The Vikings were seafarers who came from Scandinavia. This is the region encompassing the modern nations of Denmark, Norway and Sweden. The Vikings are also known as Northmen or Norse. Between the ninth and eleventh centuries, their ferocious attacks struck fear into the hearts of people throughout many parts of Europe.

### Early records of Viking raids

In 787 CE, about 400 years after the Romans left Britain, the country’s first recorded Viking raid took place (see Source 1).

Only six years later, the Vikings wreaked havoc in a second raid, this time on the Christian monastery at Lindisfarne, a small island off England’s north-east coast.

Viking raids soon became much more frequent and by around 850 CE the Vikings were using bigger raiding fleets and beginning to occupy permanent settlements. These settlements served as trading posts and as bases from which further raids could be launched against monasteries and villages that were far from the coasts. Dublin in Ireland, for example, began as a Viking settlement.

Kiev and Novgorod, which today are major cities in modern-day Ukraine and Russia, began as trading posts for Swedish Vikings. Called the Varangians, these Vikings had much to do with establishing the first nation in that region, called Kiev Rus. In western Europe, Danish Vikings succeeded in taking Normandy as a duchy from the French king. They became the Normans and went on to conquer England and parts of southern Italy.

### Runes and sagas

The Vikings did not commit anything to extensive writing until Christianity arrived in the eleventh century. During the Early Middle Ages, it was usually only members of the Church who had the skills to write. The Vikings were pagans and so they did not have groups of Christians among them to record events in writing. Rather, their story-telling was an oral tradition. However, Viking writing, called runes, did exist; runes were inscribed on bone or carved on rock.
By the time the Viking Age had ended, stories began to appear in writing. These stories are known as the **sagas**. The sagas were tales and legends about Viking heroes. Although the heroes of the sagas were sometimes based on real people, the sagas themselves were largely fictional tales. They encouraged a romantic and heroic image of the Vikings.

The only written saga dating back to the Viking Age is not of Scandinavian origin but written by an English poet. This is the oldest known story written in Old English (see Source 1). This saga is called *Beowulf* and is set in Sweden and Denmark. It tells of the Viking hero Beowulf who sets out to kill a monster ravaging the kingdom of Denmark. Beowulf also kills the monster’s mother and a dragon. The fact that this tale is written in English demonstrates the significant presence Viking culture had in Britain. Despite being largely fictional, such sagas give historians some insights into Viking culture.

### Archaeological discoveries

The Viking Age is shrouded in legend and coloured by the gruesome accounts of victims of Viking raids. This is because, unlike the Greeks and Romans, the Vikings left few visible monuments. These were mostly mysterious standing stones. Some were carved with runes, signs and images; others were arranged to outline the shape of boats.

In the nineteenth century, archaeologists began digging at sites believed to harbour relics of the Viking Age. These included mounds and the sites of settlements. Some of the mounds had folk tales associated with them. One such mound, in the middle of a farm field in Gokstad, Norway, was called the King’s Mound. It was believed a king was buried there with his hoard of treasure. When archaeologists dug into the mound in 1880, it turned out to be just what the folk tale had said: the remains of a Viking king with his hoard of treasure, although some of it had been stolen by grave robbers centuries before. More spectacularly still, the king and his hoard lay in a huge Viking ship, made mostly of oak. Until then, there had been only pictures of such dragon ships on rocks and in tapestries. In the last 150 years, other such archaeological digs have given us a greater insight into how the Vikings lived.

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**duchy** dukedom; a small state ruled by a duke, a nobleman whose rank is just below that of a prince

**geld** money or other valuables taken under threat of violence

**pagan** one who worships many gods

**runes** letters of the Scandinavian alphabet based on Roman or Greek letters but modified to be easily carved on wood or stone

**saga** a medieval Scandinavian tale about exploits and adventures in the life of a hero or his family

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**Activities**

**ANALYSIS AND USE OF SOURCES**

1. Read Sources 1, 2 and 3 closely. For each of these sources:
   a. describe its origins (where and when it was written)
   b. explain whether it should be considered to be a primary source or a secondary source and why
   c. describe its perspective (point of view) on Vikings
   d. outline the conclusions you could draw about one aspect of the Viking Age from this source.

2. Compare the three sources and explain how they support each other.

3. Do you think you would get a different perspective if you read an account of these same events written by Vikings?

4. Study Sources 4 and 5 closely and write your own historical questions to analyse each of these two sources.

5. Answer the questions you have asked as far as it is possible using just the information in the sources and their captions.