



Source 2.32 A common landscape in many parts of Scandinavia. Note the relatively small area of coastal flatland.

2.2 What developments and achievements led to Viking expansion?

Viking society changed significantly in the late 8th century. Before this time, they had only been known as traders outside their homeland. From this point on, however, the Vikings became a source of great fear as they pushed outward from their homeland to expand their territory. For almost two centuries, they terrorised villages, towns and monasteries in surrounding lands with 'lightning raids'.

Raids were often timed to take victims by surprise (such as just before dawn). Part of the terror for victims was that Vikings continued to trade during this time. If approaching ships were spotted, those on shore might not know, until it was too late, whether the Vikings were coming to trade or attack. In this chapter we will explore the developments that led to Viking expansion.

Possible reasons for Viking raids

Historians still argue today about what motivated the Vikings to change from honest traders into violent raiders. A range of reasons are offered. One of the most basic is that they were only doing what they had to do to survive in a harsh land with an unforgiving climate. In a region such as Scandinavia, day-to-day living was a huge challenge.

There was only limited coastal farming land in the Viking homeland (see Source 2.32). As the population grew, the pressure on such land would have increased. Winters can also be severe in this part of the world, especially further north. Summer brings long hours of daylight, and winters are mostly dark and bleak.

Awareness through trade

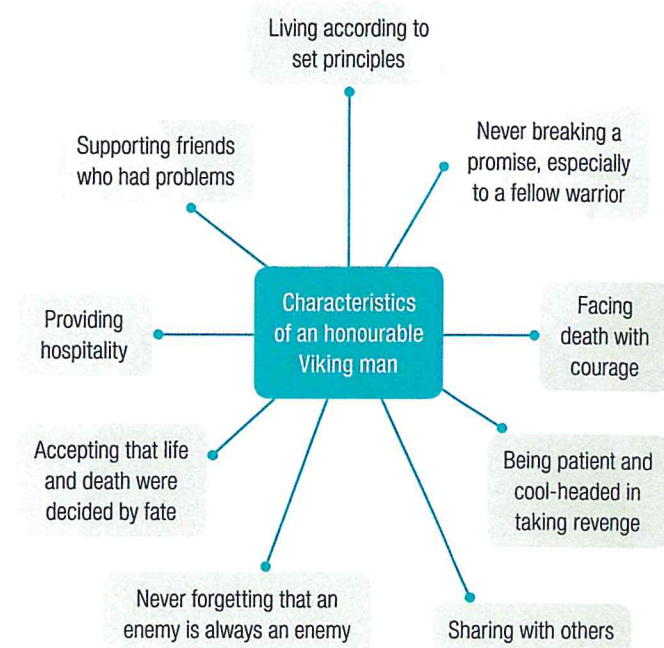
Through their sea trade and the reports brought home by their merchants, many Vikings would have been familiar with the landscapes of some surrounding regions. They would also have known about the riches held by some settlements in these places (and their defences). By the 8th century, their navigational skills and shipbuilding abilities were highly advanced.

Desire for wealth and glory

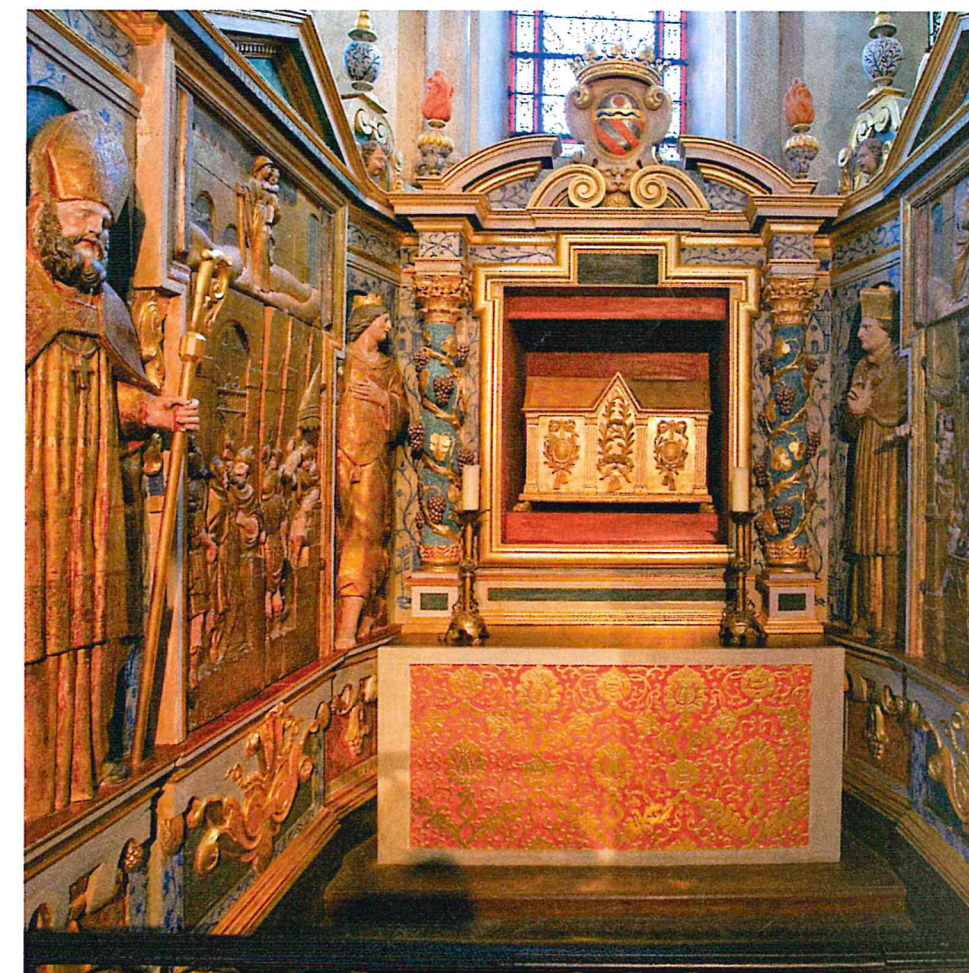
Another reason for the change in Viking behaviour, according to scholars, was that raids offered the chance for quick and easy wealth. A leader could use stolen goods to reward (and therefore keep or increase) his support base. This would then strengthen his influence and power at home.

Some argue that the desire for glory and adventure was also a factor. For example, a man's reputation was very important to a Viking. To lose honour or respect was a disgrace. Raids may have been the way for some dishonoured Vikings to redeem themselves, returning as warriors who had fought bravely. Viking warriors also believed that they would go straight to *Valhalla* if they died fighting bravely in battle.

Source 2.34 Medieval churches and monasteries were attractive targets for plundering Vikings. This interior, from the medieval Chapel of St Sernin, in Toulouse, France, is an example of why Vikings would have searched far and wide for such easy pickings.



Source 2.33 Characteristics of a Viking man of honour





Source 2.35 Detail from a 9th-century bronze statue of Charlemagne, Holy Roman Emperor



Source 2.36 A Norwegian shipbuilder carving a stern post in the same way that his Viking ancestors did

Revenge or exploitation?

Another possible reason why Vikings started to carry out violent raids on nearby lands was a desire for revenge. Charlemagne (c. 742–814), King of the Franks and later the Holy Roman Emperor, fought for around 40 years to bring most of western and central Europe under his control. As part of his military efforts, he ordered those he regarded as **pagans** (including some Vikings) to become Christians. Any who refused were killed. Early Viking raids on Europe took place during the later years of Charlemagne's reign, and the raiders may have been motivated by a want to get back at Christians, as well as by greed.

Other scholars have suggested that the Vikings were just taking advantage of what they saw as weak and divided rule in surrounding regions at the time (such as England and Charlemagne's European empire in the late 8th and early 9th centuries).

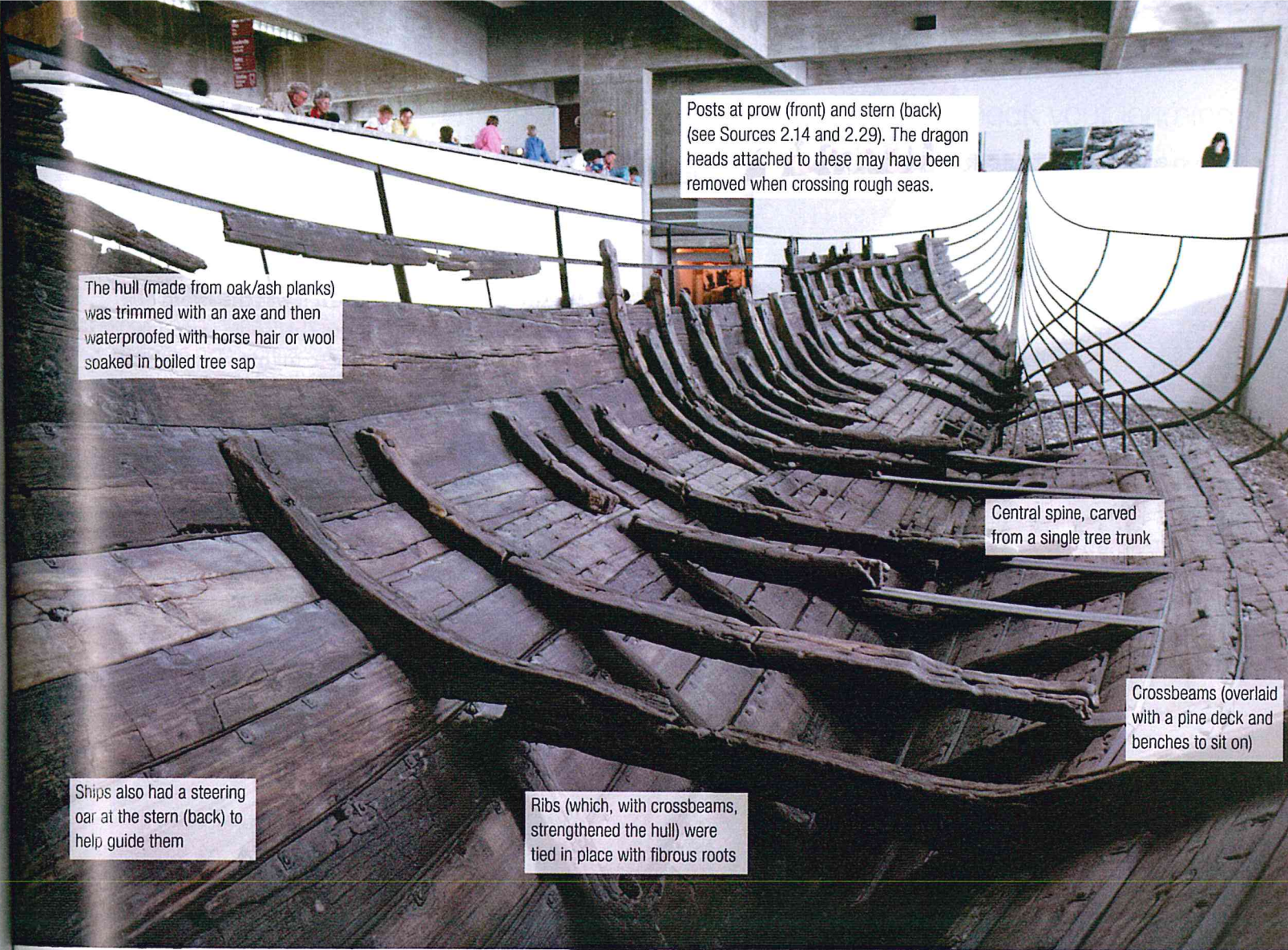
Check your learning

- 1 You are a Viking who farms in the coastal region shown in Source 2.32. The population is increasing. Why would you be tempted to leave your homeland?
- 2 Why might tales merchants told of churches and monasteries similar to that shown in Source 2.34 have tempted some Viking tribal rulers to raid such places to get rich? How would such wealth benefit them as rulers?
- 3 Why do some historians take the view that early Viking raids on Europe were revenge missions? What evidence would you be looking for to help to confirm this view?

Shipbuilding

The Vikings were expert shipbuilders, with ready access to the timber of Scandinavia's forests. They built trade ships, ferries, rowing boats, fishing vessels and ceremonial boats such as the *Oseberg* (see p. 73). By the end of the 8th century, they had also been sailing as merchants for some time. They were skilled at navigating, using the sun and stars, weather patterns, bird-flight trails and coastal features as guides. In other words, they were well placed to be either sea traders or sea pirates.

Their strong navigational and shipbuilding skills gave them all the expertise they needed to make and sail efficient warships. These included the **longships** they used for lightning raids. The Vikings called them *drakkar* (which means dragon).



The hull (made from oak/ash planks) was trimmed with an axe and then waterproofed with horse hair or wool soaked in boiled tree sap

Posts at prow (front) and stern (back) (see Sources 2.14 and 2.29). The dragon heads attached to these may have been removed when crossing rough seas.

Central spine, carved from a single tree trunk

Crossbeams (overlaid with a pine deck and benches to sit on)

Ships also had a steering oar at the stern (back) to help guide them

Ribs (which, with crossbeams, strengthened the hull) were tied in place with fibrous roots

Source 2.37 The remains of a Viking longship on display at the Viking Ship Museum, Oslo

Longships

Longships were up to twice as long as trade ships (up to about 37 metres in length), with a leaner hull. They could carry up to 100 warriors (68 of whom were oarsmen, 34 on each side). In a good wind, the sail provided for a fast sea or ocean crossing. Rowing was necessary to navigate a river or if there was no breeze. Longships could sail in very close to shore, allowing men to wade in quickly for a surprise attack.

The huge square sails (made from pieces of woollen or linen fabric, stitched together) were commonly dyed blood red. Together with the dragon heads at the prow (front) and stern (back), this helped to heighten the terror for raid victims. Vikings also believed that these dragon heads would frighten away any evil spirits or monsters during sea crossings.

Check your learning

- 1 Brainstorm the tasks that would have faced Vikings in establishing a settlement in one of Scandinavia's mountainous forest regions. Share your thoughts with a partner.
- 2 Draw a concept map to list some factors scholars suggest might have motivated Vikings to start raiding.
- 3 Explain why the Vikings' skills as shipbuilders and sailors made it easy for them to be effective sea pirates.



2.39 Some Viking weapons

Weapons

Weapons were very important to the Vikings. For a start, they were essential for hunting animals for food. They were also traditional symbols of a man's wealth and power. For example, a sword, usually double-edged, might have a decorated hilt (handle) of silver, copper or bronze if it was the sword of a rich man. The sagas record that some weapons (particularly swords) were so highly valued that they were given 'pet' names (see Source 2.38). A man's sword was usually buried with him when he died.

When the Viking Age began, Viking warriors were well equipped to arm themselves heavily. As raids became more a part of the Viking lifestyle, weapon makers were kept busy forging arrow, spear and axe heads from iron, and sharpening the steel edges of iron swords. The Vikings were highly skilled metalworkers. This is also evident in their jewellery (see Source 2.12).

Armour

Wealthy Vikings could afford metal armour, including helmets with nose bridges and chain-mail armour (see Source 2.40). By the time William the Conqueror (whose ancestors were Vikings) invaded England in 1066, chain-mail armour was worn by most soldiers.

Source 2.38 Some weapon 'pet' names recorded in Viking sagas

Weapon and Norse name	Translation
Sword – <i>Fótbítr</i>	Foot biter
Sword – <i>Gunnlogi</i>	Battle flame
Sword – <i>Leggbítr</i>	Leg biter
Sword – <i>Saetarspillar</i>	Peace breaker
Axe – <i>Himintelgja</i>	Heaven scraper
Axe – <i>Rimmugýgr</i>	Battle hag
Coat of chain mail – <i>Full-trúi</i>	Old faithful

focus on ...

contestability: horned helmets

Most people think that the helmets of Viking warriors had large horns. However, there is no evidence at all to support this. Our popular culture—movies, comics, books, games—perpetuates this image of Vikings with horned helmets, which is historically inaccurate.

Think about it—horns on helmets would have made them easier to knock off, leaving the head bare, and making Viking warriors defenceless against a blow from a sword or an axe.



Source 2.40 Viking armour at a reconstructed battle in Finland

Check your learning

- 1 How did some Vikings display their wealth and social position through their weapons and armour?
- 2 Use Source 2.38 as inspiration to create Norse names for the items displayed in Source 2.39.
- 3 Why were many Viking swords such lethal weapons?
- 4 Go to the Internet to find information about and images of the Bayeux Tapestry. Start at the beginning of the tapestry and click through, scene by scene. Locate the section where William the Conqueror's warriors are loading up their ships to invade England. Study it carefully. How do they transport the chain-mail armour?



Source 2.41 An image of a Viking in popular culture

empathy: Viking berserkers

As raiders, the Vikings were feared by the people in the villages they attacked. Most feared of all were the *berserkers* (which means 'bear coats'), who were what could be considered the Viking 'shock troops'. *Berserkers* fought with a frenzy, clad in the skins of bears or wolves. They seemed not to fear death, injury or pain. Today, one legacy of the Viking past is the word 'berserk', which in modern English describes violent rage.

Source 2.42 is the translated writing of the 12th-century Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus. Scholars today regard his view of *berserkers* as perhaps more reliant on imagination than fact.

Source 2.42

When Hardbeen heard this, a demonical frenzy suddenly took him; he furiously bit and devoured the edges of his shield; he kept gulping down fiery coals; he snatched live embers in his mouth and let them pass down into his entrails; he rushed through the perils of crackling fires; and at last, when he had raved through every sort of madness, he turned his sword with raging hand against the hearts of six of his champions.

Extract from a 1905 translation of *The Nine Books of the Danish History*, by the 12th-century Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus

**Source 2.43**

Men saw that a great bear [berserker] went before King Hrolf's men [King Hrolf (known as Kraki) was a warrior chieftain in today's Denmark around the 6th century CE], keeping always near the king. He slew more men with his forepaws than any five of the king's champions. Blades and weapons glanced off him and he brought down both men and horses in King Hjorvard's forces, and everything which came in his path, he crushed to death with his teeth ...

From *Erik the Red and Other Icelandic Sagas*, Gwyn Jones (ed.), Oxford, 1961, p. 313

Source 2.42 tells us who the *berserkers* were and what they did. Empathy requires us to be more interested in their motives: why did they do this? For, without such understanding, it would be very easy to judge such figures as lunatics.

Different opinions have been expressed about *berserkers*, including that they worked themselves into a frenzy before a battle on hallucinogenic drugs or alcohol. If this is so, their motive may well have been to put themselves beyond personal fear to, say, protect their king (as Source 2.43 suggests).

Significantly, *berserkers* were often linked with the Viking god Odin. It was Odin who was believed to give them (through rituals such as drinking animal blood) the power and fury of wild animals.

A Viking king going into battle would no doubt be reassured to have a few *berserkers* close by as he would see it as Odin's protection. The behaviour of *berserkers* on the battlefield—though to us that of out-of-control madmen—would have been welcomed as a sign that Odin was 'with them'.

Considering aspects such as these helps us to have historical empathy. It helps us to better understand why *berserkers* might have acted as they did.

Source 2.44 A stone carving from 6th-century Sweden, showing one man with a helmet adorned with the heads of birds. The other shows the head of a wolf or bear. (Bear skins were typically worn by a *berserker*.)

bigideas

2.2 What developments and achievements led to Viking expansion?

Remember

- 1 What major change happened during the 'Viking Age'?
- 2 What type of weapons were the weapons nicknamed 'foot biter' and a 'heaven scraper'? Suggest why each might have been named in this way.

Understand

- 3 List some goods Viking merchants imported through trade. Select three of these. With a partner, discuss how you think each might have changed Viking society.
- 4 Consider what you have learned about *berserkers*.
 - a Where does the English expression 'going berserk' come from?
 - b How does knowing there was a link between *berserkers* and Odin help us to better understand the motives for the behaviour of the Vikings?
- 5 Discuss this statement as a class: The Vikings may never have become sea pirates if they had not already developed such strong navigational and shipbuilding skills for trade.

Apply

- 6 In groups, discuss how and why you think Australian society has changed during your lifetime. Identify key events and developments you believe helped to cause this. Predict how you think these and other factors may influence our society over the next decade. A spokesperson will report the group's conclusions to the class.

Analyse

- 7 Source 2.45 is a photograph of a Viking cemetery. Look at its elements carefully. What do you observe? How does this compare and contrast with a typical Australian cemetery?

Evaluate

- 8 Consider what you have read, in general, about Vikings.
 - a Which two factors mentioned in this text do you think most contributed to the changes to Viking society that took place during the Viking Age?
 - b Frame one research question for each factor that you think would best help you to decide with more certainty.

Create

- 9 The discussion to this point has focused on why Viking society changed during the Viking Age. Building on this, draw a concept map that records why you think societies that came in contact with the Vikings during this time might have changed. Compare your finished concept map with that of a partner.



Source 2.45 A Viking cemetery