



Source 2.46 A scene from the Bayeux Tapestry showing the army of William, Duke of Normandy, crossing the English Channel to attack England. William was a descendant of Viking settlers in northern France.

2.3 How did Viking conquests change other societies?

The Viking Age meant frequent voyages for Viking men as they embarked on their plundering raids. The loot they brought back helped to change political and economic systems in their homeland. In due course, many left to settle in the places they or their ancestors had raided. Others left to discover new lands.

The societies that Vikings came in contact with were also changed. Deals were struck between Viking leaders and the rulers of places they raided. Some of these deals involved payments of money, others involved grants of land. In time, the language, customs and beliefs of Viking settlers mixed with those of the locals, changing both societies.

Changes caused by conflict

The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records 787 CE as the year of the first Viking attack. Three ships manned by Danish Vikings came ashore in southern England. A royal official met them, assuming they were merchants. He intended to escort them to the king's town to pay the needed taxes. Instead, they murdered him.

significance: the raid on Lindisfarne

On 6 January 793, a fleet of Viking longships attacked the monastery of St Cuthbert at Lindisfarne, in north-eastern England. This significant event began almost 200 years of uncertainty and terror for many monasteries and settlements in lands around the Viking homeland. Around 70 years later, in 865, Britain was invaded by a huge Viking army. By then, the Viking aim was to conquer, not just raid and plunder.

Source 2.47 An artist's impression of a Viking raid. Such raids saw changes not only in the behaviours of a previously peaceful Viking people, but also in the societies they raided and later merged with as settlers.

The Vikings raiders killed innocent people, raped women and kidnapped many people (including monks) as slaves—some to sell and others to work hard on their farms and building projects.

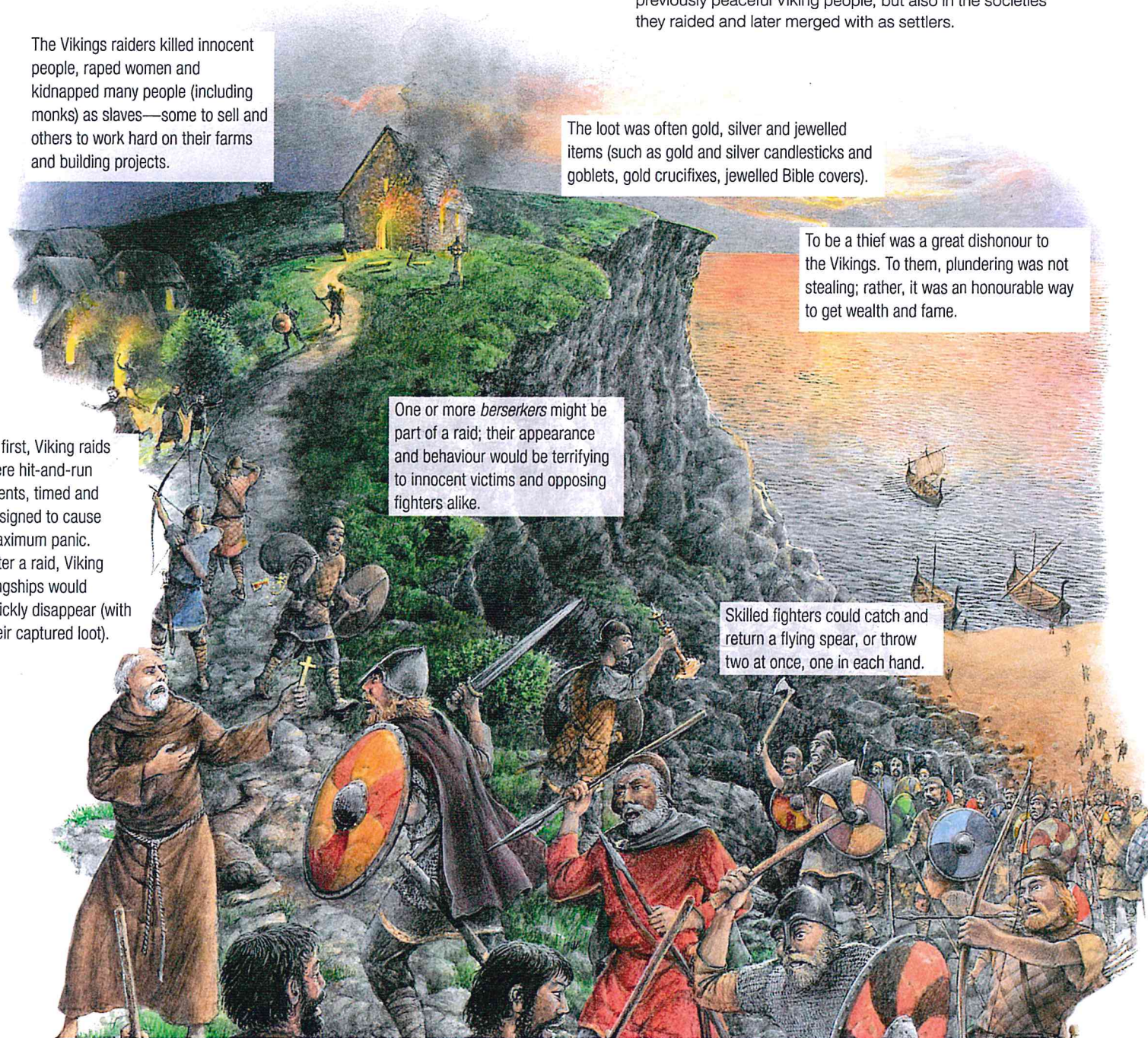
The loot was often gold, silver and jewelled items (such as gold and silver candlesticks and goblets, gold crucifixes, jewelled Bible covers).

To be a thief was a great dishonour to the Vikings. To them, plundering was not stealing; rather, it was an honourable way to get wealth and fame.

At first, Viking raids were hit-and-run events, timed and designed to cause maximum panic. After a raid, Viking longships would quickly disappear (with their captured loot).

One or more *berserkers* might be part of a raid; their appearance and behaviour would be terrifying to innocent victims and opposing fighters alike.

Skilled fighters could catch and return a flying spear, or throw two at once, one in each hand.



contestability: the Blood Eagle

People's views are influenced by their personal experiences. A man who suffers greatly during a war, for example, may hold a grudge against the people he fought, long after the war ends. That view may or may not be shared by others who did not have his experience. It may not be a fact.

Most records about the Vikings during the Viking Age were left by those they often attacked—Christian monks. To what extent these accounts were coloured by the monks' horror, fear and beliefs we will never know. To them, the Vikings were vicious, cruel barbarians. The sight of *berserkers* (see p. 88) would have only reinforced this perception.

One Viking practice was said to be the Blood Eagle. This method of execution involved cutting a person's ribs and spreading them out at the back like an eagle's wings, before pulling out the lungs.

The wound was then said to be salted. Horrific! But did it really happen?

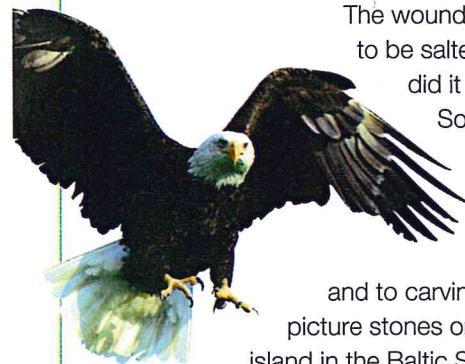
Some scholars claim it did.

They point to text references as evidence

and to carvings on Viking picture stones on Gotland, an island in the Baltic Sea. Some say it was a sacrifice to Odin.

Norse **sagas** (such as the *Orkneyinga Saga*) and poems—all written after the Viking Age—refer to this practice. It was, some say, the death ordered by the Viking leader Ivar the Boneless for the King of Northumbria in 867. This king's death is mentioned in the *Anglo Saxon Chronicle*, but not how he was killed. An Old Norse poem, written nearly 200 years later, refers to an eagle cut in relation to this king's death, but no more.

Scholars who contest the reality of this execution method argue that the sagas and poems misinterpreted, or carelessly translated, Norse symbols in earlier texts. In Norse mythology, the eagle was a symbol of death. Tales may have been spread, too, by the Christian community to represent the Vikings as being more horrifying and repulsive than they actually were.



Source 2.48 A Viking picture stone on the island of Gotland, Sweden

Stop the raids!

The first Viking raids were on English coastal monasteries and settlements. In time, Viking attacks along rivers pushed deeper into Europe and Asia. They also extended their plundering missions into modern-day Wales, Scotland and Ireland. Their attacks were swift, noisy and usually unexpected. By all accounts, they were often brutal affairs.

Source 2.49

The number of ships grows: the endless flood of Vikings never ceases to grow. Everywhere Christ's people are the victims of massacres, burnings and plunderings. The Vikings conquer all in their path and nothing resists them.

Translation from the writing of the Frankish monk
Ermentarius of Noirmoutier, 860 CE

The end of Viking raids in Britain

In 865, Britain was invaded by a huge Viking army from Denmark. This time the motive was conquest, not plunder. Within a year, Vikings controlled the Northumbrian city of Jorvik (York). By 870, they had ended the rule of every Anglo-Saxon kingdom except Wessex. The Wessex king (from 871 to 899) was a man called Alfred (later Alfred the Great).

King Alfred fiercely resisted Viking attacks. By 878, he had forced the Viking leader, Guthrum, to surrender—and to become a Christian.

As part of the peace treaty the two men drew up, Alfred agreed to the Danish Vikings having an area in England they could regard as their own—it became known as the **Danelaw** (see Source 2.51). Over the next 100 years or so, Viking traditions, beliefs and language took hold in the former Anglo-Saxon community, influencing the history of England.

Viking raids continued, on and off, beyond Alfred's rule. In 1016, the council that appointed English kings asked the then King of Denmark, Cnut, to become England's king. King Cnut ruled England wisely and well until his death in 1035. His reign largely ended the era of Viking raids for England. They stopped altogether with William the Conqueror's victory at the Battle of Hastings in 1066 (see p. 65). English society would then be changed again, in a different way, when William became King of England—he would introduce **feudalism**.

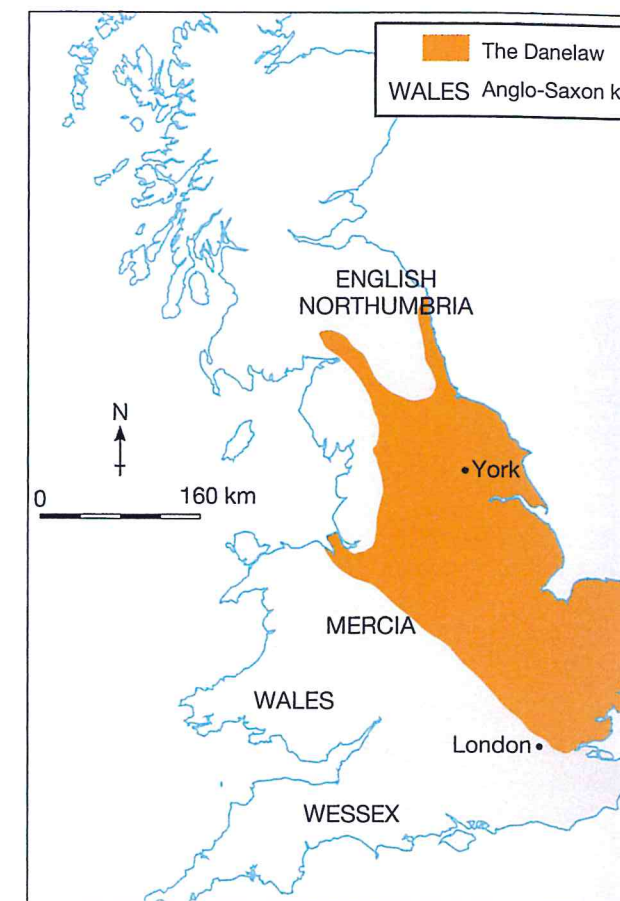
The end of Viking raids in Gaul

A similar situation happened in Gaul (part of today's France). A Viking leader known as Rollo had repeatedly attacked settlements along the Seine River (including Paris). In 911 CE he was at last defeated by the army of the Frankish king, Charles the Simple. Till then, the Franks had been paying heavily (in silver, crops and livestock) to stop Viking attacks, without success. As you have learned, these payments were also made in England. There, they were called the **Danegeld** (Dane gold). In 1007 CE alone, the English paid a Danegeld of nearly 13 500 kilograms of silver. The payments put a crushing load on the economies of Gaul and England.

This time, the king gave Rollo an area of land—a **fief**. Rollo became a **vassal** of the king, and a Christian. The land he was given was called Normandy. Around 150 years later (in 1066), a duke from Normandy, William (see above), would invade Britain.

Check your learning

- 1 Develop a concept map to explain how you think villagers living near Lindisfarne (who would have heard about the attack on the monastery) might have felt and acted. Think how this event might have changed their lifestyle.
- 2 What does Source 2.49 reveal about how some felt about Viking attacks?
- 3 Explain why making Rollo a vassal was a clever move on the part of the Frankish king.
- 4 Go to the Internet to find information about 'Erik Bloodaxe'.
 - a Write down five facts about the life of this prominent Viking.
 - b Frame one question to guide your research into what most interests you about this man.



Source 2.51 The area of the Danelaw, 878 CE



Source 2.50 An artist's impression of the Viking attack on Paris of 885 CE

significant individuals

Leif Eriksson

Vikings were already living in North America 500 years before Christopher Columbus reached close to its shores. The first explorers to actually land in North America were Leif Eriksson and his crew, who landed in what is now Greenland and Canada. This significant event was recognised in 1964 when the US president declared 9 October as 'Leif Ericson Day' (note the different spelling; there are many ways to spell the great Viking's name).

Leif's early life

Leif was born (most probably) in Iceland around 970 CE, the second of Erik the Red's three sons. As a boy, he was educated and taught life skills by Thyrker, a man Erik the Red had taken prisoner on an earlier raid in Europe. For four years, until he was 12, Leif lived in Thyrker's house.

In around 985 CE, Erik the Red was banished from Iceland for killing a man. (He had earlier been banished from Norway, too.) So he set out in a boat with his family, slaves and supplies, and headed west. He called the land he found Greenland. There he settled, later encouraging other Icelanders to join him.

Finding North America

Historians contest how Leif found North America. It depends which saga is used as evidence. According to *Eiriks Saga* (*Saga of Erik the Red*), Leif visited Norway in 999 CE with gifts for the king, Olaf I Trygvasson. He stayed for a year, becoming a Christian (as was the king). He returned with the intent of carrying out the king's request to convert Greenlanders to Christianity. However, he was blown off course, ending up in today's Newfoundland.

The *Groenlendinga Saga* (*Greenlanders Saga*) is generally considered to provide the more reliable evidence. (Like the *Saga of Erik the Red*, it was written 200 to 300 years after the events occurred.) It states that Leif's discovery was far from accidental. In 986 CE, Bjarni Herjólfsson, a Norwegian explorer, arrived in Greenland, looking for his father (who had

shortly before emigrated from Iceland with Erik the Red). Along the way, Bjarni got lost. He reported that he saw a wooded, hilly place. But it was more than a decade before Leif Eriksson acted on this news.

Leif bought Bjarni's boat. In around 1000 CE, he set off (with a crew that included Thyrker) to find the land Bjarni said he had seen. Before he landed at a grassy place he named Vinland, he named two others: Helluland (Land of Flat Rocks, possibly Labrador or Baffin Island) and Markland (Land of Woods, possibly Newfoundland). Leif set up camp at Vinland, returning to Greenland after a year.

Where did Leif settle?

Historians contest the location of Leif's settlement. Most think it was at a place now called L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland. There, archaeologists have located the remains of dwellings with walls of thick turf. Also found was a dress pin and a device used to spin wool.

Later visits

After Leif returned to Greenland, his brother and other family members made trips to the settlement he had established. Leif, though, never returned and died in 1020. The new Viking settlement remained for a few years, but faced increasingly hostile attacks by the Indigenous people who were the ancestors of the modern Inuit. The Vikings called them *skraelings*. Eventually these attacks forced the Vikings to abandon the settlement and return to Greenland.



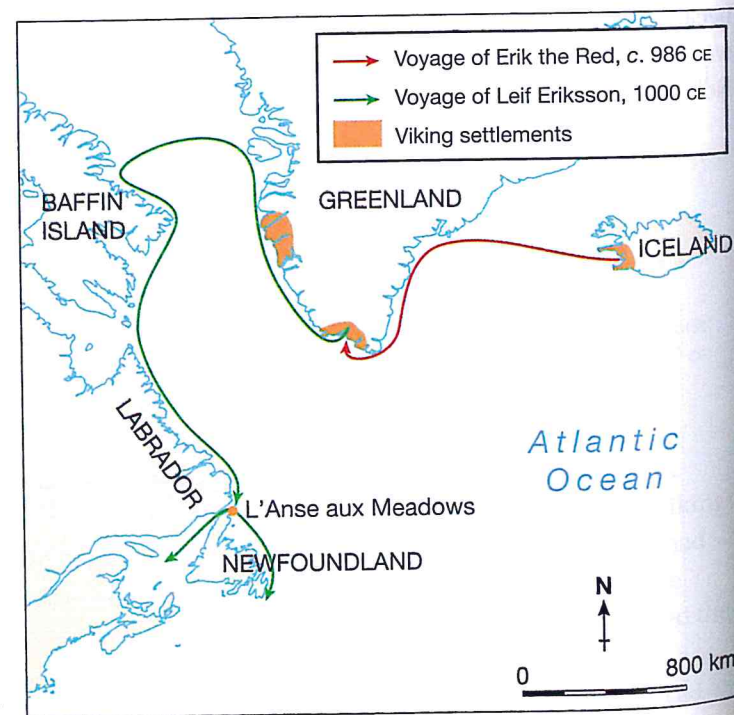
Source 2.55 A statue (created 1930) of Leif Eriksson in Hallgrímskirkja, Iceland

Check your learning

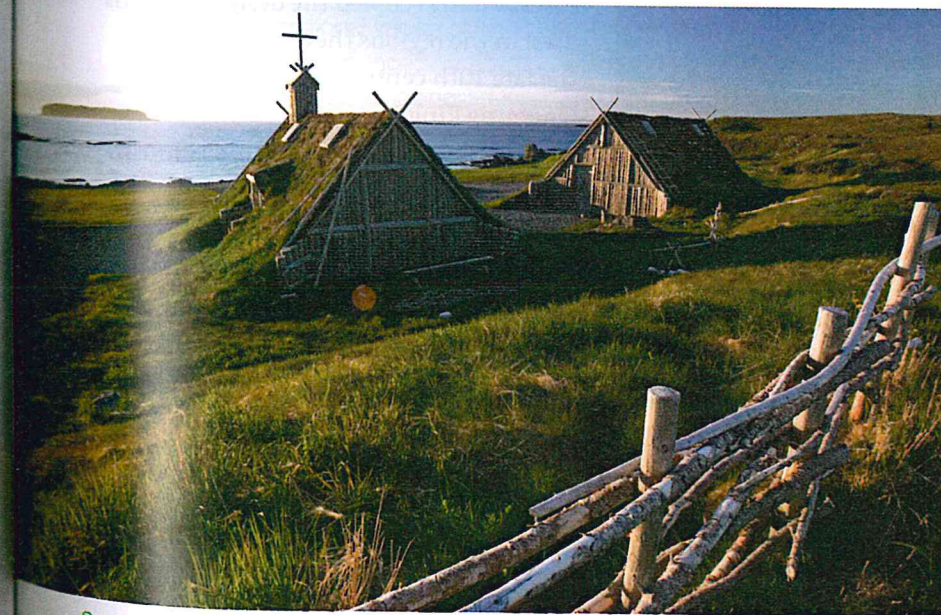
- 1 Explain how and why Leif Eriksson ended up in Greenland.
- 2 Refer to the map and the sagas to complete the following:
 - a Draw two flow charts, each showing how Leif discovered North America according to the two different sagas.
 - b Which version do most scholars think is most reliable?
- 3 Use Source 2.53, Google Earth and Internet photo libraries such as Corbis and Getty (search for them on Google) to create a travel diary of what Leif might have seen on his journey from Greenland to Vinland.
- 4 Explain why some scholars think L'Anse aux Meadows is probably the site of Leif's settlement.
- 5 What eventually ended the Viking settlement in North America?
- 6 How do you think the 'discovery' of North America affected the Viking society in Greenland? Give reasons for your opinion.
- 7 Create a timeline for Leif Eriksson's life, using data from the *Greenlanders Saga*.



Source 2.52 An artist's impression of Leif Eriksson and his crew landing in Newfoundland, Canada, in 1001 CE



Source 2.53 A map showing the routes of Erik the Red and, later, his son Leif



Source 2.54 The heritage-listed site of L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland, Canada (with its reconstructed dwellings)

Political change in the Viking homeland

Warriors returned 'home' from their raids with large stores of plundered loot (including prisoners taken as slaves). In time, these goods made some local Viking rulers very wealthy. Some became so influential that they no longer needed the support of *jarls*. Local tribes began to group together, forming larger **kingdoms**. Within about 200 years, there were three dominant kings. These monarchs ruled areas we know today as Norway, Sweden and Denmark.

Economic change in the Viking homeland

After they began raiding, the Vikings developed an economy based on the value of different precious metals and their weight. Silver was most commonly used. Much of this silver was obtained through plunder or forced payments. Silver items would be broken

into smaller pieces until they matched the weights needed to trade.

The Vikings also collected taxes (often coins) in some places they colonised. The penalty for non-payment in Ireland during the 8th century was a slit nose! Some coins they obtained through trade from parts of Europe, Afghanistan and some Arabian countries.

Eventually, the Vikings developed an economy based on money—one where a particular coin had a particular value. This is similar to the way our currency works. Most of the places the Vikings raided had similar economies. In many cases, Vikings copied the designs of coins used in the regions they colonised. By the late 10th century, the kings of the emerging kingdoms of Sweden, Norway and Denmark were all issuing their own currencies.



Source 2.56 A Viking hoard found in a field in Harrowgate (Yorkshire, England) in 2007, one of many treasures that have been uncovered. The stash, buried for over 1000 years, includes 617 silver coins.

Check your learning

- 1 How did raids change the status and influence of some Viking rulers?
- 2 Explain why Viking society changed from an agricultural economy to a money (monetary) economy in the 8th century.
- 3 Where do you think the English expression 'to pay through the nose for something' came from?
- 4 As a class, discuss why the Vikings might have converted to a monetary economy.
- 5 Examine Source 2.56. Besides the coins, what do you think the other items in this stash were used for?

cause and effect: Christianity and the Vikings

One of the factors that changes societies is belief systems. Viking society, for instance, changed significantly when it adopted Christianity.

The towns, villages and monasteries that Vikings raided were usually Christian settlements. Many of the places in which they later settled were in Christian lands (the people of the settlements often encouraged the Vikings to stay in order to stop their raids). As well, around 1000 CE, Christian missionaries were travelling to parts of the Viking homeland. These factors, among others, eventually caused the Viking people to change their beliefs. This affected many aspects of their social behaviour. For example:

- Attacks on Christian communities stopped altogether.
- Burial practices changed from the rituals of a Viking **cremation** (the burning of corpses) to traditional Christian burials; human sacrifices stopped as did driving a stake through the heart of the dead person to 'stop them' returning to take revenge.
- A large number of Christian churches were built.
- Many Vikings gave former slaves their freedom.
- Some traditional values of Vikings were changed (e.g. the belief that being disgraced required a revenge killing).
- New Christian festivals were celebrated; in some instances, though, the rituals were a mix of Christian and pagan traditions.

Source 2.58 An artist's impression of a Viking cremation. A boat would be filled with goods, slaughtered animals—even sacrificed slaves—and set on fire. It was then covered with a mound of earth. Runestones might be erected at the site.

Source 2.57 is an example of a traditional Viking burial practice. It describes the burial of a chieftain in which a female slave is sacrificed in order to accompany the chieftain into the afterlife. Horses were forced to run until exhausted, before being cut to pieces. Their body parts were thrown into the boat, along with sacrificed chickens.

Source 2.57

The dead chieftain was put in a temporary grave that was covered for ten days until new clothes were prepared for him. They asked which of his thrall [slave] women wanted to join him in the afterlife and one of the girls volunteered ... When the time had arrived for cremation, his longship was pulled ashore and put on a platform of wood. On the ship, a bed was made for the dead chieftain. Soon after, an old woman named the 'angel of death' put cushions on the bed. She was an old witch, stocky and dark. She would be responsible for the ritual and would be the one to kill the thrall girl.

Extract from an account of a human sacrifice at a Viking funeral, by the Arab traveller Ibn Fadlan



2.3 How did Viking conquests change other societies?

Remember

- 1 What was the Danegeld?
- 2 Explain how Vikings raid helped to change the way people were ruled in the Viking homeland.
- 3 What was the Danelaw? What broad influence did it have on societies in England?
- 4 Explain why Leif Eriksson is a significant individual in Viking history.

Understand

- 5 Draw a simple flow chart to explain how the economy of Viking society changed during the Viking Age.
- 6 Vikings took many prisoners (including monks). How would these captives have benefited Viking society?
- 7 Explain why Christian monasteries and churches were common targets for Viking raiders.
- 8 Use a dictionary to find five words in the English language (besides 'berserk') that we have 'inherited' from the Vikings. For example, 'egg' and 'window' are two. Look for entries that end with: Origin – Old Norse.
- 9 Explain in a paragraph how conversion to Christianity changed burial practices of the Vikings.
- 10 Re-read Source 2.57.
 - a Suggest why the *thrall* woman Ibn Fadlan describes might have been willing to volunteer for such a horrible death.
 - b What perspective do you think a Christian monk may have had on this?
- 11 Use an atlas to identify five English towns that were once part of the Danelaw.
- 12 English society was changed in 1066 by the introduction of feudalism by its new king, William I. Explain what link this had to the Viking Age.

Apply

- 13 The Viking attacks on often defenceless communities created great fear, perhaps even revulsion and hate, among those they attacked. Think now about the world today. Discuss as a class how you think societies today react towards those they perceive as attacking them—either directly through warfare, or by attacking their values and way of life. What do you conclude?
- 14 Have you heard the term 'urban myth'? It is a story that may have started with a grain of truth that gets passed around by word of mouth, perhaps exaggerated along the way—always described as a 'true story'. You may even know some. Suggest how the account of the Blood Eagle might have been helped along as an urban myth among Christian communities.

Analyse

- 15 Study Sources 2.59 and 2.60, together with Source 2.47. Use the information provided to list as many points as you can identifying why a Viking raid would have terrified an unsuspecting community.

Evaluate

- 16 Organise a class debate on this topic: The Vikings were no more than dishonourable thieves.

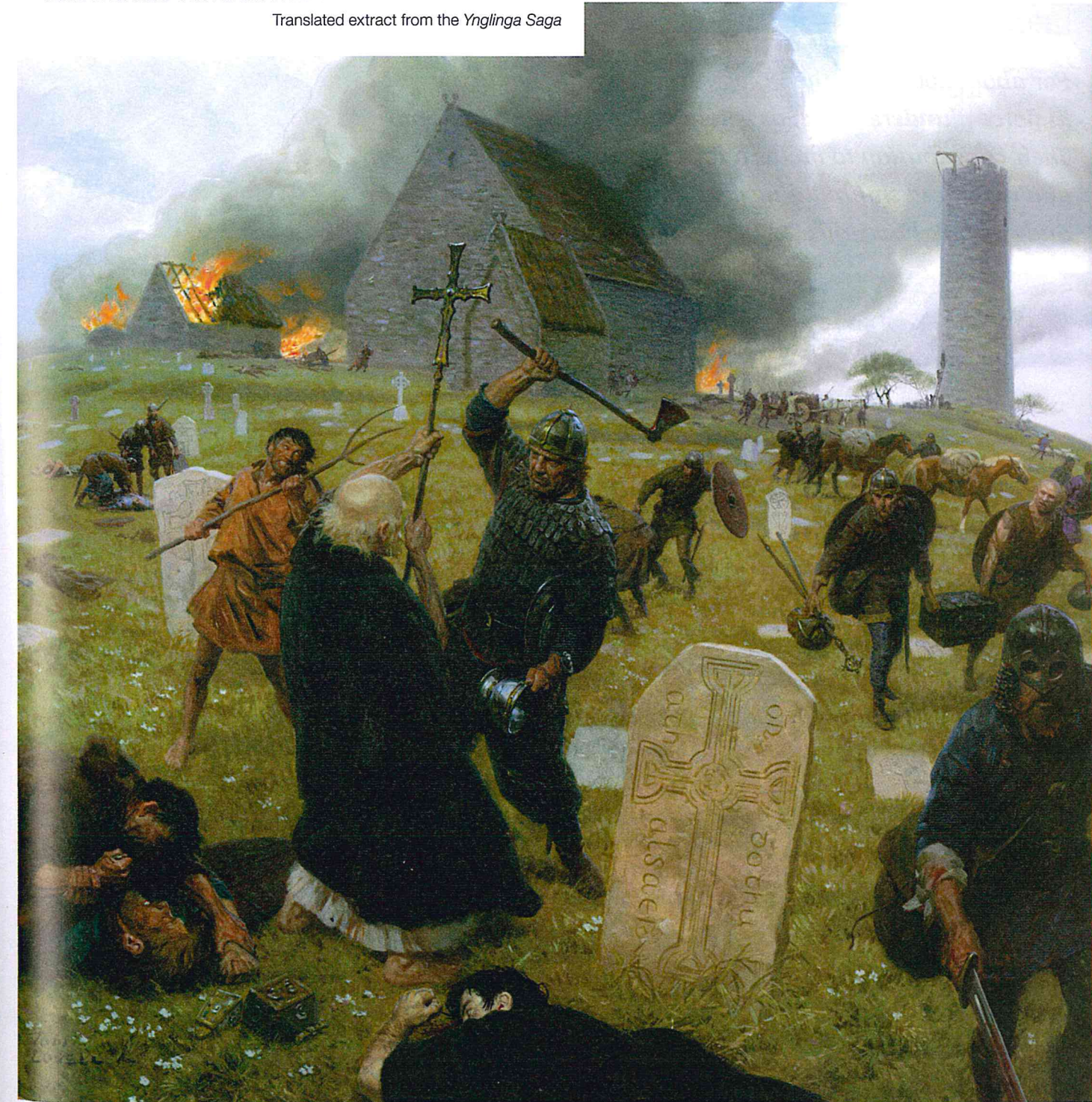
Create

- 17 Excavations in the English city of York have uncovered evidence of the Viking settlement of Jorvik. A reconstruction of this settlement has been built on the site that captures not only what the settlement looked like in 975 CE, but even how it smelt. Find information about the Jorvik settlement site on the Internet. Use this information to empathise with life as a Jorvik Viking. Write a diary entry of a typical day in this settlement, from a Viking's point of view.

Source 2.59

Odin could make his enemies in battle blind, or deaf, or terror-struck, and their weapons so blunt that they could no more but than a willow wand; on the other hand, his men rushed forwards without armour, were as mad as dogs or wolves, bit their shields, and were strong as bears or wild bulls, and killed people at a blow, but neither fire nor iron told upon themselves. These were called Berserker.

Translated extract from the Ynglinga Saga



Source 2.60 An artist's impression of a Viking raid