



THE VIKING'S GREATEST BATTLES

KIM HJARDAR



*spartacus



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Vikingenes største slag
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The Last Viking

Introduction

The Viking Age was an expansive and innovative era in the history of the Nordic countries. Trade, plundering, warfare and settlement took the Vikings to almost every corner of Europe and beyond. Viking society was militarised. In other words, no distinctions were made between civilians and warriors, and society's leaders were also military leaders. All free men had the right to bear arms and they had to be able to use them. Death in battle was a natural end for a man in those days.

Society in the Viking Age revolved around the land-owning peasantry and the ideological world of the peasants. Even the gods were idealised farmers who had vast farms with fields of grain, cattle, servants and slaves. The peasants of Scandinavia were dominated by an "aristocratic" warrior elite who were the principal stewards of social ideals. Breaches with social norms and ideals led to ruined reputations and this was seen as a fate worse than death. These norms were often linked to the way people preserved their "honour". Honour was primarily earned by fulfilling one's duty to one's leaders, friends, family and kin. The concept was also linked to a well-developed fatalism in Norse mythology. This promoted the belief that an individual's fate was already predetermined at birth and that the only thing people truly had control over was how they met their fate – especially at war. In the Edda poem *V luspá* (*Prophecy of the Seeress*) we hear about the three Norns – Urd, Verdande and Skuld – who sit around the root of the World Tree, Yggdrasil, weaving the threads of human destinies. The threads they use are life itself and they weave everything

that will happen. Nobody had the power to alter what was woven into the Norns' tapestry – not even the gods. This fatalism may have given sense to an otherwise apparently meaningless death. What mattered most for a warrior's reputation was therefore not necessarily victory or defeat but the way he behaved when he met his end. This view was reinforced by the skalds' praise of the few who lived up to the ideals and the scornful words they reserved for those who failed to do so. The motto was that it was better to die young with honour than grow old without. Particularly strict expectations were attached to society's leaders, who had a greater obligation to live up to the various ideals than others. They had to be role models, and were supposed to be generous to friends and ruthless to enemies. Access to beautiful weapons, ships, fine clothes and jewellery made of silver and gold offered proof that one was living up to the ideals. And the Vikings were willing to travel far and defy powerful forces in search of honour and spoils.

In this book, you will find a selection of battles, campaigns and raids conducted by the Vikings in the period from 750 until just before 1100. Many battles may be left out: an overview of this kind can never be complete. One of the criteria of choice is that there must be contemporary sources for the events. These may include images, runestones, skaldic lays or foreign journals, letters and accounts. The texts of the Sagas are not deemed to be contemporary sources but are cautiously used as the basis for some of the stories if the events they describe can be confirmed or found in other contemporary sources.



The Sources for the Viking Battles



The Vikings have left many traces of their warlike lives. Important elements include archaeological finds such as weapons, skeletons, ships and other remains. These can tell us about the weapons they used, the types of ships they had and where they spent time, but they cannot tell us anything about why they set out to pillage and wage war. Or what they did when they got to the places they travelled to. For that, we need narrative sources, such as writings or images. We can divide these into two different categories: those they produced themselves and those produced by others. The best sources are often those created by the Vikings themselves: skaldic lays, texts or images on runestones, and other artefacts. Important sources about the Vikings include the histories preserved

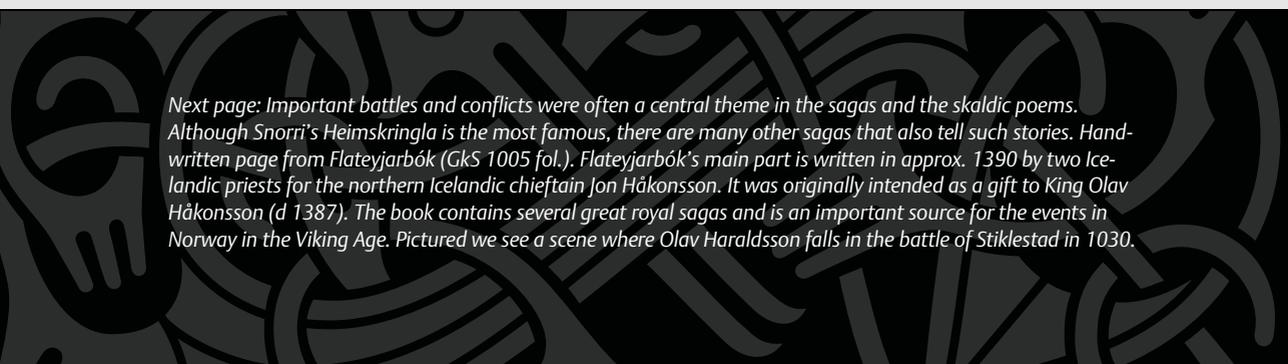
in Iceland, the Sagas. The most famous of these are the many King Sagas, which the Icelandic historians wrote down between the 1100s and the 1400s. They take the reader around the entirety of the then-known world on a campaign of plundering and conquest, offering conflict aplenty, bloody battles and exciting occurrences. But since the authors lived more than 200-300 years after the events they write about, these are not contemporary sources. What's more, the authors of the Sagas were Christian. It is therefore uncertain whether everything they write is true or whether it is coloured by their religion. Any historian trying

Next page: One of the most important sources for the Viking Age is archeology. Curator Vegard Vike with skull from Ålgård in Sørum municipality in Norway, dated to the 900s.
Photo: Lill-Ann Chepstow-Lusty / KHM.



to piece together the jigsaw puzzle of the Vikings who wishes to use the Sagas as a source must ask a number of questions. Do any other sources say the same thing? If so, this reinforces their credibility. But then we also have to find out which of the texts is older. Maybe the other sources are simply copied from others again? That is why it is important for historians to try to find the oldest source. In this way, one digs back as far as possible. We must also ask ourselves why these stories were written. For example, the best-known Saga writer, Snorre Sturlason, was in the service of earl Skule, a prominent member of the Norwegian royal family, when he wrote about King Håkon's forebears in his book *Sögur Noregs konunga* (*The Norse King Sagas*), also known as *Heimskringla*. Did Håkon or earl Skule perhaps commission him to write the sagas? Might he have added to or embroidered the historical facts to please Skule and Håkon? Or maybe he was actually writing a historical novel? The best thing is if archaeological sources or other contemporary sources bear out the stories. Many of the saga writers and historians tell us in their books that their tales are based on ancient written and oral histories, and skaldic lays. Most of the sagas and history

books from the times after the Viking Age contain numerous skaldic lays that back up the stories. Many of these poems are considered to be genuine sources for the Viking Age owing to their complex structure: they must have been relayed correctly in order not to lose meaning. Most of the lays are homages to kings and chieftains and speak volumes about social attitudes and values but little about everyday life. They may also tell us a lot about important events, such as battles and situations of conflict, and they can tell us a lot about who took part in the various battles – as well as offering examples of actions performed in battle. In addition to the great Norse literature and the skaldic lays, we have written sources from England, Ireland, France, Russia, Spain, Byzantium and a number of Muslim countries. These often contain eyewitness descriptions. Some of them are simply short notes in journals written in monasteries and churches, while others are letters and accounts of the battles that were fought against the Vikings and their outcomes. Together, these sources create a good foundation for telling the story of the biggest, most remarkable and most exciting battles and conflicts in the Viking Age.



Next page: Important battles and conflicts were often a central theme in the sagas and the skaldic poems. Although Snorri's *Heimskringla* is the most famous, there are many other sagas that also tell such stories. Handwritten page from *Flateyjarbók* (GkS 1005 fol.). *Flateyjarbók*'s main part is written in approx. 1390 by two Icelandic priests for the northern Icelandic chieftain Jon Hákonsson. It was originally intended as a gift to King Olav Hákonsson (d 1387). The book contains several great royal sagas and is an important source for the events in Norway in the Viking Age. Pictured we see a scene where Olav Haraldsson falls in the battle of Stiklestad in 1030.

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The Sack of Nantes

When: 24th June 843

Where: Nantes, a city in the Loire Valley, France

Outcome: Nantes was pillaged

Warring parties: The Loire Vikings and the Duke of Brittany

Combatants: Åsgeir of Vestfold with 67 ships and 2,500 to 3,000 men versus local defences

Commanders and leaders: Åsgeir, Count Lambert versus the Franks

Losses: Unknown

Sources for the battle

The sources for the Vikings' ravages in the Frankish Empire are largely the annals and journals written in various monasteries. The most important are *Chronicon rerum inter Francos gestarom* (*The Annals of Flodoard*), yearly annals of the most important events in the Frankish Empire written by Flodoard of Reims (d. 996); and *Annalens regni Francorum* (*The Royal Frankish Annals*), which is a record of important events written year by year from 741 until 829; and *Annales Fontanellenses* (*The Annals of Fontanelle*), written in around 872 in the monastery of Saint Wandrille, which is also called *Chronicon sancti Wandregesili* (*The Chronicle of Saint Wandrille*). Another important source is *Annales Bertinian* (*St Bertin's Annals*), which largely deals with events linked to the kingdom of West Francia between 830 and 882. All these are therefore deemed to be important sources for the Viking presence in the Frankish Empire. Further important sources are *Annales Egoismenses* (*The Annals of Angoulême*), which deals with the years between 815 and 991, and the somewhat later source, *Chronicon Namnetense* (*The Chronicle of Nantes*), from around 1050.



The Raven who Lays Waste to the Land



After the death of Louis the Pious in 840, his surviving sons divided the realm among themselves. Lothar (795-855) became emperor and ruled the central part of the empire. Charles the Bald (823-877) got the western part and Louis the German (804-876), the eastern part. Lothar quickly came into conflict with his brother Charles and allied himself with the mighty Viking chieftains to obtain their assistance in the war against his brothers. This led to the most intensive phase of Viking raids on the Frankish Empire.

Prelude

In 841 a fleet of Viking ships came from Norway under the leadership of a man called

“*Oscherus*”, equivalent to the Norse *Åsgeir* – spear of the gods. In *Annales Fontanellenses* it is said that the Vikings wreaked havoc with “*robbery, sword and fire.*” Monks and many other prominent figures were taken prisoner and later liberated in exchange for large sums of money. The annal relates that people were often given the choice between fire and destruction or buying their freedom – something very few could afford:

.....

“In the year of our Lord 841, on 12th May, the Northmen came with their leader *Oscherus*. On 14th May they set fire to Rouen. On 16th May, they left. On 24th May, they burnt the monastery at Jumieges. On 25th May, Fontenelle was spared from plundering for a sum of six livres [1 livre = 489.5 grams of silver]. 28th May, the monks of Saint Denis purchased the freedom of sixty-eight prisoners for a ransom of 26 livres.”

.....

Much suffering and pain must lie behind these brief, precise, somewhat clinical references, and great wealth was at stake. The sources do not dwell on that especially, so it is left to us to imagine how such raids unfolded and how they affected the lives of all those who lived through them. Those whose freedom was not bought risked ending up at one of the many slave markets that sprang up in the wake of the Vikings. On the island of Oissel, just south of Rouen, a base was set up from which Åsgeir could operate, and here the prisoners were probably interned to await their fate. The Vikings named the island *Thorhólmr* (Thor or Thunder Isle). From Oissel, the Vikings continued up the Seine, plundering the villages and monasteries they encountered. The rich monasteries and religious communities helped many escape the Vikings' clutches. Others with wealth did the same. When autumn arrived, the Vikings vanished as swiftly as they had come.

In 843, the Vikings were back and it is suggested, although the sources do not explicitly state it, that Åsgeir had returned. In the *Annales Engolismenses* (*The Annals of Angoulême*) it is claimed that those who came were, once again *Westfaldingi* – people from Vestfold in southern Norway. There probably weren't all that many warlords from Vestfold capable of commanding such large fleets at that time, so it seems probable that it was indeed Åsgeir who returned and led the 67-ship fleet up the Loire in June 843. His forces may have amounted to somewhere between 2,500 and 3,000 men. This same year, the Vikings also established a year-round base on the monastery island of Noirmoutier at the mouth of the Loire.

Some 50 km further inland lies Nantes, then one of the Frankish Empire's most important bishoprics and trading centres.

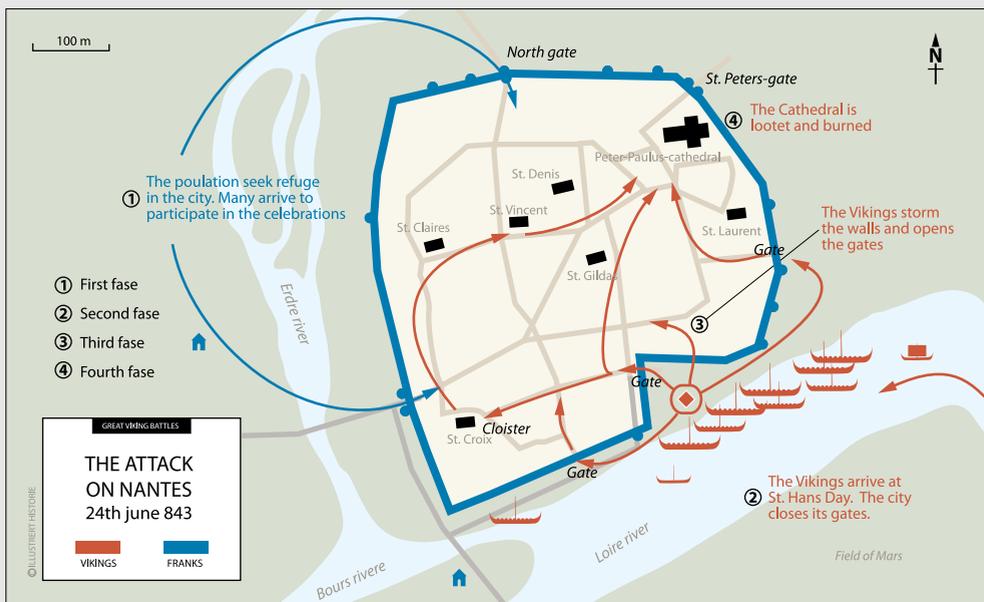
The city was a trouble spot in the battle between the Franks and the Breton people, who had hitherto held firm against the Frankish expansion. The city was captured and re-captured in turn by Frankish and Breton princes. The region was also the centre of an escalating conflict between the sons of the emperor. In 843, the city was controlled by followers of Charles the Bald, while the local count, Lambert (d. 836), was Lothar's man. In addition, Lambert had formed an alliance with the Bretons, who hoped this would lead to Lothar handing them back their influence in the region.

The Vikings' arrival in Noirmoutier further fuelled the conflict, causing it to explode. The Vikings became willing participants in the internal strife between the Franks and the Bretons. The somewhat later source, *Chronicon Namnetense* (*The Chronicle of Nantes*), thinks it was Lambert himself who lured the Vikings on Noirmoutier into attacking Nantes, with promises of a city rich in gold, silver and other treasures. This claim may have its roots in the account of the *Annales Engolismenses*, which in fact says that Lambert was evicted from city just fourteen days before the Vikings attacked. If that was the case, he acted extremely quickly.

The monasteries and villages in the river valley were systematically plundered as the fleet approached the city. Nantes was founded as early as 70 BCE by the Namnetes, a Gallic tribe, and the city had seen many conquerors come and go. First the Roman General, Julius Caesar, who took the city in 56 BCE and transformed it into a provincial Roman city. Then came the Saxons

Next page: In 843, the Viking chief Åsgeir led a fleet of 67 ships and almost 3,000 Vikings up the Loire River and spread death and terror.
Photo: Kasia Skrzypek, FotoForge.





(around 285 CE), the Franks (around 500 CE) and the Bretons (in the 600s). But the city had probably never encountered an enemy like the Vikings. There are several sources for what happened next. As we shall see, brief written sources conceal many of the details. In *Annales Bertiniani* (*St. Bertin's Annals*) it is simply stated that:

“Northmen pirates attacked Nantes, killed the bishop and many of the priests and many of the inhabitants of both sexes and plundered the city. Then they attacked the western part of Aquitania and laid it to waste. Finally, they settled on an island, brought their households from the mainland and overwintered there in a fixed settlement.”

This is just a brief account of the raid itself, followed by the fact that they continued to pillage and eventually built an overwintering camp on an island, identified as Noirmoutier. To gain a true insight into the gruesome events that lay behind this

brief reference, we must turn to *Chronicon Namnetense*, which contains an eyewitness account written down in around 866. It was found in Abbey Saint-Serge in Angers and published in *Histoire de Bretagne* in 1588;

“... after they [the Vikings] disembarked, some of them entered the city walls with ladders, others broke into the monastery. Nobody could deny them entry. They entered the city during the celebrations of Saint John the Baptist...”

On 24th June, the feast of St John was taking place and there was a market in the old Breton market town. Nantes was full of people in festive mood, as well as many refugees who had fled the coastal areas for fear of the Vikings, seeking refuge within the city walls. Songs and music must have poured through the streets, and people sang and smiled. The noise of distant church bells, their loud clangs warning of enemies, must have been drowned out by the racket from the street parties. Soon,

though, shrieks could be heard cutting through the sounds of jubilation.

The city's defences, which dated back to the late Roman period, were obsolete and badly maintained. The 200-year peace that reigned in the Frankish kingdom before the Viking raids had left most of the country's defences crumbling. Nantes was no exception. On 24th June, the Vikings stormed the old city walls with the aid of siege ladders and opened the city gates from within.

.....
“... At the sight of the enemy entering the city, people fled into the church devoted to the Apostles St. Peter and St. Paul and barricaded the doors against their persecutors, praying for divine salvation since they could not save themselves... the Vikings came in ...”
.....

Many of the inhabitants fled into the church of St. Peter and St. Paul, where Bishop Gohardus was saying mass. The entrances were barred but the Vikings got in by smashing the windows and breaking down the doors. It was a brutal massacre.

.....
“... The Vikings butchered all they found inside without regard for age or sex. They murdered the priests and Bishop Gohardus, who died as he was intoning the ‘*Sursum corda*’. All the other monks, regardless of whether they were in or outside the church, were slain and disembowelled...”
.....

The source relates in gruesome detail what befell the populace and how the bishop was murdered in mid-prayer (the *Sursum corda* ‘Lift your hearts up to God’), collapsing before the altar in a pool of blood. The priests, monks and canons all suffered the same fate before the whole cathedral was plundered of its treasures and set ablaze. Eyewitnesses tell that nobody could express in words the

.....
“catastrophe and suffering that struck on that day of woe” without drowning in tears “... infants hung from their dead mothers’ breasts and suckled blood instead of milk; the flagstones of the church were red with the blood of holy men and the holy altar dripped with the blood of innocents. Then the heathens plundered the city, taking everything of worth, and then set light to the church. They took with them a large number of prisoners as hostages for ransom and returned to their ships...”
.....

In the light cast by the burning city, the Vikings dragged their prisoners and booty down to the ships. The glow of flames against the sky warned the people in the villages of the misfortune that had befallen the city. The people of the region took what little they owned and fled further inland.

Aftermath

Not all the Vikings returned to Noirmoutier. A large group settled for the winter outside Nantes and ravaged the surrounding region. The monasteries, which lay close together in this area, quickly packed their reliquaries and fled further inland. Those monasteries and villages that remained in the Loire Valley were burnt to the ground by the main fleet on its way back to Noirmoutier.

Whatever the strength of Lothar's ill-feelings against his brother, this must have been more than he was bargaining for. But it was too late to do anything about that now. With the sack of Nantes, the Vikings demonstrated that they had no intention of being obedient pawns in an internal chess match between the Frankish princes. The horror that unfolded was just the beginning of a rule of terror that descended on the area around the French rivers for a long, long time to come.

The Battle of Tablada

When: 25th September – 17th November 844

Where: The village of Tablada outside Seville, al-Andalus, Spain

Outcome: Initial victory for the Vikings; Seville was conquered and plundered. Later victory for the Muslims; The Vikings were forced out.

Warring parties: 2,000 Vikings from Noirmoutier, Francia versus the Emirate of Cordoba, Al-Andalus

Commanders and leaders: Unknown leader † vs Abd al-Rahman Isa ibn Shuhayd Musa ibn Musa al-Qasi

Losses: Around 570 Vikings killed; unknown numbers of Muslims

Sources for the battle

The Viking raid on Spain in 844 is mentioned in both Frankish and Arabic sources. One of the most important is the Frankish *Annales Bertiniani* (*St. Bertin's Annals*). Parts of the account are attributed to Prudentius Trecensis (d. 861), a Spanish-born bishop of Troyes. He summed up this voyage briefly thus: “After the Vikings had sailed up the River Garonne to Toulouse, in spring 844, they sailed back to the Atlantic Ocean. They travelled onward to a country called Galicia. They later continued to Spanish land that was occupied by the Saracens, and there they fought until they were vanquished.” This is confirmed by several other Christian sources, such as *Chronicon Sebastiani* (*The Chronicle of Bishop Sebastianus*) from the mid-800s, and *Codex Albeldensis* (the book from the monastery of San Martín de Albelda), a collection of historical documents dealing with the situation in Spain from antiquity to 976. But to find details of what actually happened when the Vikings arrived in Islamic Spain, we must turn to the Arabic sources. Here, the Vikings are referred to as al-Madjus, al-Majus or al-Magi. This means Fire Worshippers and was a common name for heathens. The most important Arabic sources are *Tarikh Iftitah al-Andalus* (*The History of the Conquest of al-Andalus*) written by Abu Bakr al-Qurtubi (d. 977), *Muqtabas* (a collection of historical texts) by Ibn Hayyan (d. ca. 1076) and *Tarsi al-akhbar* (*The History of the Civil Wars and Rebellions*) by al-Udri (d. 1085). Also the works of *Al-bayan al-mugrib fi ahbar al-Magrib* (*An Extensive Account of the History of the West*) by Ibn-Adhari (d. ca. 1295), in which he copied writings from the 900s, and An-Nuwairi's (d. 1332) *Nihayat al-arab fi funun al adab* (*The Ultimate Ambition in the Arts of Erudition*) are used in this account. Although these sources are largely based on older accounts, it is a challenge that many of these are relatively late sources. We do not know, for example, whether the names of the Arabic leaders in the war against the Vikings were added later or were known at the time. Nonetheless, these sources combine to offer us an exciting insight into a somewhat unusual Viking raid.



Honour and Death beneath the Southern Sun



Al-Andalus is the Arabic name for the parts of Spain that were conquered by the Islamic Caliphate after the invasion in 711. In 750 the Umayyad dynasty was overthrown by the Abbasids. Abd al-Rahman (731–788), an Umayyad prince, fled to al-Andalus and established himself as the Emir, with his capital in Córdoba. Al-Andalus enjoyed its political and cultural heyday under Abd al-Rahman and his descendants. Fleeing intellectuals, artists and scientists, as well as Jewish families and various trading houses established themselves in the more tolerant Umayyad emirate in Spain, helping the region to flourish both culturally and economically.

When Islam established itself in the Middle East and then expanded into the Germanic kingdoms in North Africa and

Spain, it didn't just change the inhabitants' religious life but also, and fundamentally, their economic life. From the outset, trade and mobility lay at the heart of the Arabic expansion. Not since Roman times had Spain enjoyed such a commercial flourishing as it did after the arrival of the Arabs. And not since Roman times had the region been a centre of exports – pig iron, copper and mercury; glass, ceramics, woollen textiles and silk, as well as leatherwork – to the extent that it now was. In addition, they imported a great deal of gold from the upper Niger region. The Jewish intellectual, Hasdai ibn Shaprut (ca. 915–ca. 970), described the country in a letter to Khazaria's King Joseph:

.....
“The country is rich, abundant rivers, springs, aqueducts; a land rich in grain, oil, wine, fruits and every delicacy on earth; it has cool

gardens and orchards of all kinds, including those with leaves that the silkworms live off... we are also surrounded by mountains with veins of sulphur, porphyry, marble and crystal. Tradesmen gather here, and travellers from all over the world bring spices, precious gems and splendid wares fit for kings and princes..."

al-Andalus also had a darker side. Much of the agriculture and production of goods was based on slavery, and the sale and purchase of slaves was an important business for many tradesmen. There were a number of slave markets around the kingdom and the Vikings were themselves great slave traders. It isn't hard to imagine why the Vikings from the ever more impoverished regions of the Frankish Empire might wish to visit this area.

Prelude

Many Viking bands in the Frankish Empire at the beginning of the 840s were fighting over the same spoils. Gradually, the coastal regions and the areas along the rivers became so impoverished that many enterprising chiefs started to look for new areas to plunder. The Christian kingdoms of northern Spain and the Muslim caliphate in Cordoba became the Vikings' new target. A group of Vikings from the monastery island of Noirmoutier at the mouth of the Loire equipped a major expedition in 844 to search for the famed treasures of al-Andalus. The fleet of warships and smaller auxiliary ships followed the coast south towards al-Andalus in what proved to be a bloody quest for honour and wealth. *The Chronicon Sebastiani* (The Chronicle of Bishop Sebastianus) from the mid-800s tells us what happened.

"The city of Gijón on the coast of Asturia was the first Spanish city to suffer a Viking raid. The

Vikings later continued to Galicia, where they lost a battle against the army of King Ramiro".

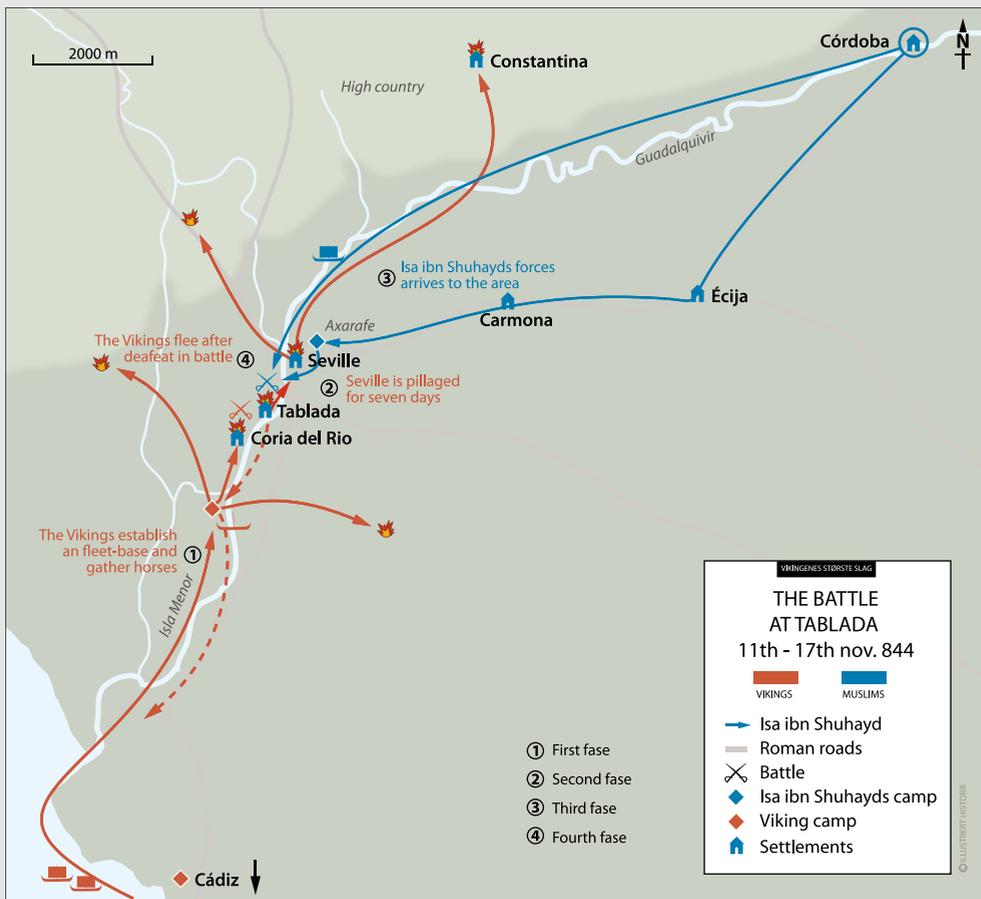
The first known raid in Spain took place on 1st August 844 and targeted the little port of Gijon in the kingdom of Asturias in the Christian north. This is also confirmed in the *Codex Albeldensis* (the book from the monastery of San Martín de Albelda). This source tells us that the men of King Ramiro of Asturias (reign: 842-850) managed to repel the Viking raid on La Coruña, capturing much of their booty and destroying some ships. The primary purpose of these Viking forays was probably to acquire provisions and take prisoners they could later sell in al-Andalus – most likely the ultimate target of their expedition. *Chronicon Sebastiani* briefly continues the account of events:

"The [Vikings] then continued south and conquered the city of Cádiz. After that, they sailed up the river Guadalquivir to the city of Seville, which they conquered and plundered. Emir Abd ar-Rahman II dispatched his army to face the Vikings, inflicting heavy losses on them and casting them out of the city."

But let's go back to the point when the Vikings arrived in Muslim Spain and follow the Arabic sources instead. On 20th August 844, a number of ships arrived in Lisbon, modern-day Portugal. The sources disagree over how many there were, reporting the fleet size as both 54 and 80 ships. If we take the lower number, that means around 2,500 Vikings. Ibn-Adhari says:

"it was as if they filled the sea with dark birds and filled hearts with anxiety and torment".

The Vikings went ashore and settled on the great plain before the city. This ancient Phoenician trading centre, whose roots go



back to 1200 BCE, had a well-preserved city wall from Roman times and for 13 days, the Vikings tried to enter the city. It is uncertain whether they succeeded, because the sources appear to disagree. The chronicler al-Udri says that they conquered the city, while Abu Bakr simply says that they besieged it. The city's governor, Wahballah ibn Hazm, wrote about the attack in a letter to Emir Abd ar-Rahman II (792—852) in Córdoba. At that time, he was the supreme leader of the Muslims in Spain. The letter contained a warning and urged the Emir to prepare a defence.

The fleet's next known target was Cádiz. The small, strategically placed port

was plundered and burnt down. Its location also appears to have made it a suitable place for the Vikings to base their fleet. The long peninsula was only attached to the mainland via a narrow spit of land and was easy to defend. From here, the fleet conducted more raids and assaults on the cities of Medina Sidonia and Algeciras among others – and possibly also on the Abbasid-controlled city of Asilah in modern-day Morocco.

On 25th September the Vikings settled on the great island of Isla Menor, halfway up the river Guadalquivir, by Seville. Here they built a base for their fleet and acquired horses and provisions. Smaller groups



In mid-November 844, a decisive battle broke out between the Vikings and the Muslims outside the village of Tablada. By then, the Vikings had plundered the country for 42 days. Photo: Bartek Janiczek, Recography.



then headed north on reconnaissance and plundering raids. The people in the villages of Coria del Rio and Tablada were the first victims in the region. On 29th September, local forces gathered and attempted a counter-attack, but were set to flight in what was the first major battle against the Vikings.

News of the Vikings' ravages had spread rapidly after the attack on Lisbon. Abd al-Rahman II had placed his army on war footing and mobilised his elite forces under the leadership of Hajib (a kind of prime minister) Isa ibn Shuhayd (d. after 844). But the mobilisation took time and when the Vikings reached the gates of Seville, the Emir's soldiers were still many weeks away. On the 1st or 3rd October, the Vikings stormed Seville, which had no defences at the time, and after arduous fighting, they were free to embark on the plundering. Ibn Adhari relates that the Vikings let "*the inhabitants of the town drink from the goblet of death*" while An-Nuwairi tells us that the Vikings "*spared neither man nor beast*". The local forces, and probably the civilians too, had sought refuge in the city's fortress. The Vikings were unable to enter and from there the inhabitants witnessed the Vikings plundering their city unhindered for seven days. They attempted to set the great mosque on fire with burning arrows, but it did not catch light properly, so only parts of the roof were damaged. In the 900s, it was still possible to see marks where the arrows had struck. Many other buildings were burned down. There were rich merchants in Seville with many luxury wares, so there was wealth aplenty to carry off. Inventories and other property were also transported to the base, along with women and children destined for the slave market. We must assume that wealthy merchants and officials were taken along too, to obtain ransom

payments. Using Seville as a base, the sources tell us that the Vikings conducted raids as far afield as Constantina, to the northwest of Córdoba. For a couple of weeks, they were relatively free to wreak havoc until the elite soldiers of Abd al-Rahman arrived.

The Battle

Isa ibn Shuhayd prepared the warships that would sail down the Guadalquivir to Seville and then ordered the governors nearest at hand to mobilise their men and come to Córdoba. Then the army marched along the old Roman highway towards Axarafa, a hilltop near Seville. Here they set up their headquarters. The war against the Vikings was seen by later chroniclers as a unifying action by the Muslims. They write that even Musa ibn Musa al-Qasi (d. 862), ruler of the Banu Qasi domain, a semi-autonomous principality in the north, contributed forces to help out and played an important role in repelling the Vikings. The Banu Qasi domain was almost independent of the emirate at that time and had originally been a Christian principality that survived conquest by converting to Islam.

On the days that followed, there were many skirmishes between the Muslim forces and the Vikings. Both sides had their victories, but the forces of Musa ibn Musa al-Qasi excelled. In one case, 70 Vikings are said to have lost their lives in a skirmish with his troops. The sources say nothing of how many Muslims fell. In mid-November, between the 11th and the 17th, a decisive battle took place outside the village of Tablada. By then, the Vikings had been in the region for 42 days.

The battle took place on both land and sea, the sources say. The Muslims' warships were equipped with Greek fire, which they

hurled at the Viking ships with catapults, setting them ablaze. The Muslims also had cavalry. The Vikings suffered a terrible defeat. 500 of them were killed, including one of the chieftains, and at least four ships were set on fire. The Muslims also took many prisoners, whom they hanged from the palm trees in Seville and Tablada after the battle. They then chopped off the heads of 200 of the corpses, including that of the chieftain. The Emir sent them to his allies in Tangier to underscore the scale of the victory over the Vikings. ibn Adhari wrote:

.....
“Their amir [chieftain] was killed and Allah killed them and annihilated them, dispatched their people and equipment as revenge and punishment from Allah and just retribution for their deeds.”
.....

The remaining Vikings withdrew to their ships and rowed out to sea. Along the banks, the local populace gathered, hurling rocks and insults at them. The Vikings then offered the local people the opportunity to buy back some of the prisoners in return for safe passage, provisions and clothes. After the exchange, the fleet left the area.”

The fleeing Viking fleet embarked on a long but bloody homeward journey. Along the way, it sailed up Rio Tinto and settled on the island of Saltés, not far from Huelva. From here, they conducted a number of bold raids for slaves and provisions. Their next stop was the mouth of the river Guadiana, which today marks the border between Spain and Portugal. They apparently conducted some raids upriver, in the direction of Beja, but this desolate landscape cannot have appealed greatly to them and they soon travelled onwards. The

sources name one stop at Ocsonoba, near Faro on the southern coast of Portugal, and one by Almada, on the bank opposite Lisbon. It was late autumn and the winter storms must have made onward sailing an unattractive prospect. It is therefore likely that they settled for the winter somewhere on the coast of Portugal, since we hear no more of them until autumn 845, when they attacked the Bordeaux region.

Epilogue

This was the first truly military encounter between the Vikings and the Muslims and although the Vikings came off worst this time, the emir realised that this was a war-like people to be reckoned with. He established an arsenal in Seville and transferred an elite unit of marines there. Then he set to work building a fleet to patrol the rivers.

It is striking how effectively the Muslim rulers responded to the Viking threat, compared with the slow, almost non-existent response from the Frankish and English princes in the same era. Much of this is probably due to the feudal ruling system that prevailed in Christian Europe, where the kings were weak and dependent on support and contributions from the noblemen. The nobles were often uninterested in being the kings' errand boys or risking their own financial and political position by expending major resources on defence and militias. Many kings in Europe therefore opted to pay the Vikings to stay away instead, or offered them lucrative rewards in exchange for their military services. The Muslim princes of Spain never did this. In all, this is the main reason why Muslim Spain was never a lucrative target for the Vikings.

The Raid on Miklagard

When: 18th June 860

Where: Constantinople by the Bosphorus Strait in modern-day Turkey

Outcome: The Vikings plundered the Byzantine region

Warring parties: Nordic Vikings against Byzantines

Commanders and leaders: Askold and Dyr versus Patriarch Photius the Great

Losses: Unknown, many civilians

Sources for the raid

The most important source for the Vikings' raid on Constantinople and their history in Russia, Belarus and Ukraine is *Povest' vremennykh let* (The Tale of Bygone Years), also known as the *Nestor Chronicle*. According to tradition, the chronicle was written by the monk Nestor in the principality of Kiev in around 1113, and deals with the principality's history from ca. 850 to 1110. Among the sources Nestor used were earlier (now lost) Slavic chronicles, Byzantine annals, local legends and the Norse sagas, as well as various Greek religious texts and Rus-Byzantine treaties. Nestor also wrote down the verbal accounts of the commander Jan Vysjatitsj (ca. 1016- 1106) and other military leaders from the court of Sviatopolk II of Kiev. Another important source for this raid is texts written by the Byzantine patriarch, Photius the Great (d. 893). Eighteen of his sermons have been preserved and in many of these, he tells of the Vikings' attack on the imperial city. He also writes about the attack in several of his *Encyclics* (letters). The sermons and letters are dated at around 867.

In the Shadow of the Imperial City



The first written account in which the Vikings are named in connection with the Eastern Roman Empire is probably the *Annales Bertiniani* (St. Bertin's Annals). In 839, a group of Vikings appeared at the court of Louis the Pious in Ingelhem, along with some emissaries from the Byzantine emperor. The men had been sent by their "*Chaganus*" (which means either khagan/king or Håkon – the High-Born) to the Byzantine emperor Theophilus (Emperor 829—d. 842) in a sign of friendship. Now they had accompanied an imperial delegation to the Frankish Empire in an attempt to return home to Sweden. However, peaceful relationships with Byzantium did not last long. The next time the Vikings appeared in Constantinople, in 860, they were there to conquer the

imperial city itself. The assault so shocked and terrified the Byzantines that they attempted to convert and establish diplomatic links with the *Rus*, which was one of the names people used for the Vikings in the East. Over time, this would develop into a close and intimate relationship that strengthened the principality of Kiev and incorporated it into the cultural realm of eastern Christianity.

Prelude

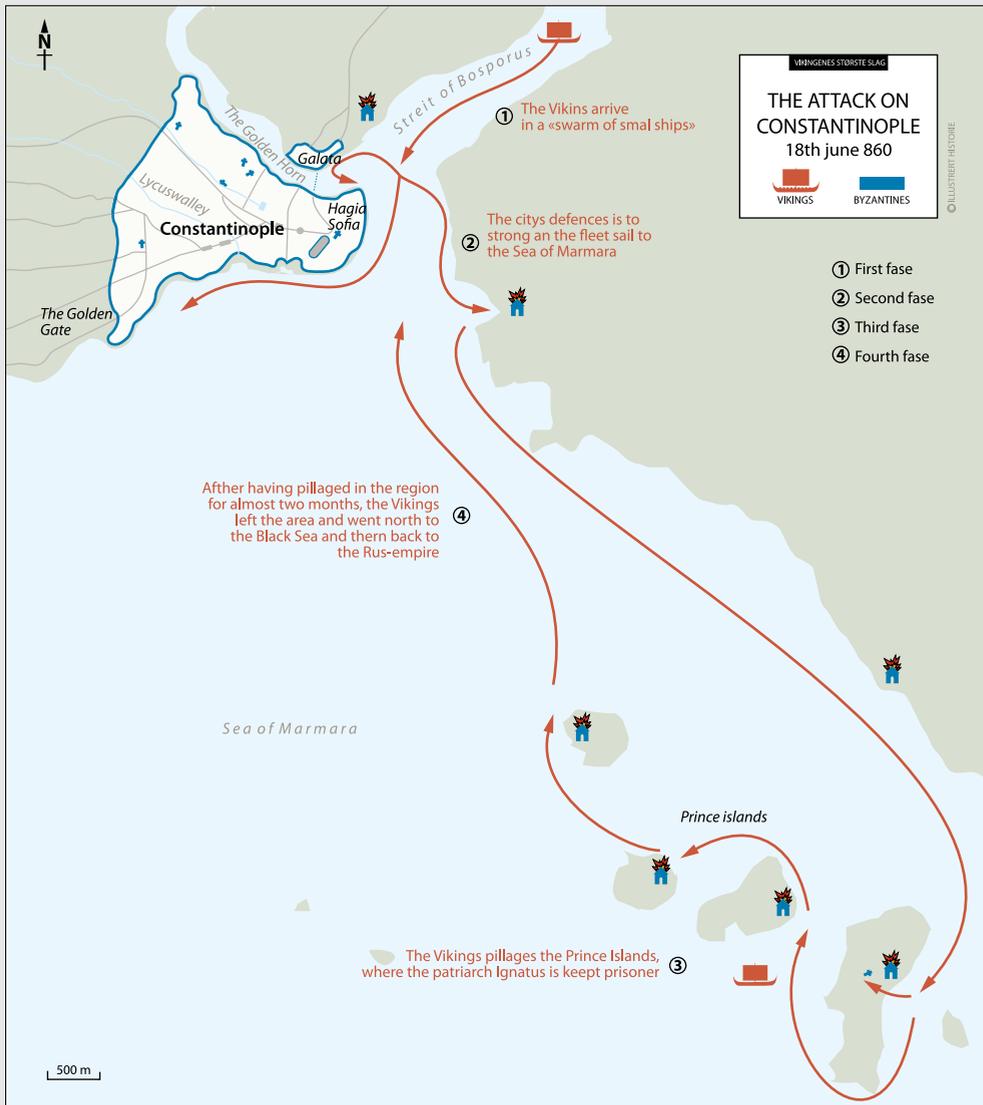
Vikings established themselves in the Russian regions from around 800, attracted by trading in furs, hides, honey and wax, not to mention goods that arrived via the Silk Way – Arabic silver and silk from China. Starting in the trading centres of Staraya

Ladoga and Novgorod in modern-day Russia, enterprising Viking chieftains expanded into the surrounding areas, founding several small Viking kingdoms. *The Nestor Chronicle* tells us that the beginnings of Novgorod, the first of the larger kingdoms, was standing in 859. There, a Viking chieftain called Rørek from modern-day Sweden subjugated tribes living along the rivers in the region. At the end of the 850s, two other Scandinavian chieftains, Askold and Dyr, also led a large fleet along the river systems from Novgorod and down the river Dnepr, the main artery between Scandinavia and south-eastern Europe. The final aim of the expedition was apparently to plunder Constantinople, known to the Vikings as Miklagard – the shining city. Very few Scandinavians had travelled to the imperial city at this point but those who had told of fantastic wealth. They also recounted that Constantinople was one of the world’s best defended cities, surrounded by a vast double perimeter wall, and that the city had a formidable fleet and army. A small Viking army without catapults, battering rams and siege ladders would have no chance of taking the imperial city. However, most Vikings were probably entirely unaware of this. In around 860, the Vikings reached Kiev. The city, strategically placed on elevated land by the banks of the river, was the western capital of the Khazar empire and a regional trading hub. The Vikings stormed the fortress and drove the Khazars out. The chronicle tells us that Askold and Dyr became the city’s new rulers. Kiev later became the centre of the growing Rus kingdom. After a brief stay, Askold and Dyr departed for the Black Sea and Constantinople. According to the Russian chronicle, the Vikings had 2,000 ships. This must be a

massively inflated figure. The Byzantine sources, on the other hand, say they came in 200 ships. That sounds like a lot too, but may nonetheless contain a kernel of truth. The Viking ships that were used in the east differed from those in the west in that that they were considerably smaller. The large western ships could transport 50-100 warriors, whereas the eastern ships transported 10-15. The rivers were often shallow and narrow, with stretches that were not navigable, so in various places the ships had to be carried. 1,000 warriors would need 75-100 ships. Other Byzantine sources also say that the Vikings came in “countless small ships”. While they may not have been countless, there must have been a lot of them. At any rate, this was a relatively large force by the standards of the day – although nowhere near large enough to be capable of posing a threat to Constantinople.

The Attack

The Viking fleet attacked on 18th June when the summer heat was at its height. The attack struck like “*lightning from the heavens*”, says Patriarch Photius in the sermon he wrote after the event. Emperor Michael III (840—867) was away when the Vikings arrived. The entire imperial army, including the garrison that normally protected the capital, was with him in Anatolia, fighting the Muslim Arabs, then encroaching on the Western Roman Kingdom. The fleet, with its famed weapon, Greek fire, was also taking part in the war against the Muslims. As a result, the northern islands by the Black Sea, the Strait of Bosphorus and the Sea of Marmara were defenceless in the face of attacks from the



north. Consequently, it fell to Patriarch Photius to lead the defence. In evocative terms, he later described the terror that gripped the inhabitants at the sight of the “*horde of barbarians*” outside the city walls. But the Vikings did not penetrate the city, instead plundering the surrounding area. According to Photius, they proceeded brutally. After destroying the outskirts, the

Rus travelled to the islands in the Sea of Marmora. There they attacked, among others, Prince Island, where the former patriarch, Ignatius (d. 877) was kept prisoner in a monastery. The monastery was plundered and Photius tells us that they took 22 of the former Patriarch’s servants prisoner, took them on board their ship and then “*hacked them to pieces with axes*”.





The Viking fleet attacked Constantinople on June 18, when the summer was at its hottest. The attack struck like lightning from heaven. Photo: Kasia Skrzypek, FotoForge.

It is possible that these killings are mere propaganda and that the servants ended up becoming slaves instead. It is also conceivable that they were killed if no ransom money was forthcoming for them. In any case, the assault made an indelible impression on the people of the times.

The Vikings remained in the region until 4th August before vanishing. In one of his sermons, Photius thanks God and the Virgin Mary for protecting the city against the threat from these people they were barely aware of. Photius calls them “*unknown people*”. That would change.

Aftermath

Although the raid in 860 was not crowned with victory over the Eastern Roman Empire, it marked the beginning of an enduring mutual relationship, which strengthened the cultural bonds between the Nordic region and Byzantium for centuries to come. Even though the Vikings could not threaten the capital itself, the emperor was anxious about all those living in unprotected towns and villages around the empire. The decision was therefore made to try and convert the Rus Vikings to Christianity in order to prevent future attacks. A delegation of ambassadors and missionaries was sent north. We have no accounts of their

reception, but by as early as 867, Photius claimed to have successfully converted the *rhos*, i.e. the Rus, “*who surpassed all others in savagery and murderousness, and who, after enslaving the people around them, became overcome by presumption and took up arms against Roman might.*” But he spoke too soon. Many decades would pass before the Rus Vikings allowed themselves to be converted. And many years also passed before the Vikings again made an attempt on the imperial city. In 907, the Prince of Kiev, Helge (ca. 879–ca. 913) mustered large enough forces to be taken seriously by the emperor: in 911, Byzantium and the principality of Kiev entered into a peace and trade treaty and “*the fleet sailed home with sails of silk and their cargo holds filled with gold, silk, fruit and wine,*” *The Nestor Chronicle* says. The links between Kiev and Byzantium became so good that the intellectual emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus (905–959) wrote about them in his great work *De administrando imperio* (On the Administration of the Empire) from ca. 950. In the book, he talks about the Rus custom of demanding an annual tribute from the Slavs in winter and conducting trading expeditions to Constantinople in the summer. Over time, this led to the principality of Kiev being incorporated into the cultural realm of eastern Christendom.



