

The Vikings were great explorers and travellers. Viking ships reached Britain, France, Spain, Italy and North Africa.

Traders made long journeys overland through Russia, reaching as far south as Constantinople in modern-day Turkey. Some merchants travelled further east to Baghdad in Iraq.

A few daring explorers made voyages to Iceland and beyond, travelling across the Atlantic Ocean to North America.

What did the Vikings trade?

The Vikings traded all over Europe and as far east as Central Asia.

They bought goods and materials such as silver, silk, spices, wine, jewellery, glass and pottery.

In return, they sold items like honey, tin, wheat, wool, wood, iron, fur, leather, fish and walrus ivory. Everywhere they went, the Vikings bought and sold slaves too.

Viking traders carried a set of folding scales which they used to weigh coins to make sure they got a fair deal.

How did they find their way?

Vikings sailed close to the coast whenever possible, watching for landmarks.

Out of sight of land, they looked for the sun: west (towards the sunset) meant they were headed for England; east (towards the sunrise) meant home to Denmark or Norway.

The Vikings invented a kind of sun compass to help find their way. At night they watched the skies and could use the position of the stars to determine which direction they were heading.

Seamen knew a lot about winds and sea currents. By watching birds or even the colour of the water, an experienced sailor could tell when land was close.

How do we know about longships?

Wood rots and metal rusts away after a thousand years or more in the ground, but some remains show what Viking ships were like.

Two Viking ships were found by archaeologists in Norway. The Gokstad ship was dug up on a farm in 1880. The Oseberg ship was found on another farm in 1904.

Both ships were buried in Viking funerals between AD800 and 900. The Gokstad ship is 23 metres long. It was big enough for 32 oarsmen and had 16 oars on each side.

These two ships are now in a museum in Oslo, Norway. In 1893, a copy of the Gokstad ship sailed across the Atlantic Ocean from Norway to America.

Viking warriors fought using long swords and axes. A good sword was handed down from father to son, but Vikings also buried weapons with their owner when he died.

Vikings did not wear much armour. Some chieftains wore chain mail coats, but most relied on a round wooden shield for protection.

Some Viking warriors went into battle wearing wolf or bear skins. These warriors were called 'berserkers' because they went 'berserk' (out of control) and charged fearlessly into battle. Berserkers believed that Odin, the god of war, gave them superhuman powers and that they didn't need to wear battle armour for protection.

How did the Vikings attack?

The Vikings did not send many ships on their first raids. They made surprise attacks on places like Lindisfarne.

There was no English navy to guard the coasts so it was easy for small groups of Vikings to land on a beach or sail up a river. But it was not long before larger Viking armies attacked Britain.

In AD892, 300 Viking ships invaded Britain to fight King Alfred of Wessex. No one knows how big the Viking army was but if there were 20 men in each Viking ship, the army of AD892 numbered 6000!

That was a huge army for the time. Most Viking armies were smaller, perhaps 1000 to 2000 men.