

HIST*3520 - THE VIKINGS

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COURSE DESCRIPTION:

In 793 a group of Vikings raided the small monastic community of Lindisfarne on the English coast. This event is often depicted as the start of the Viking age when groups of feared warriors, traveling by sea, ravaged and pillaged Europe. During this course we will examine this traditional narrative from several different perspectives. First we will try to find out who the Vikings were, where they came from, their culture and their religious beliefs. We will follow in their traces and see where they settled and how they influenced the various cultures that they encountered. Finally, we will explore how the Vikings converted to Christianity.

During the course we will also discuss the views of the Vikings throughout time. We will analyze why they were described by contemporary writers as worse than other plunderers and warriors. We will examine the Vikings as 'foreigners' and settlers and see what this can tell us about constructions of ethnic groups and origin in early medieval Europe. We will also examine which types of sources we have available; written as well as archeological.

Throughout the course we will read sources written by the people they encountered and examine their descriptions of the Vikings. But we will also explore sources that were written in the regions where the Vikings lived. Many of these sources are however from later time periods, when a new Christian culture had replaced the old one. The primary sources thus pose problems for any student of the Vikings. How can we deal with these problems? Can we overcome the difficulties and trace a culture through the eyes of people who either feared and despised them, or people who lived in an era with a new religion and a different view of society?

Classes will consist of lectures with various in-class activities (map quizzes, group exercises etc.) and seminars where we will discuss the primary sources.