

Vikings and Early Russia  
AP World History  
Kienast

The Vikings were seafaring north Germanic people who raided, traded, explored, and settled in wide areas of Europe, Asia, and the North Atlantic islands from the late 8th to the mid-11th centuries. The Vikings employed wooden longships with wide, shallow-draft hulls, allowing navigation in rough seas or in shallow river waters. The ships could be landed on beaches, and their light weight enabled them to be hauled over portages. These versatile ships allowed the Vikings to travel as far east as Constantinople and the Volga River in Russia, as far west as Iceland, Greenland, and Newfoundland, and as far south as Nekor. This period of Viking expansion, known as the Viking Age, constitutes an important element of the medieval history of Scandinavia, Great Britain, Ireland, Russia, and the rest of Europe.

Despite their raiding of other civilizations, the Vikings ended up promoting trade with their explorations and conquests. Rurik was a Varangian [Viking] chieftain who sailed into what is now Russia in 862 CE. He eventually built a settlement near Novgorod, and founded the Rurik Dynasty, which ruled Kievan Rus (and later Grand Duchy of Moscow and Tsardom of Russia) until the 17th century.

Rurik remained in power until his death in 879. His successors (the Rurik Dynasty), however, moved the capital to Kiev and founded the state of Kievan Rus, which persisted until the Mongol invasion in 1240.

Eric the Red (950-1003 CE) was a Viking explorer who was the first European in Greenland. He sailed from Iceland in 982 and led a group of colonists to Greenland in 986. Eric the Red (also called Erik Thorvaldson, Eirik Raude, or Eirik Torvaldsson) was born in Norway, but his family settled in western Iceland, after his father, Thorvald Asvaldsson, was banished for murdering a man. Eric later killed two men in Iceland and was banished from Iceland for three years.

After hearing of the discovery by Gunnbjorn Olfsson of some islands that lay west of Iceland, Eric decided to sail to these islands during his banishment. With a crew, he sailed due west from and landed on the coast of eastern Greenland. In 985, Eric's banishment from Iceland was over, so he returned. He called this new land Greenland (even though it was covered with ice) to make it sound nicer than it was and encourage settlement.

Leif Ericsson (also spelled Eriksson) (980-1020) was a Viking explorer who was possibly the first European to sail to North America. Leif sailed north from the southern tip of Greenland, then went south along the coast of Baffin Island down to Labrador, and then landed in what is now called Newfoundland, Canada (which he called Vinland). Ericsson sailed around the year 1000 CE. Ericsson was born in Iceland and was one of the sons of the explorer Eric the Red. Ericsson later inherited his father's position as leader of the Norse colony in Greenland.

The early history of Russia, like those of many countries, is one of migrating peoples and ancient kingdoms. In fact, early Russia was not exactly "Russia," but a collection of cities that gradually coalesced into an empire. In the early part of the ninth century, as part of the same great movement that brought the Danes to England and the Norsemen to Western Europe, a

Scandinavian people known as the Varangians [Vikings] crossed the Baltic Sea and landed in Eastern Europe. The leader of the Varangians was the semi-legendary warrior Rurik, who led his people in 862 to the city of Novgorod on the Volkhov River. Whether Rurik took the city by force or was invited to rule there, he certainly invested the city. From Novgorod, Rurik's successor Oleg extended the power of the city southward. In 882, he gained control of Kiev, a Slavic city that had arisen along the Dnepr River around the 5th century. Oleg's attainment of rule over Kiev marked the first establishment of a unified, dynastic state in the region. Kiev became the center of a trade route between Scandinavia and Constantinople, and Kievan Rus', as the empire came to be known, flourished for the next three hundred years.

By 989, Oleg's great-grandson Vladimir I was ruler of a kingdom that extended to as far south as the Black Sea, the Caucasus Mountains, and the lower reaches of the Volga River. Having decided to establish a state religion, Vladimir carefully considered a number of available faiths and decided upon Greek Orthodoxy, thus allying himself with Constantinople and the West. It is said that Vladimir decided against Islam partly because of his belief that his people could not live under a religion that prohibits hard liquor. Vladimir was succeeded by Yaroslav the Wise, whose reign marked the apogee of Kievan Rus'. Yaroslav codified laws, made shrewd alliances with other states, encouraged the arts, and all the other sorts of things that wise kings do. Unfortunately, he decided in the end to divide his kingdom among his children and bid them to cooperate and flourish. Of course, they did nothing of the sort.

Within a few decades of Yaroslav's death (in 1054), Kievan Rus' was rife with strife and had broken up into regional power centers. Internal divisions were made worse by the invading Cumans (better known as the Kipchaks). It was during this time (in 1147 to be exact) that Yuri Dolgorukiy, one of the regional princes, held a feast at his hunting lodge atop a hill overlooking the confluence of the Moskva and Neglina Rivers. A chronicler recorded the party, thus providing us with the earliest mention of Moscow, the small settlement that would soon become the pre-eminent city in Russia.