

The Myths Versus the Facts: Norse Vikings

Trevor Jacobsen

English Department, Anoka Ramsey Community College

ENGL 1121 28

Prof. Chris McCarthy

May 2, 2023

The Myths Versus the Facts: Norse Vikings

Picture this, you're an English farmer that lives in a small township on the coast of England. It's a nice sunny day and you are going to fetch water from the well to make dinner for your family. Then, flaming arrows fill the sky and light your town ablaze while an army of Northmen floods into the homes of your neighbors. They kill all in sight and steal everything possible. They strike you down and kill your whole family. Except for your daughter and wife, who they take as slaves back to their homeland. That's what most people think Vikings were, and nothing more. Many common myths make the Vikings seem like primitive people with primitive weapons that only raided and stole for a living. Some myths claim the Vikings were brutal people that would execute through ritual "blood eagling," which entails a painful and gruesome death for the recipient. Overall, these myths make people think the Vikings were huge, menacing savages. However, the Vikings weren't exactly what the myths entail. Even their name is a myth; Nordic people never called themselves "Vikings". Nor were the Vikings just raiders, they were also explorers that found distant lands. Still, many Nordic people went on raids and sacked foreign villages, but not with primitive swords, but with rudimentary steel weapons. Advanced for their times. All while being of average heights for the times they lived in. Not so menacing in stature after all. Plus, there is little evidence "blood eagle" executions actually happened.

One myth is that the Norse people called themselves Vikings. However, this is untrue, and the fact is they never called themselves "Vikings". Which begs the question of how this name then came along? The truth is that Viking isn't a title but an activity. In an article on Britannica, it states "The word *Viking* meant 'piracy' or 'freebooting voyage' in Old Norse and

was something one would do, rather than a personal descriptor--‘go on a Viking’” (Eldridge, 2018). Showing that “Viking” for the Norse people at the time was never a title to call themselves by. Instead, it was something to do. Making sense for why this myth occurred because Norse people went on Vikings all the time. Many foreign nations were attacked and conquered by these raids and attacks of piracy, making the word Viking very common place when people throughout history talked about Norse people. Over time the term slowly became glued with Norse people of that time period and the name just stuck.

Furthermore, the connection of Norse people and their Viking behavior made most people believe that’s all they would do. Which caused many to believe that the first European to discover the Americas was Christopher Columbus. Though, on the contrary, it was the Vikings that made the first European exploration to the New World. To be exact, it was Leif Eriksson that made the first European visit. In an article by Britannica, it states “Leif Eriksson and about 30 other people set out in 1001 to explore this land. They probably reached the coasts of Newfoundland and Labrador (now in northeastern Canada). Modern archaeologists have found evidence of Viking settlements there from about Leif’s time” (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2016). This shows how they came to the Americas a few hundred years before Columbus. But, it was Columbus that opened the Americas to Europe and the rest of the world, while Eriksson merely ventured there. This caused a lot of people in the modern day to not even know who Lief Eriksson was and the fact that the Norse made it to the Americas first.

In addition, stories and tales about gruesome events partaken by the Vikings makes these great expeditions to foreign lands forgotten. One such gruesome event is the ceremonial execution called a “blood eagle.” This is depicted in some popular culture films and shows, popularizing the idea that the Vikings committed this act. This is execution which entails flaying

a person alive and pulling their lungs from their back and making them appear as wings. The person would be covered in blood and look like a bird, causing the title of “blood eagle.”

However, beyond some written tales, there is little to no evidence that this ritual has ever been done. In a piece by the Smithsonian, they say “Experts have long debated whether the blood eagle was a literary trope or an actual punishment. The sources are often vague, referencing legendary figures of dubious veracity or mixing up accepted historical chronology. Unless archaeologists find a corpse bearing clear evidence of the torture, we’ll likely never know” (Perry, 2021). This created a big old question mark for the legitimacy of this execution. One explanation for why this was written was to put fear into the hearts of the people who were conquered by Vikings, because no one wants to be put through something like that ever. Also, the people said to be put through these executions, as said by Perry, were legendary people.

Making this a way of tarnishing their legacy and how they will be remembered through history. Admittedly, this execution is mentioned in history. Making it possible that the Vikings really did use the “blood eagle” as an execution technique... but we may never know.

Another common myth about Vikings that made them feared by their enemies was that they were giants compared to other Europeans at the time. On the contrary, Norse people at the time were of very average height. Even short when they are compared to the modern day. In an article about the heights of Norse people it explains, “The skeletons that the archaeologists have found, reveals, that a man was around 172 cm tall (5.6 ft), and a woman had an average height of 158 cm (5.1 ft)” (Skajden, 2022). In comparison with average European heights at the time, this was normal height. Shown in this article (Oxford, 2018), “By the end of the early medieval period, heights had increased to 172 cm, increasing to 173 cm in the 1100s, edging closer to heights achieved at the start of the 20th century.” This proves the Vikings to be no giants when

compared to other Europeans. Then, compared to modern day heights, Vikings are even seen as short. This should come as no surprise, as height is partly determined by the diet of people. With modern times having much better food access. Still, this shows how the Vikings, through archeological discoveries, aren't as gigantic as some think.

An additional common myth about the Vikings and much of Europe at the time was that they had very primitive weapons. However, the Vikings had advanced weaponry for the times they were in by using steel instead of iron. Though, they didn't really know what they were doing or understand how their swords were stronger. Stated by Davis (2022), a writer on science, technology and history, "Incorporating bones into the smithing process did in fact make Scandinavian swords stronger, but it wasn't magic — it was technology. What ancient smiths could not have realized is that they were in fact mixing their bog iron with carbon to make a rudimentary form of steel." This discovery makes the Vikings both revolutionary and a little dumb, because when they put bones into their swords, they thought they were putting in spirits. This is because Vikings believed in a whole lot of crazy gods and were all about warrior way. They believed making your sword with the spirit or bones of your strong father would help to strengthen the blade itself. Instead, science has shown that carbon makes iron into strong steel. Humans are carbon-based life forms, so putting humans in the sword makes steel. Causing Viking weapons to be far more durable when compared to other weapons at the time.

Finally, a last myth that many think is fact, is that all Nordic people at the time of the Vikings were Viking pillagers that went and raided foreign lands. However, many Nordic people were never Vikings, and those who were, didn't do it for very long. As shown in an article by Barraclough (2016), a cultural historian and writer, she says "most Vikings were young men off on their equivalent of a gap year, trying to get rich quick and have a few adventures before they

settled down. In the Icelandic sagas, older men still going on summer raids are often presented as disruptive, antisocial elements within the community, who have never quite settled down or made much of their lives.” This shows that raiding wasn’t in the blood of many for very long. Which makes sense, as these raids would cost the lives of many people. The more raids you do, means the more times you could go and get killed. Also, many Nordic people were women, children and elderly that were not very well suited to go and fight. This makes the actual populous of people able to go and fight a minority.

To sum up, the Vikings, though they didn’t call themselves that, were more than the giant violent characters depicted on the screen and page. The Vikings did many things that most don’t know, like venture to new lands and make revolutionary weapons. Also, the Vikings weren’t giants like many today believe, or violent killers that used the “blood eagle” execution. Many Nordic people never even went on raids, and those that did wouldn’t for very long. Still, shows like *The Last Kingdom* mainly depict Vikings as violent raiders that will kill anyone in the way of wealth. Which is true, but the Vikings are much more than just that. Seen in the television show *Vikings*, Nordic people are shown as both warriors and common people that farm and hunt food. All while also being travelers, traders and explorers of new lands and places. This show does have some inaccuracies, but it shows lots of information that is both accurate and looked over by other media content. In addition, schools and society should educate people more accurately on subjects like the discovery of the Americas and what different ancient people were like. This is because history should be taught the way it happened. Nothing more and nothing less. The Vikings were a violent people, but they were also revolutionary people that made advancements. Still, I would never want the Vikings to attack my village and steal all that I own.

References

Barraclough, E. (2016, October 17). *10 myths about the Vikings*. OUPblog. Retrieved April 3, 2023, from <https://blog.oup.com/2016/10/ten-myths-vikings/>

Davis, M. (2022, April 19). *Vikings unwittingly made their swords stronger by trying to imbue them with spirits*. Big Think. Retrieved April 3, 2023, from <https://bigthink.com/hard-science/norse-rituals/>

Eldridge, A. (2018, February 1). *5 Fast Facts About Vikings*. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/list/5-fast-facts-about-vikings>

Encyclopedia Britannica, inc. (2016, September 21). *Early Exploration of the Americas*. Encyclopedia Britannica. Retrieved April 3, 2023, from <https://kids.britannica.com/students/article/early-exploration-of-the-Americas/543490>

Oxford. (2017, April 18). *Highs and lows of an Englishman's average height over 2000 years*. University of Oxford. Retrieved April 3, 2023, from <https://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2017-04-18-highs-and-lows-englishman%E2%80%99s-average-height-over-2000-years-0>

Perry, D. (2021, December 6). *Did the Vikings actually torture victims with the brutal 'blood eagle'*? Smithsonian.com. Retrieved April 3, 2023, from <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/did-the-vikings-actually-torture-victims-with-the-brutal-blood-eagle-180979148/>

Skjalden, M. (2022, July 18). *What did the Vikings really look like*? Nordic Culture. Retrieved April 25, 2023, from <https://skjalden.com/what-did-the-vikings-look-like/>