Christian traditions. There were vikings who converted to Christianity, and viking kingdoms back in Scandinavia slowly became part of the wider European Christian tradition.

[00:17:54] After 300 years, the inhabitants of the British Isles and northern France also got better at defending themselves, as you might imagine. While it might have been easy in 793 to rush out of your [longboat](#)⁷⁴ and surprise a lot of [unarmed](#)⁷⁵ monks and steal all of their valuables, people soon [cottoned on](#)⁷⁶, they figured out what was happening, and it became harder and harder to get the same results.

⁷⁴ a long boat

⁷⁵ not armed

⁷⁶ to understand



The Vikings

[00:18:23] Then in the year 1066, on Christmas day in fact, William of Normandy was crowned King of England. He was a strong military ruler, and was able to [deflect⁷⁷](#) the viking threat, and that's where the records of viking attacks end.

[00:18:42] Up until the Victorian era, the vikings were remembered as [barbarians](#), [savages⁷⁸](#), violent, [bloodthirsty⁷⁹](#) [pagan](#) invaders who [massacred](#) innocent people. Then in the Victorian era things started to change.

[00:18:59] There was a [newfound⁸⁰](#) [fascination⁸¹](#) with the vikings, and an understanding that, yes, they might have done quite a lot of [raping](#) and [pillaging⁸²](#), but they were humans too, and trying to understand them was an interesting exercise.

[00:19:16] Since then, they have captured people's imagination, and certainly when I was at school it was an important subject that we all learned about, probably because it's quite an easy subject to get a 5-year-old child excited about.

⁷⁷ to prevent something happening

⁷⁸ extremely violent people

⁷⁹ wanting to see violent activities happen

⁸⁰ recently started

⁸¹ a large interest

⁸² stealing from someone



The Vikings

[00:19:32] And the legacy of the vikings lives on not just through language and popular culture, but through our [DNA](#)⁸³.

[00:19:41] William the Conqueror, the Norman who invaded Britain in 1066 was descended from viking [settlers](#)⁸⁴ in northern France.

[00:19:49] And there are always slightly ridiculous articles about what percentage of people in Britain can directly [trace](#)⁸⁵ their [heritage](#)⁸⁶ to the vikings - one article said that around one in thirty three men can [trace](#) their [ancestry](#)⁸⁷ back through the father's side directly to viking invaders. Evidently, when you include all of the [genealogical](#)⁸⁸ combinations, from fathers and mothers, then we're probably all a little bit viking.

[00:20:20] So, there we are, the vikings.

[00:20:22] The inhabitants of the Lindisfarne [monastery](#) didn't know it when they first saw the boat arriving on the 8th of June 793, but this people were to have a huge

⁸³ the substance that contains the genetic information

⁸⁴ people who arrive somewhere and live there

⁸⁵ find something in the past

⁸⁶ your heritage is what you inherit

⁸⁷ members of your family who lived a long time ago

⁸⁸ relating to the history of families



The Vikings

impact on the [fabric](#)⁸⁹ of Europe for the next three hundred years, and leave a [legacy](#) that is felt all over the continent.

[00:20:43] Yes they were [savage](#)⁹⁰ [invaders](#)⁹¹, but they were also [traders](#)⁹², explorers, [shipbuilding](#)⁹³ [innovators](#)⁹⁴, storytellers, and artists, and our history, culture, and traditions are richer thanks to them, although I'm not sure that all of the [monks](#) on the island of Lindisfarne would agree.

[00:21:03] OK then, that is it for today's episode on The Vikings.

[00:21:08] I hope it's been an interesting one, and you've learned something new about a people that, [statistically](#)⁹⁵ speaking, you probably share some kind of [ancestry](#) with.

[00:21:18] I think it's fascinating to go beyond the [stereotypes](#)⁹⁶ that we're taught, and to think about the why: the vikings were humans like you and me after all with their

⁸⁹ the basic structure

⁹⁰ very violent

⁹¹ people who attack a place

⁹² people who buy and sell goods

⁹³ the activity of building ships

⁹⁴ people who introduce new ideas

⁹⁵ relating to statistics

⁹⁶ set ideas that people have about what something is like



The Vikings

own motivations, reasons, and desires, and I hope that today's episode has [shed a little light⁹⁷](#) on some of these.

[00:21:38] As always, I would love to know what you thought of this episode. You can head right in to our community forum, which is at community.leonardoenglish.com and get chatting away to other curious minds. As well as to me.

[00:21:52] I can't wait to see what you have to say.

[00:21:55] And as a final reminder, if you are looking to improve your English in a more interesting way, to join a community of curious minds from all over the world, and to unlock the transcripts, subtitles, and key vocabulary, then the place to go to is leonardoenglish.com

[00:22:14] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English

[00:22:19] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF PODCAST]

⁹⁷ provided some information



Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Terrorised	deliberately frightened by threatening
The best part of	most of
Barbarian	a member of a group from a different country
Horns	the hard pointed things that grow on the heads of some animals, e.g. cows
Raping	forcing someone to have sex when they do not want to
Gross	very large
Oversimplification	a description of something that is too simple and ignores facts
Sophisticated	having a lot of knowledge and experience
Admirable	worthy of praise
Monastery	a place where monks live
Monks	a member of an all-male religious group that lives apart from society
Rushed out	ran quickly (out)



The Vikings

Spears	a pole with a sharp point
Massacred	killed
Raids	short, sudden attacks
Overpopulation	the situation of having too many people
Pastures new	new of exciting places or activities
Seek	look for
Imbalance	a situation where two things aren't equal
Brides	women to marry
Settlements	groups of houses where people live
Pagan	belonging to a religion that worships many gods
Brutal	cruel and violent
Overarching	main
Profitable	able to produce lots of money
Depicted	represented
Snatching	catching, often by force



The Vikings

Expeditions	long and careful journeys
Caught their eye	attracted them
Militarily	relating to armed forces
Settle	go and live in a new place
Inland	in the middle of a country, away from the sea
Relative	comparable
Ease	simplicity
Oars	the long pole with a flat part at the end, used to row a boat
Keel	the long piece of wood along the bottom of a boat
Stable	firmly fixed, not likely to move
Hulls	the bottom of a boat
Handy	useful
Rush up	go quickly towards
Navigate	to find a way to where you want to go
Double-ended	with two ends



The Vikings

Reverse	backwards
Carved	cut (into something)
Spoils	things taken by a victorious party in war
Raiding	see 'raid'
Parties	groups
Misconceptions	ideas that are wrong
Horned	with horns on
Ceremonial	related to a ceremony
Berserk	mad
Trance	a temporary condition when someone isn't fully conscious
Hallucinogenic	a hallucinogenic drug makes you see things that don't exist
Other worldly	relating to things that don't exist in the real world
Wounds	damaged area of the body
Wild boar	a wild pig
Formidable	very impressive



The Vikings

Accomplished	skilled
Forbade	did not allow
Willing	happy to do something
Piles	large amounts
Broad	general
Tasked	given a piece of work to do
Higher-ranking	more important (in society)
Peasants	people who own or rent small pieces of land
Pecking order	an informal order of society
Archaeology	the study of ancient societies by looking at what remains of their buildings, graves, tools etc.
Runestones	stones with Old Norse carved on them
Norse	the language spoken by the people of ancient Scandinavia
Dotted around	in various different places
Device	an object or machine
Legacy	something that exists because it was left by someone



The Vikings

Fertility	the quality of being able to produce young or fruit
Longboat	a long boat
Unarmed	not armed
Cottoned on	to understand
Deflect	to prevent something happening
Savages	extremely violent people
Bloodthirsty	wanting to see violent activities happen
Newfound	recently started
Fascination	a large interest
Pillaging	stealing from someone
DNA	the substance that contains the genetic information
Settlers	people who arrive somewhere and live there
Trace	find something in the past
Heritage	your heritage is what you inherit
Ancestry	members of your family who lived a long time ago



The Vikings

Genealogical	relating to the history of families
Fabric	the basic structure
Savage	very violent
Invaders	people who attack a place
Traders	people who buy and sell goods
Shipbuilding	the activity of building ships
Innovators	people who introduce new ideas
Statistically	relating to statistics
Stereotypes	set ideas that people have about what something is like
Shed a little light	provided some information

We'd love to get your feedback on this podcast.

What did you like? What could we do better?

What did you struggle to understand?

Let us know in the forum community.leonardoenglish.com

