

Nine Things You Never Knew About Vikings

by
Grace Tierney

Copyright 2021

<https://wordfoolery.wordpress.com/downloads/>

This article is available freely for reading and educational use, but reprints or publication in print or online is only possible with author permission and acknowledgement of source.

I spent two years researching the words the Vikings gave to the English language for my book “Words The Vikings Gave Us”. Along the way I’ve learned more about the Vikings than I ever did in school. The simple picture of Vikings raiding Irish monasteries for their treasures is part of the story, but only a small part. Probably because those monks wrote the histories, Vikings were painted as the villains and they deserve a fresh look. Rather than turning my word history book into a ponderous tome on misunderstood Vikings, I’ve gathered some of my more surprising discoveries here. I hope you enjoy them.

1. Viking Helmets Didn’t Have Horns

Every Viking you’ve ever seen in a cartoon had horns on his helmet but this stereotype is simply not true. Also, a good number of those warriors would have been female.

The word helmet does have Viking roots though. It comes from the Old English word *helm* which has roots in German, Old Norse (the language of the Vikings), Saxon, and Gothic.

There’s no historical evidence of horned helmets. None have been discovered in digs, and at this point plenty of Viking warrior burial sites have been explored. They did wear helmets but they were a simple skullcap design.

How did this misconception arise? We can blame Wagner for this one. Richard Wagner composed “The Ring Cycle” in 1874. It’s a group of four operas which he loosely based on the Norse sagas and they’re still popular to this day. The costume designer for the original production, Carl Emil Doepler, designed horned helmets for the Viking characters. His designs have influenced artists, filmmakers, and cartoonists ever since.

Vikings did love horns though. They were astute traders who sold spiral *narwhal* tusks as unicorn horns. Traders from the rest of Europe wouldn’t have seen the horned whale themselves as only the Vikings had reached the Arctic at that point. Medieval Europeans believed such a horn had magical properties, especially against poisons and melancholy. The fake unicorn horns were literally worth their weight in gold and the Vikings who originally bought them from the Inuit and later hunted for them, were probably very happy to bolster the stories.

The legends lasted for centuries. In the 1500s, Queen Elizabeth I of England received a carved and jewel-encrusted narwhal tusk as a gift which would be

worth about £5 million sterling today. It was claimed as being from a sea unicorn and was named the Horn of Windsor.

Vikings didn't put cow horns on their helmets but they did use them in their homes as drinking vessels for their favourite tipple, mead. The modern Swedish lifestyle idea of *lagom* being the pursuit of "just enough" in life and interiors has become popular in recent years and its origins lie with the Vikings. The word comes from the phrase *laget om* which means "around the team". In Viking times communal horns of mead would be passed around the team and each would sip their own share, in moderation.

2. Vikings Reached North America Before Columbus

There are a handful of dates that most school children retain as adults. 1066 for the Battle of Hastings, the moon landing in 1969, the 6th of June 1944 for the D-day landings, and 1492 for Christopher Columbus discovering the New World are on this short list.

As an Irishwoman I have a sneaking suspicion that Saint Brendan landed on the shores of North America long before Columbus but I have to admit it hasn't been proven, yet. The Viking claim to discovering America however, there's more evidence for that one and the reason you may not have heard about it in school is that it is a relatively recent discovery and is only starting to edge into the schoolbooks.

Unlike other empires, the Vikings didn't write histories, but they did create oral sagas. With time and research many of them are proving to have a basis in fact.

The sagas tell us that a famous Viking explorer called Leif Erickson sailed to a land west of Greenland (settled by the Vikings) and created a colony called Vinland around the year 1000, almost five centuries before Columbus reached the New World. Historians believe Vinland was in modern-day Canada in the Newfoundland, Gulf of St. Lawrence, and New Brunswick areas. It wasn't a single location, but a series of settlements along the same coast, many of which had wild grapevines, hence the name.

In 1960 this idea moved from historical theory to reality with the excavation of *L'Anse aux Meadows* on the northern tip of Newfoundland. The area didn't have vines, but definitely showed the idea of a Vinland Viking colony was feasible and gave us clear proof that Vikings landed in North America.

The site was explored during the 1960s and 1970s and carbon-dating of timbers confirmed the date (990-1050) of what appears to be a Norse base probably used for timber gathering (wood was in very short supply in Greenland despite the name) and ship repair. Some items found in the camp came from other areas of North America and show the Vikings had landed there too. Significant levels of Viking artefacts have also been found on Baffin Island and Labrador, Canada.

3. Ever Heard of the North Sea Empire?

History is littered with the rise and fall of various empires from the Aztecs and British to the Romans and Ottomans. Empires leave a lasting trace on the countries they consume and rule. However until I began to write “Words the Vikings Gave Us” I had never heard of the North Sea Empire and considering its proximity to my homeland, that’s surprising.

One reason for its low level of public awareness is that it was a short-lived empire. It ran between 1013 and 1042 and was what is called a thalassocracy, a sea based empire - something the ancient Greeks knew all about.

The North Sea Empire was formed of England, Denmark, Norway, and parts of Sweden and it was founded by King Sweyn Forkbeard. After Forkbeard’s death and the division of the realm, his son Cnut The Great re-united the empire and ruled it from 1028-1035 at which time he was second only to the Holy Roman Emperor in Western Europe in terms of power and influence.

If you take a look at a map of Europe you’ll see the extent of the North Sea Empire is physically smaller than, for example, the Roman Empire at its height but the trade routes controlled by Forkbeard and Cnut were huge and with the addition of rich land in England the empire was wealthy and powerful.

While most history students will know England was conquered by the Romans and the Normans (who were descended from Vikings by the way), few will be aware that Viking rulers included England in their empire.

Vikings ruled parts of Britain for *much* longer than 1013-1042, as explained in point seven, see below.

4. Vikings Traded along the Silk Roads

Vikings are best known for raiding and plunder but they were also skilled traders. Their trade network helped the European economy recover after the demise of the Roman Empire.

Vikings established trade routes and trading centres for Arab coins, Chinese silks, and Indian gems. They used silver, and sometimes gold, as a weighed trading currency. Viking coins, for example, are a common find in digs in Dublin and elsewhere. At a time when trade via bartering was common, the Vikings introduced the idea of coins for use as payment to Northern Europe.

Their settlements around the Baltic Sea used that waterway for trade but they also traded along the River Volga and Dnieper in Russia to connect with Constantinople, Jerusalem, Baghdad, and the Caspian Sea. This linked them to the so-called Silk Roads (see below). They established numerous trading centres such as a Hedeby, Birka, and Kiev. Even the name Russia comes from Old Norse, the language of the Vikings.

The Vikings also founded routes to the Mediterranean from the Baltic and travelled westwards to Iceland, Greenland (where the trade was walrus ivory), and Vinland.

Note: The silk roads were not specific roads, but rather a selection of trade routes connecting Europe to Asian silk supplies and they were not called silk roads until recently.

5. The Current Danish Royal Family is Descended from Vikings

King Gorm the Old was a Viking who ruled Denmark from 936 to his death in 958. He lived to about the age of 60, which was old for the times. Before King Gorm's reign, according to the sagas, the land was ruled by the Norse Gods and semi-legendary figures like Ragnar Lothbrok and Ivarr the Boneless (whose stories are told in the TV series "Vikings", filmed in Ireland). Ragnar did exist, but the sagas about him may refer to more than one person.

Gorm is perhaps best known for fathering three sons – Toke, Knut, and Harald. His son Harald, who ruled after him as King Harald Bluetooth, moved his land toward Christianity and united Denmark and Norway.

Harald Bluetooth Gormsson was King of Denmark and parts of Norway from 958 until 987 when he was murdered on the orders of his son. He is most famous for bringing together various Danish tribes into a united nation and even bringing them together with some of their Norwegian neighbours. It was this ability to bring people together that inspired the naming of bluetooth technology in his honour.

Bluetooth enables the wireless transfer of photos, documents, and messages. It was developed by the Swedish company Ericsson in 1994. The bluetooth symbol is a monogram of the two runes of King Harald's initials.

Historians are not certain how King Harald got his nickname but most guess he had a prominent blackened tooth. The word used in the old texts to describe his tooth as blue has over-tones of black as well as blue.

King Harald and King Gorm, were linked via legend to Ragnar Lodbrok and Ivarr the Boneless. King Gorm is officially claimed as an ancestor to the current Danish royal family. The Danish monarchy is one of the oldest in the world and the current queen can trace her line back more than 1,000 years. There is also some evidence to suggest that Ragnar Lothbrok was an ancestor of the current British royal family.

6. Viking Husbands Brought Their Wives Beads from Their Travels

Finds of Viking jewellery have expanded our knowledges of their culture. Their accessories were made from wood, glass, amber (still popular in the Baltic Sea area today), bronze, and gold. They were often decorated with plaits, animal designs, and geometric patterns.

Viking men and women wore arm rings, often made of two strands of twisted metal. These were a show of wealth, were sometimes given by the men to wives they were leaving behind while they travelled, and also given by lords to their followers as a gesture of loyalty in both directions.

Some jewellery pieces reflected their beliefs, Thor hammers, for example. Others, such as their brooches, fastened clothes. Women often wore two large oval brooches to fasten their pinafore style dresses and between these they strung one or more strands of beads. These beads were accumulated over time as members of their family travelled overseas on summer raiding parties, bringing back beads as a reminder of their trip or symbol of a successful raid. Hence the more beads, the better your family was at raiding.

7. Vikings Ruled Parts of Britain for 700 Hundred Years - Three Centuries Longer than the Romans

The Romans conquered Britain and the Vikings raided for a while, every school-kid knows that, right?

It's partly true, but that means it's partly untrue. Students from Scotland, for example, will point at Hadrian's Wall and proudly explain the Romans never managed to subdue the Scots. Students from the island of Ireland (part of Britain in Roman times) will explain that the Romans didn't bother even trying to invade us.

It's more accurate to say the Romans conquered part of Britain (England and Wales) and ruled there for nearly four centuries from 43 to 410 A.D.

The Vikings managed to settle larger swathes of the British Isles than the Romans, as in addition to the lands previously conquered by the Romans they also settled Ireland and Scotland.

Have a look at North Sea Empire (see above) and Danelaw if you're curious about the extent of their rule of mainland Britain. They may not have left behind roads and villas like the Romans but, as discussed in my book "Words the Vikings Gave Us" they exerted plenty of influence on the English language.

Perhaps the most startling example of prolonged Viking rule in the British Isles comes from the Scottish islands of Orkney and Shetland.

The Orkney islands lie north of Scotland, south of Iceland, and west of Norway. For centuries they held a central position in the Viking world. 60% of modern Orkney islanders are genetically linked to Norway but that's not surprising as Vikings ruled Orkney and Shetland for nearly 700 years. That's three centuries longer than Roman Britain.

Many place names on the islands are from Viking times. Orkney itself was named by the Vikings. They called it *Orkney-jar* in Old Norse (Seal Islands).

Vikings settled Orkney in the late 700s and to an extent replaced the local Pictish population. The islands were used as bases to raid into Scotland, England, and Ireland so Vikings didn't have to return to their homelands during the winter. Ownership of the islands was passed between various Viking leaders over time but their control was strong there until at least the 1400s. Viking maritime laws are still observed by the islanders today.

The islands were finally returned to Scotland in 1468 when they formed part of the dowry of the daughter of King Christian I of Denmark upon her marriage to King James III of Scotland.

Shetland is a group of islands north of Scotland, with a population of 22,000 people and they were also named by the Vikings. They called the islands *Hjaltland* (hilt land) in Old Norse, possibly due to the shape of the islands. The first written accounts of the Shetland islands are found in the Norse sagas. The islands were inhabited in neolithic times, later by the Picts, and then conquered by the Vikings around 800.

Like Orkney, the Shetland islands remained under Viking control for centuries, until they were traded away for a princess' dowry.

Shetland maintains strong links to its Viking heritage. Nearly all place names are Viking, dozens of Norse archaeological sites exist, and the dialect spoken by Shetlanders contains many Old Norse words. On Norwegian National Day the island is draped in Norwegian flags despite being an oil-rich part of Great Britain.

On the last Tuesday of January the inhabitants of Lerwick on the Shetlands take part in a community celebration of their Viking roots called *Up Helly Aa*. Run entirely by volunteers this festival takes thousands of islanders the entire year to prepare for one day and night of wildness.

In the evening, thousands of residents from the capital dress in full Viking costume (or something a little more silly) and parade through the streets led by a Jarl. Then they drag a full size Viking galley ship (which took four months to build) to a particular spot where it is burned in the dark of the night. Dramas, songs, and feasting round out the event. Smaller versions of the festival take place throughout the islands.

You could argue the Vikings never really left the British Isles if you were on Shetland that night.

8. Viking Power and the Oldest Parliament in the World

Why isn't the Viking empire seen as significant in the same way as the Roman Empire?

Firstly, for most of its existence it wasn't unified under a single leader like Julius Caesar. Power in the Viking world spread to more than one leader. The semi-

regular overthrow of powerful leaders stopped any long-running inherited monarchies becoming established in the Viking world. The Danish royal family is an exception to this but was mostly after the Viking Age.

The second reason is the way Viking society structured power. In a world where most leaders assumed total power with farmers having little control over their own lives, Viking communities structured their world through laws.

While Vikings appeared lawless to others, they could never had conquered an area stretching from Greenland to Russia and traded from the Arctic circle to the Middle East without laws, power structures, and rules. In fact the longest running democratic parliament in the world is the Viking one established in Iceland in 930 A.D..

Viking society shared many similarities with England in terms of how it managed power at the time. Most people worked the land. Farmers (and their slaves) in Denmark lived similar lives to those in England.

Above the farmers, certain men gathered power, often through successful raiding and wars. In Viking countries the titles for such men were jarls (earls). They were local warlords or chieftains. Later in the Viking era some jarls rose to kingship and the other jarls became nobles much as in England you had a king with nobles beneath him ruling over freemen and slaves. However Viking kings rarely established an inherited dynasty.

Women had more power in Viking society than in other communities of the same era. While their primary role was in the home they travelled on the longships with the men to settle new lands, they could own property in their own right, request divorces, and reclaim their dowry if a marriage failed. This was very different from the very limited rights assigned to women in Anglo Saxon society. With the Viking menfolk frequently absent for long periods (or killed in battle) the women ran the farm or businesses during those times. Some women also became shield maidens, female warriors equal in status to the male fighters.

The Viking influence enriched the English language with political words like *bylaw*, *haggle*, *hustings*, and even *ombudsman*.

Iceland's national assembly is called the *Althing*. It's the oldest parliament in the world, having been founded in 930, and it originally met in the *Thing Fields* outside Reykjavik. This is where the English language gets the word *thing*.

Similarly the *Thing Mote* in Dublin, Ireland was a raised mound near the location of Dublin Castle today, where the Vikings met to agree laws to rule the city during centuries of Norse rule. It stood until the late 1600s.

A Thing Meeting could be attended by all free Viking men, there were no restrictions of status, age, or property. That would have shocked English society of the time. It was 1918 before the property restriction on voters in Britain was

finally removed. Until then the poor didn't have a vote. The first British parliament was established in 1215, in case you're wondering.

Viking Thing Meetings were regular and organised by a Law Speaker (who could recite all laws previously agreed) and the local chieftain. Disputes were resolved and laws made. It was a cross between a parliament and a court of law. Thing Meetings could be small local affairs, city level like Dublin, or national like Iceland's *Althing* which has operated continuously since 930. The meetings often lasted for a few days and attracted community activities such as trade and weddings on the sidelines.

Over time the assembly meaning of *thing* faded. A *thing* became something which was discussed at a meeting. By the 1600s English had settled on *thing* to be the word for an object you can't name at the moment and it began to join with other words to provide words for *anything* and *everything*.

9. Vikings Gave us Words like Hug, Kiss, and Glitter

The Vikings gave English more than 600 words, many of which are explored in "Words the Vikings Gave Us". Some are particularly surprising given our perceptions of Viking society and some are additions to modern English such as *frisbee*, *IKEA*, *slang*, *trash*, and *bluetooth*. Here are three of the ones which surprised me.

Hug

The word *hug* is a relatively late addition to the English dictionary. It arrived in the 1560s and was spelled as *hugge* initially. Its origin is technically unknown but it's suggested that it came from the Old Norse word *hugga* which translates beautifully as "to comfort".

Hugga itself comes from *hugr* (courage, mood) and is from a Proto-Germanic root which also gives us *hycgan* (to think or consider) in Old English and the name *Hugh*. There may also be a link to the German verb *hegen* (to foster or cherish) which originally meant to enclose with a hedge. While a German hedge may enclose, the Norse idea of comforting is closest to what a *hug* means today.

Kiss

Kiss entered English as the Old English word *cyssan* and it described touching with the lips but in respect or reverence rather than romantic *kissing*, at least initially. The word itself has Proto-Germanic roots and variants exist across many northern European languages – Old Norse (*kyssa*), Middle Dutch (*cussen*), Norwegian and Danish (*kysse*), and *kyssa* in Swedish.

Phrases including *kissing* often have surprisingly old origins. *Kiss my ass* (or arse) dates from the 1700s but may have been in use in Chaucer's time. *Kiss and tell* comes from the 1600s and *kiss the dust* to describe death is from 1835.

Glitter

It's unsurprising that plundering Vikings with a love of gold had a word for *glitter*, but it does summon up a charming image of a fierce bearded Viking with *glitter* on his cheeks, like a music fan at an outdoor festival weekend.

Glitter entered English around 1300 spelled as *glideren*, from an earlier word *gliteren*, probably from a Scandinavian source. The most likely candidate being *glitra*, the Old Norse verb (to *glitter*).

Enjoyed this article about Vikings?



Since 2009 I've been blogging about the history and origins of unusual English words every Monday on the **Wordfoolery Blog** <http://wordfoolery.wordpress.com>.

I also create a newsletter "**Wordfoolery Whispers**" once a month with the inside scoop on my writing and history adventures, contests, bonus content, book reviews, and a plethora of unusual words. If you want a sneak peek inside Wordfoolery HQ you can subscribe at subscribepage.io/wordfoolerywhispers. Don't forget to click on the confirmation email, it might land in your spam folder.

I write books about the history of the English language which are widely available in paperback and ebook editions. All the ways to get them (including signed copies) are available here <https://wordfoolery.wordpress.com/my-books/>.



- **"Words Christmas Gave Us"** (festive words and traditions through history)
- **"Words The Vikings Gave Us"** (norse nouns and Viking verbs)
- **"Words The Sea Gave Us"** (nautical words and phrases)
- **"How To Get Your Name In The Dictionary"** (extraordinary lives of those whose names entered the English dictionary)
- Coming soon **"Words the Weather Gave Us"**, **"Words Stories Gave Us"**

Thanks for reading!
Grace Tierney, February 2024