The Amazing Vikings

They earned their brutal reputation— but the Norse were also craftsmen, explorers and believers in democracy

By Michael D. Lemonick and Andrea Dorfman

RAVAGERS, DESPOILERS, PAGANS, HEAthens—such epithets pretty well summed up the Vikings for those who lived in the British Isles during medieval times. For hundreds of years after their bloody appearance at the end of the 8th century A.D., these ruthless raiders would periodically sweep in from the sea to kill, plunder and destroy, essentially at will. "From the fury of the Northmen, deliver us, O Lord" was a prayer uttered frequently and fervently at the close of the first millennium. Small wonder that the ancient Anglo-Saxons—and their cultural descendants in England, the U.S. and Canada—think of these seafaring Scandinavians as little more than violent brutes.

But that view is wildly skewed. The Vikings were indeed raiders, but they were also traders whose economic network stretched from today's Iraq all the way to the Canadian Arctic. They were democrats who founded the world's oldest surviving parliament while Britain was still mired in feudalism. They were master metalworkers, fashioning exquisite jewelry from silver, gold and bronze. Above all, they were intrepid explorers whose restless hearts brought them to North America some 500 years before Columbus.

The broad outlines of Viking culture and achievement have been known to experts for decades, but a spate of new scholarship, based largely on archaeological excavations in Europe, Iceland, Greenland and Canada, has begun to fill in the elusive details. And now the rest of us have a chance to share in those discoveries with the opening last week of a wonderfully rich exhibition titled "Vikings: The North Atlantic Saga" at the National Museum of Natural History in Washington.

Timed to commemorate the thousand-year anniversary of Leif Eriksson's arrival in North America, the show examines the Vikings and their Norse descendants from about A.D. 740 to 1450—focusing especially on their westward expansion and on the persistent mysteries of how extensively the Vikings explored North America and why they abandoned their outpost here.

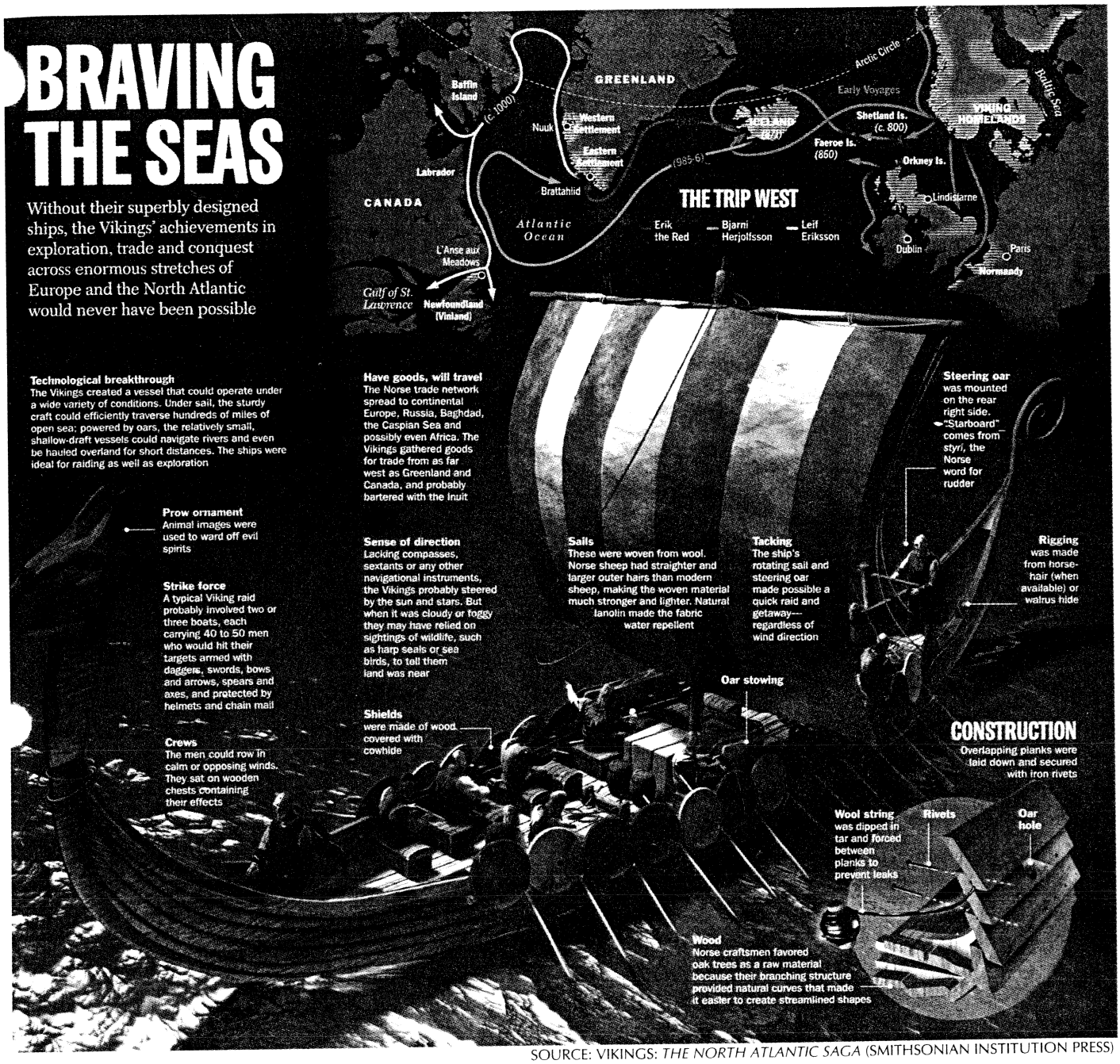
In doing so, the curators have laid to rest a number of popular misconceptions, including one they perpetuate in the show's title. The term Viking (possibly from the Old Norse *vik*, meaning bay) refers properly only to men who went on raids. All Vikings were Norse, but not all Norse were Vikings—and those who were did their viking only part time. Vikings didn't wear horned helmets (a fiction probably created for 19th century opera). And while rape and pillage were part of the agenda, they were a small part of Norse life.

In fact, this mostly blue-eyed, blond or reddish-haired people who originated in what is now Scandinavia were primarily farmers and herdsmen. They grew grains and vegetables during the short summer but depended mostly on livestock—cattle, goats, sheep and pigs. They weren't Christian until the late 10th century, yet they were not irreligious. Like the ancient Greeks and Romans, they worshiped a pantheon of deities, three of whom—Odin, Thor and Freya—we recall every week, as Wednesday, Thursday and Friday were named after them. (Other Norse words that endure in modern English: berserk and starboard.)

Nor were the Norse any less sophisticated than other Europeans. Their oral literature—epic poems known as *Eddas* as well as their sagas—was Homeric in drama and scope. During the evenings and throughout the long, dark winters, the Norse amused themselves with such challenging board games as backgammon and chess (though they didn't invent them). By day the women cooked, cleaned, sewed and ironed, using whalebone plaques as boards and running a heavy stone or glass smoother over the seams of garments.

The men supplemented their farmwork by smelting iron ore and smithing it into tools and cookware; by shaping soapstone into lamps, bowls and pots; by crafting jewelry; and by carving stone tablets with floral motifs, scenes depicting Norse myths and runic inscriptions (usually to commemorate a notable deed or personage).

Most important, though, they made the finest ships of the age. Thanks to several Viking boats disinterred from burial mounds in Norway, archaeologists know beyond a doubt that the wooden craft were "unbelievable—the best in Europe



SOURCE: VIKINGS: *THE NORTH ATLANTIC SAGA* (SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION PRESS)

by far," according to William Fitzhugh, director of the National Museum's Arctic Studies Center and the exhibition's chief curator. Sleek and streamlined, powered by both sails and oars, quick and highly maneuverable, the boats could operate equally well in shallow waterways and on the open seas.

With these magnificent craft, the Norse searched far and wide for goods they couldn't get at home: silk, glass, sword-quality steel, raw silver and silver coins that they could melt down and rework. In return they offered furs, grindstones, Baltic amber, walrus ivory, walrus hides and iron.

At first, the Norse traded locally around the Baltic Sea. But from there, says Fitzhugh, "their network expanded to Europe and Britain, and then up the Russian rivers. They reached Rome, Baghdad, the Caspian Sea, probably Africa too. Buddhist artifacts from northern India have been found in a Swedish Viking grave, as has a charcoal brazier from the Middle East." The Hagia Sophia basilica in Istanbul has a Viking inscription in its floor. A Mycenaean lion in Venice is covered with runes of the Norse alphabet.

Sometime in the late 8th century, however, the Vikings realized there was a much easier way to acquire luxury goods. The monasteries they dealt with in Britain, Ireland and mainland Europe were not only extremely wealthy but also situated on isolated coastlines and poorly defended—sitting ducks for men with agile ships. With the raid on England's Lindisfarne monastery in 793, the reign

of Viking terror officially began. Says archaeologist Colleen Batey of the Glasgow Museums: "They had a preference for anything that looked pretty," such as bejeweled books or gold, silver and other precious metals that could be recrafted into jewelry for wives and sweethearts. Many monasteries and trading centers were attacked repeatedly, even annually. In some cases the Vikings extorted protection money, known as danegeld, as the price of peace.

Viking Vs. Norse

"Viking" refers only to those among the Norse who went out on raiding parties. Plenty of Norse—including all the women—weren't Vikings at all, and others were Vikings only some of the time

The Vikings didn't just pillage and run; sometimes they came to stay. Dublin became a Viking town; so did Lincoln and York, along with much of the surrounding territory in northern and eastern England. In Scotland, Vikings maintained their language and political links to their homeland well into the 15th century. Says Batey: "The northern regions of Scotland, especially, were essentially a Scandinavian colony up until then." Vikings also created the duchy of Normandy, in what later became France, as well as a dynasty that ruled Kiev, in Ukraine.

Given their hugely profitable forays into Europe, it's not entirely clear why the Vikings chose to strike out across the forbidding Atlantic. One reason might have been a growing population; another might have been political turmoil. The search for such exotic trade goods as furs and walrus ivory might have also been a factor. The timing, in any event, was perfect: during the 9th century, when the expansion began, the climate was unusually warm and stable. Pastures were productive, and the pack ice that often clogged the western North Atlantic was at a minimum.

So westward the Vikings went. Their first stop, in about 860, was the Faeroe Islands, northwest of Scotland. Then, about a decade later, the Norse reached Iceland. Experts believe as many as 12,000 Viking immigrants ultimately settled there, taking their farm animals with them. (Inadvertently, they also brought along mice, dung beetles, lice, human fleas and a host of animal parasites, whose remains, trapped in soil, are helping archaeologists form a detailed picture of early medieval climate and Viking life. Bugs, for example, show what sort of livestock the Norse kept.)

Agriculture was tough in Iceland; it was too cold, for instance, to grow barley for that all important beverage beer. "They tried to grow barley all over Iceland, but it wasn't economical," says archaeologist Thomas McGovern of New York City's Hunter College. Nevertheless, the colony held on, and in 930 Iceland's ruling families founded a general assembly, known as the Althing, at which representatives of the entire population met annually to discuss matters of importance and settle legal disputes. The institution is still in operation today, more than a thousand years later.

In 982 the Althing considered the case of an ill-tempered immigrant named Erik the Red. Erik, the saga says, had arrived in Iceland several years earlier after being expelled from Norway for murder. He settled down on a farm, married a Christian woman named Thjodhild (the Norse were by now starting to convert) and had three sons, Leif, Thorvald and Thorstein, and one daughter, Freydis. It wasn't long, though, before Erik began feuding with a neighbor—something about a cow and some wallboards—and ended up killing again.

The Althing decided to exile him for three years, so Erik sailed west to explore a land he had heard about from sailors who had been blown off course. Making his way around a desolate coast, he came upon magnificent fjords flanked by lush meadows and forests of dwarf willow and birch, with glacier-strewn mountain ranges towering in the distance. This "green land," he decided (in what might have been a clever bit of salesmanship), would be a perfect place to live. In 985 Erik returned triumphantly to Iceland and enlisted a group of followers to help him establish the first Norse outposts on Greenland. Claiming the best plot of land for himself, Erik established his base at Brattahlid, a verdant spot at the neck of a fjord on the island's southwestern tip, across from what is now the modern airport at Narsarsuaq. He carved out a farm and built his wife a tiny church, just 8 ft. wide by 12 ft. long. (According to one legend, she refused to sleep with him until it was completed.)

Days of the Week

Wednesday
Odin
Thursday
Thor
Friday
Freya

The remains of this stone-and-turf building were found in 1961. The most spectacular discovery from the Greenland colonies was made in 1990, however, when two Inuit hunters searching for caribou about 55 miles east of Nuuk (the modern capital) noticed several large pieces of wood sticking out of a bluff. Because trees never grew in the area, they reported their discovery to the national museum. The wood turned out to be part of an enormous Norse building, perfectly sealed in permafrost covered by 5 ft. of sand: "definitely one of the best-preserved Norse sites we have," says archaeologist Joel Berglund, vice director of the Greenland National Museum and Archives in Nuuk.

According to Berglund, a leader of the dig at the "Farm Beneath the Sand" from 1991 through 1996, the site was occupied for nearly 300 years, from the mid-11th century to the end of the 13th century. "It went from small to big and then from big to small again," he explains. "They started with a classic longhouse, which later burned down." The place was abandoned for a while and then rebuilt into what became a "centralized farm," a huge, multifunction building with more than 30 rooms housing perhaps 15 or 20 people, plus sheep, goats, cows and horses.

The likeliest reason for this interspecies togetherness was the harsh climate. Observes Berglund: "The temperature to-

Vikings and History

Events in the Viking world (bold) can be seen in parallel with what the rest of the world was doing (italic)

A.D. 793: Viking Age begins with the raid on England's Lindisfarne monastery

800: Charlemagne is crowned Emperor

802: Khmer kingdom is created in Cambodia

841: Vikings found Dublin, in Ireland

845: First Viking assault on Paris

850–900: Maya civilization in Mesoamerica begins to decline

862–82: Viking princes become rulers of Novgorod and Kiev

871: Colonization of Iceland begins

886: Alfred the Great divides England with the Danes under the Danelaw pact

911: Viking chief Rollo founds the duchy of Normandy (now in France)

930: Iceland's parliament, the Althing, is established

969: Fatimids, Muhammad's descendants, sweep across North Africa and make Cairo their capital

982–85: Erik the Red explores Greenland, starts a settlement there

985–86: Icelandic trader Bjarni Herjolfsson sights a lush, forested shore, apparently North America, but opts not to inspect it

c. 1000: Leif Eriksson sets up camp at L'anse aux Meadows, Newfoundland

1000: Iceland adopts Christianity

1042: Accession of Edward the Confessor ends Danish rule in England

1054: Final schism of Roman Catholic Orthodox churches

1066: William the Conqueror, a Norman, defeats England's King Harold at the Battle of Hastings, ending the Viking Age

1077: Completion of the Bayeux tapestry, depicting the Battle of Hastings and showing Viking ships

1095–96: Europe's Christians launch the first Crusades to recapture the Holy Land

1206: Genghis Kahn crowned Emperor of the Mongols, launches wars of conquest

1215: England's King John signs the Magna Carta

1271: Marco Polo sets off for Asia

1337: Beginning of the Hundred Years War between England and France

1347: Plague (Black Death) erupts in Europe

c. 1350: Little Ice Age leads to end of Western Settlement on Greenland

1370: Tamerlane sets out to restore the Mongol empire

1431: Joan of Arc is burned at the stake in Rouen

c. 1450: Last Norse leave Greenland

1492: Christopher Columbus lands in the New World

day gets as cold as -50°C [-58°F]." Bones recovered from trash middens in the house indicate that the occupants dined mostly on wild caribou and seals, which were plentiful along the coast. (The domesticated animals were apparently raised for their wool and milk, not meat.) Scientists recovered more than 3,000 artifacts in the ruins, including a wooden loom, children's toys and combs. Along with hair, body lice and animal parasites, these items will be invaluable in determining what each room was used for. Researchers also found bones and other remnants from meals, and even a mummified goat. That means, says Berglund, "we'll even be able to tell whether there was enough food and whether the people and animals were healthy."

As Greenland's overlord, Erik the Red took a cut of virtually everyone's profits from the export of furs and ivory. Material success apparently did not keep Erik and his family content, though; they undoubtedly heard of a voyage by a captain named Bjarni Herjolfsson, who had been blown off course while en route to Greenland from Iceland. After drifting for many days, Bjarni spotted a forested land. But instead of investigating this unknown territory, he turned back and reached Greenland.

Intrigued by this tale, Erik's eldest son Leif, sometime between 997 and 1003, decided to sail westward to find the new land. First, say the sagas, the crew came to a forbidding land of rocks and glaciers. Then they sailed on to a wooded bay, where they dropped anchor for a while. Eventually they continued south to a place he called Vinland ("wineland," probably for the wild grapes that grew there). Leif and his party made camp for the winter, then sailed home. Members of his family returned in later years, but Leif never did. Erik died shortly after his son returned, and Leif took over the Greenland colony.

Though he retained ownership of the Norse base in North America and received a share of the riches that were brought back, he stopped exploring.

This much had long been known from the Icelandic sagas, but until 1960 there was no proof of Leif's American sojourns. In retrospect, it is astonishing that the evidence took so long to be found. That year Norwegian explorer Helge Ingstad and his wife, archaeologist Anne Stine Ingstad, went to Newfoundland to explore a place identified on an Icelandic map from the 1670s as "Promontorium Winlandiae," near the small fishing village of L'Anse aux Meadows, in the province's northern reaches. They were certain that it marked the location of an ancient Norse settlement.

Finding the settlement turned out to be absurdly easy. When the Ingstads asked the locals if there were any odd ruins in the area, they were taken to a place known as "the Indian camp." They immediately recognized the grass-covered ridges as Viking-era ruins like those in Iceland and Greenland.

During the next seven years, the Ingstads and an international team of archaeologists exposed the foundations of eight separate buildings. Sitting on a narrow terrace between two bogs, the buildings had sod walls and peaked sod roofs laid over a (now decayed) wooden frame; they were evidently meant to be used year-round. The team also unearthed a Celtic-style bronze pin with a ring-shaped head similar to ones the Norse used to fasten their cloaks, a soapstone spindle whorl, a bit of bone needle, a small whetstone for sharpening scissors and needles, lumps of worked iron and iron boat nails. (All these items helped win over detractors, since the artifacts were clearly not native to America.)

Further excavations in the mid-1970s under the auspices of Parks Canada, the site's custodian, made it plain that this was most likely the place where Leif set up camp. Among the artifacts turned up: loom weights, another spindle whorl, a bone needle, jasper fire starters, pollen, seeds, butternuts and, most important, about 2,000 scraps of worked wood that were subsequently radiocarbon dated to between 980 and 1020—just when Leif visited Vinland.

The configuration of the ruined buildings, the paucity of artifacts and garbage compared with those found at other sites, and the absence of a cemetery, stables and holding pens for animals have convinced Birgitta Linderoth Wallace, the site's official archaeologist, that L'Anse aux Meadows wasn't a permanent settlement and was used for perhaps less than 10 years.

Instead, she believes, it served as a base camp for several exploratory expeditions up and down the coast, perhaps as far south as the Gulf of St. Lawrence. "We know this because of the butternuts," she says. "The closest places they grow are east of Quebec near the Gulf of St. Lawrence or in eastern New Brunswick. They are too heavy for birds to carry, and they can't float. And we know the Norse considered them a delicacy."

The National Museum's Fitzhugh notes that the location of the camp was advantageous for various reasons. "L'Anse aux Meadows is rocky and dangerous," he admits. "There are much better places just a few miles away—but there's a good view. They could watch out for danger, and they could bring their boats in and keep an eye on them." What's more, Fitzhugh says, "they would have built where they could easily be found by other people. That's why they chose the tip of a peninsula. All they had to tell people was, 'Cross the Big Water, turn left and keep the land on your right.'" With fair winds, the voyage would have taken about two weeks; a group of men who tried it in the replica Viking ship Snorri (named after the first European born in America) in 1998 were stuck at sea for three months.

Despite all the natural resources, the Norse never secured a foothold in the New World. Within a decade or so after Leif's landing at L'Anse aux Meadows, they were gone. Wallace, for one, believes that there were simply too few people to keep the camp going and that those stationed there got homesick: "You had a very small community that could barely sustain itself. Recent research has shown it had only 500 people, and we know you need that many at a minimum to start a colony in an uninhabited area. They had barely got started in Greenland when they decided to go to North America. It wasn't practical, and I think they missed their family and friends."

Fitzhugh offers another theory. "I think they recognized that they had found wonderful resources but decided they couldn't defend themselves and were unable to risk their families to stay there," he says. "Imagine 30 Norsemen in a boat on the St. Lawrence meeting a band of Iroquois. They would have been totally freaked out."

As for discovering additional Norse outposts in North America, most experts think the chances are very slim. "These areas were heavily occupied by Native Americans," says archaeologist Patricia Sutherland of the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Hull, "so while there may have been some trade, relations would have been hostile. Maybe someone will find an isolated Norse farm on the coast of Labrador or Baffin Island, but not an outpost."

That's not to say Norse artifacts haven't been discovered south of Newfoundland—but aside from a Norse penny, minted between 1065 and 1080 and found in 1957 at an Indian site near Brooklin, Maine, nearly all of them have turned out to be bogus. The Newport (R.I.) Tower, whose supposed Viking origin was central to Longfellow's epic poem *The Skeleton in Armor*, was built by an early Governor of Rhode Island. The Kensington Stone, a rune-covered slab unearthed on a Minnesota farm in 1898 that purportedly describes a voyage to Vinland in 1362, is today widely believed to be a modern forgery. So is Yale's Vinland Map, a seemingly antique chart with the marking "Vinilanda Insula" that surfaced in the 1950s bound into a medieval book.

To the north, though, it's a different story. Digs at dozens of ancient Inuit sites in the eastern Canadian Arctic and western Greenland have turned up a wealth of Norse artifacts, indicating that the Europeans and Arctic natives interacted long after Leif Eriksson and his mates left. Says Sutherland: "The contact was more extensive and more complex than we suspected even a couple of months ago."

The Norse referred to the indigenous peoples they encountered in Greenland and the New World as *skraeling*, a derog-

atory term meaning wretch or scared kling, and the sagas make it clear that Norse considered the natives hostile. But the abundance of Norse items found at Inuit sites—some 80 objects from a single site on Skraeling Island, off the east coast of Ellesmere Island, including a small driftwood carving of a face with European features—suggests that there was a lively trade between the groups (as well as an exchange of Norse goods among the Inuit).

The Vikings held out in their harsh Greenland outposts for several centuries, but by 1450 they were gone. One reason was climate change. Starting about 1350, global temperatures entered a 500-year slump known as the Little Ice Age. Norse hunting techniques and agriculture were inadequate for survival in this long chill, and the Vikings never adapted the Inuit's more effective strategies for the cold.

Another factor was the rapacious overuse of resources. The goats, pigs and sheep brought by the Norse ate or trampled the forests and shrub lands, eventu- transforming them into bare ground. ...hout enough fodder, the farm animals could not survive. The Norse were forced to eat more seal, seabirds and fish—and these too became locally scarce. The depletion of Greenland's meager trees and bushes meant no wood for fuel or for repairing ships.

To make matters worse, demand for the trade goods that Greenlanders exported to Europe plummeted. Not only was African ivory once again available (the supply had been cut off during the Crusades), but the material was falling out of fashion. And Europeans had their own problems: plague, crops failing in the colder conditions and city dwellers rioting in search of food. By the time the last Norse departed Greenland, the colonies had become so marginal that it took several hundred years before some Europeans realized they were gone. The Icelandic colony suffered too, though it managed to hang on.

But the true Vikings—those marauders of monasteries, those fearsome invaders from the north—had long since vanished, except in myth. As Europe's weak feudal fiefs had grown into powerful kingdoms, the Norse raiders had run out of easy victims. In England the victory in 1066 of William the Conqueror—a descendant of Norsemen from Normandy—marked the end of Viking terror.

Indeed, fear of the Vikings had played a pivotal role in reshaping Europe. "They helped develop nations and forced the Europeans to unite and defend themselves," says Fitzhugh. "It was a turning point in European history."

Back in their Scandinavian homeland, the Vikings' descendants also united into kingdoms, ultimately establishing Norway, Sweden and Denmark and pursuing a history no more or less aggressive than that of any other Europeans. The transfer of the Orkney Islands from Danish to Scottish control in 1468, for example, came not as the result of a bloody battle but as part of a royal wedding dowry.

As for the Norse settlements scattered around Britain and Europe, their inhabitants intermarried with the locals and finally disappeared as a distinct people. All that remains of them is their language and genes, spread widely through the Western world. Unlike Columbus, the Vikings may not have established a permanent presence in North America the first time around. But given the millions of Americans who share at least a bit of Viking blood, they are still there—and in considerable force.

From *Time*, May 8, 2000, pp. 69-76.