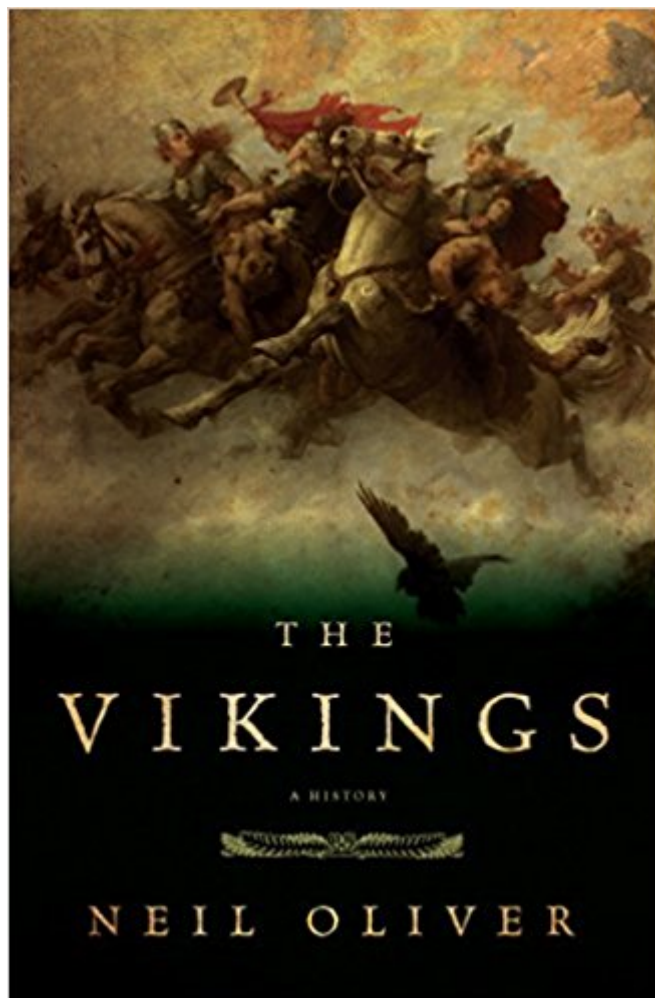


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The Vikings: A New History



Synopsis

Archaeologist Neil Oliver ventures beyond the myths about seafaring Norsemen to reveal the true lives of their chieftains, warlords, and explorers. The Vikings are infamous for taking no prisoners, relishing cruel retribution, and priding themselves on their bloodthirsty skills as warriors. But their prowess in battle is only a small part of their story, which stretches from their Scandinavian origins to America in the West and as far as Baghdad in the East. As the Vikings did not record their own history, we have to discover it for ourselves, and their tale, as Neil Oliver reveals, is an extraordinary story of a stalwart people who came from the brink of destruction to develop awesome seafaring power that reached a quarter of the way around the globe, building an empire that lasted nearly two hundred years. Drawing on discoveries that have only recently come to light, Oliver follows the Vikings' trail to uncover what drove them to embark on such extraordinary voyages more than 1,000 years ago. An epic tale of one of the world's great empires, The Vikings will fascinate all history buffs interested in finding out more about these real-life adventurers.

Book Information

File Size: 24274 KB

Print Length: 336 pages

Publisher: Pegasus Books (November 5, 2013)

Publication Date: November 5, 2013

Language: English

ASIN: B00FXH7Y0E

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Screen Reader: Supported

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #86,911 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #21

in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > History > Europe > Scandinavia #36 in Books > History > Europe > Scandinavia #74 in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > History > Europe > Medieval

Customer Reviews

If I wanted to read a text book I would have taken a class. Long and wordy with very little content. I

learned more watching Vikings on the History channel. The section on migration into Europe was good but on the whole I would not recommend this book for leisure reading.

An enlightening trip from prehistory through the thirteenth century of a fascinating people.

I'm guessing this might be the kind of history book for people who don't like history. Instead of analysis, theories, and even just plain facts and narrative, what you get instead is lots of purple prose, lots of details about places the author visits, lots of very high-level flights of fancy, lots of repeated information, lots of stuff that's not even related to the topic. Just to give you an idea, here's how one chapter begins: "The little Swedish island of Faro lies just off the northern tip of Gotland, like a raft that has slipped its mooring. Even mainland Swedes tend to misinterpret the name 'Faro' - hearing in it their word 'far,' meaning 'sheep.' Since 'o' means island, they tend to assume the place is called the 'island of the sheep' - and given the number of sheep there, it is an easy mistake to make. On Faro, however, there is a distinct dialect of the Swedish tongue, called Modern Gutnish, which has been spoken in some of the islands since at least the medieval period. Modern Gutnish is derived, as might be expected, from Old Gutnish, another branch of the Old Norse language. For Gutnish speakers on Faro (and they are few and far between now, among a total population of fewer than 600 souls) the word for sheep is 'lamm.' On Faro 'far' has connotations of distance travelled, the journey, and so the name is better understood as either 'the travelers' island' or, even more precisely, 'the island that must be travelled to.' Since it lies marooned off the coast of an island off the coast of Sweden, it seems like a suitable name." And all this to introduce a trip the author takes to Faro to look at some early pictographs of long boats - but not before another several pages featuring similar diversions devoted to Ingmar Bergman (who lived on the island) and a detailed description of the landscape and walk to the pictograph. It all ends with this rather purple bit: "There was something magical in the air around that plain of bedrock trapped beneath its protective shield of ice. The sun was gone, replaced by a bright silver disc of gibbous moon that turned the crust from clear to white. How many sunsets and moonrises had cast their light and shade across that ship carving since its maker walked away from it all those thousands of years before? We see it now just as they saw it then." As they used to say in Monty Python and the Holy Grail, "get on with it!" A very odd effort, but probably not all that unusual when you realize it's coming from a television personality. There's a lot better stuff out there I'm sure.

Great story about a society that is very foreign to most of us

Good read

My husband is from Swedish background. His grandfather was from Swedish and has always wanted to know more about his roots. He loves it. Totally recommend this book.

A very easy to read and interesting look into the Viking Heritage. This book helps put a human face to the marauding, raping and pillaging Vikings.

This is not a straightforward history of the Vikings, who don't really appear until p.116 in Chapter 5. Before that the author explains why he became fascinated by Vikings as a child, and lays the foundation for their eventual appearance on the European scene with plodding chapters on the Bronze Age, the fall of the Roman Empire in the west, and other social, economic and political developments that led to the Viking Age. After this lengthy set-up, the book starts to get going with descriptions in Chapter 5 of how Swedish Vikings established trading centers and kingdoms at the east end of the Baltic, eventually founding Russia. Chapter 6 gives a sketchy account of Viking interactions with the Byzantine empire, then--confusingly--shifts its focus to Viking incursions into Western Europe. At this point the author's primary interest in the Viking history of the British Isles becomes evident. We learn little here about Viking explorations into the Mediterranean, but quite a lot about the important role Vikings played in the early history of Ireland. Oliver repeatedly refers to the Vikings' hunger for silver coins from the Mideast, and their southward trade dealings beyond the Black Sea. Historians think Vikings may have reached beyond Constantinople all the way to Baghdad, but you wouldn't know it from Oliver's book. Frustratingly, he throws out a choice tidbit--"Finds of silk back home in Sweden suggest they had penetrated China and the Indian subcontinent by then as well"--but, incredibly, doesn't follow up on it at all. Vikings in India? In China? THAT's something I'd never heard of, but Oliver can't be bothered with providing any more detail. Chapter 7 covers the Viking invasion of Britain and their wars of conquest with the Anglo-Saxons, introducing Alfred the Great in passing. We learn some interesting facts about how many places in Britain derive their names from Viking words. The chapter then switches focus to trace the history of the Vikings' arrival in the Faeroe, Orkney and Shetland islands, and their eventual landing in Scotland. Here I learned something new about the Vikings: They established a sea kingdom in the Hebrides and on Scotland's west coast, and Prince Charles' now-meaningless title "Lord of the Isles" today is a legacy of that kingdom. Scotland's Viking heritage is continued in

Chapter 8, which then shifts focus to the Viking expansion into Iceland. However, the Viking settlement in Greenland is given just four pages, and the Viking site at L'Anse aux Meadows doesn't get much more than a page, nor even a single photograph. This is unforgivable. Historians have never solved the riddle of how and why the Greenland settlement died out after about 300 years. Oliver devotes only a lone paragraph to this, leaving us wishing for more with these final, tantalizing words on the subject: "In any event, some misfortune overtook them...eventually the ships from Greenland stopped arriving in Iceland. When a Christian mission was sent out from Norway in the early seventeenth century, it found not a single man or woman of Viking descent." Dozens of books have been written about the Viking discovery of North America. Learning more about the Vikings in Greenland and North America was the primary reason I picked up this book, but Oliver isn't interested in modern scholarship on those subjects, so I was intensely disappointed by the lack of space he devoted to them. This is, I feel, the book's primary failure, but the other problem with this book is that entire pages are devoted to describing Viking archaeological sites, and each time you encounter them, the pace of the book's flow comes to a screeching halt. I'll grant that you learn much about Viking society and culture in this book, but you can tell that the author, a Scot, is primarily interested in the Vikings' role in Ireland and Britain. Chapter 9 is the most interesting because it's devoted to Canute the Great--"the most successful Viking of them all," as Oliver writes--who ruled England, Norway, Denmark and part of Sweden before his death in 1035. The chapter--and the book--ends (abruptly) with the Norman conquest in 1066. Oliver earlier had mentioned how the French king gave Normandy to the Northmen (Vikings) to appease them, creating the Duchy of Normandy, and went on to relate the involvement of the Normans in the wars between Alfred the Great's heirs and the Vikings intent on conquering Britain. That is the extent of any mention of the Normans in this book. Disappointingly, Oliver fails to provide any summary or concluding chapter outlining the impact of the Viking Age, and he completely omits any mention of the Normans' impact on Italian, Byzantine and Mideast history. Normans had been invading southern Italy since 999 and eventually established the Kingdom of Sicily in 1130. But before the appearance of that kingdom, Normans from southern Italy were among the principal leaders in the First Crusade (1096--30 years after Hastings), and they created a Crusader state, the Principality of Antioch, in what is modern-day Turkey and Syria, which eventually allied itself with the invading Mongols. You won't learn any of this from Oliver, who obviously considered the history of Norman involvement in the Mediterranean unworthy of inclusion. Oliver mentions how the personal bodyguards of the Byzantine emperors were the Varangian Guard, an elite force formed from the Swedish Rus. The Guard later was predominated by Rus, Norsemen from Scandinavia and

Normans. However, Oliver doesn't mention that the Normans of southern Italy fought against their Norse cousins of the Varangian Guard at the (second) Battle of Cannae in 1018, and the two groups fought as allies in 1038 during the Byzantine reconquest of Sicily from the Arabs. Among the Guard at that time was Harald Hardrada, who later was king of Norway from 1046 to 1066. Oliver mentions Hardrada near the very end of this book, but only in connection with Britain and Norway. I only mention all this here because it would fit nicely into a concluding chapter, bringing the history of the Vikings--and their Norman descendants--full circle from their founding of Russia and their initial involvement with the Byzantine Empire. Oliver's coverage of the Viking role in the creation of Ireland and England is well-written, and that subject is the book's best feature. His subtitle, "A new history," suggests scholarship on topics that are, unfortunately, missing from this book. If you're looking for more than passing details about the Vikings in parts of Europe other than Scandinavia, the British Isles or Russia, this is not the book for you. And, if you're seeking any sort of new scholarship or discussion of Viking settlements in Greenland and North America, you'll be wasting your time with this book.

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