

NEIL PRICE AND
BEN RAFFIELD

THE VIKINGS

THE VIKINGS

The Vikings provides a concise but comprehensive introduction to the complex world of the early medieval Scandinavians.

In the space of less than 300 years, from the mid-eighth to the mid-eleventh centuries CE, people from what are now Norway, Sweden, and Denmark left their homelands in unprecedented numbers to travel across the Eurasian world. Over the last half-century, archaeology and its related disciplines have radically altered our understanding of this period. *The Vikings* explores why we now perceive them as a cosmopolitan mix of traders and warriors, craftworkers and poets, explorers, and settlers. It details how, over the course of the Viking Age, their small-scale rural, tribal societies gradually became urbanised monarchies firmly emplaced on the stage of literate, Christian Europe. In the process, they transformed the cultures of the North, created the modern Nordic nation-states, and left a far-flung diaspora with legacies that still resonate today.

Written by leading experts in the period and exploring the society, economy, identity and world-views of the early medieval Scandinavian peoples, and their unique religious beliefs that are still of enduring interest a millennium later, this book presents students with an unrivalled guide through this widely studied and fascinating subject, revealing the fundamental impacts of the Vikings in shaping the later course of European history.

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Cover image: Background detail from carved picture stone I from Stora Hammars (Gotlands Museum, Sweden), and the armed female figurine from Hårby, near Roskilde (National Museum of Denmark).

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For my students – past, present, and future.

N.P.

For my parents, Jane and Steve Raffield, whose unwavering support
has kept me on the right path.

B.R.



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Neil Price
Sarawak, New Mexico, and Colorado, Autumn 2022

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Uppsala, Autumn 2022

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INTRODUCTION

Viking Variations

Sometime around the year 1590, an anonymous Elizabethan playwright penned one of the earliest known examples of a new theatrical genre. Shunning the usual emphasis on heroes from Classical Antiquity, the play instead created a truly English historical drama. *Edmund Ironside* is little known and almost never performed today, mainly noted for the possible, controversial identity of its author (on the basis of vocabulary and syntax, the play has been argued to be the first, precocious work of a talented young man called William Shakespeare).¹ Regardless of who wrote it, the key feature of this tentative experiment in a new presentation of the English story is that its author chose to focus not on the reigns of the medieval monarchs who would make Shakespeare famous a few years later, but on the invasions of the Vikings.

Six centuries after their heyday it says much that these Northern peoples would still be seen as such central figures, obviously suitable for a popular theatre-going audience. Half a millennium further on, in our own times, the Vikings remain just as prominent in the public imagination, giving their name to football teams, shipping lines, and spacecraft. Their gods have comic books and movies devoted to them and are remembered in the days of the week. Even their language has left some surprising imprints on our own: when we speak of such a basic concept as ‘law’, we are using an Old Norse word. The Vikings enjoy a popular recognition shared with very few other ancient cultures.

At the same time, the Vikings have also been reinvented at regular intervals, their attitudes and appearance changing to suit the times. Not long ago, even in recent decades, the image of them that greeted any interested enquirer would have been a resolutely violent one: the Vikings as raiders, pirates, and agents of terror. This stereotype has a long pedigree, extending back to the Middle Ages when they formed the stuff of saga writing and legend. The clichés came into sharper focus

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with their rediscovery during the Enlightenment and in the political fantasies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. At this time, romance was blended with a nationalism that incorporated the Vikings into a blurred sense of emergent identity, supposedly rooted in the deep past. When the outlines of the modern map of Europe were being formed, the Vikings became Nordic archetypes: blond supermen (definitely men) with horned helmets, scouring the world in their dragon ships, but in a somehow admirable and heroic way. They were seen to have laid the foundations of modern Scandinavia and were pioneers of northern Christianity, though in a fashion that still permitted the remembrance of their excitingly savage paganism. By the 1930s, this version of the Vikings was in turn usurped by the darker fictions of the Third Reich and its spurious myths of racial purity.²

After the war, the academic study of the Viking Age would take decades to recover from the contamination of Nazi ideology. Interpretations began to be toned down and subsumed in the collection of data – of which more and more was coming to light with the advent of large-scale rescue archaeology in advance of construction projects as Europe rebuilt itself. Partly as a result, by the 1970s and 1980s, the Vikings had become peaceable, their warrior image not exactly forgotten but instead giving way to traders, craftworkers, travellers, and poets. From the 1990s onwards, they were transformed again, this time into standard-bearers of free trade, early medieval pathfinders for the fully integrated European Union that was just then coming into being.

In more recent years, the violent Vikings have also begun to return – partly as a restoration of historical reality, but sadly also with echoes of their twentieth-century weaponisation as they continue to be misappropriated by white supremacists and nationalists. Beyond these distortions, however, scholars are now becoming increasingly interested in the contents of Viking minds as well as the substance of their actions and materiality. Current perspectives on the early medieval Scandinavian world are numerous, pluralistic, and in constant flux. They also incorporate perhaps one of the most fundamental shifts in research perspective: until about 30 years ago – with some notable exceptions – most readings of the Viking Age were unquestioningly androcentric. The notion of the female Viking was seen as a contradiction in terms, and Viking studies took a very long time indeed to be engendered. Thankfully, this has now changed definitively, and Viking-Age gender and identity is being explored on a spectrum that extends well beyond the binary.³ There is also a similar acknowledgement of all stages of the life course from infancy to old age, a range of bodily ability, and a diversity of ethnic backgrounds.

In approaching all this, archaeologists share the field with historians, philologists, scholars of medieval literature, students of comparative religion, runologists, anthropologists, and specialists from the full range of the natural, physical, and biological sciences. But in the midst of all this variation and redefinition, who really were the Vikings? What was the ‘Viking Age’, how did it come about, and when and why did it end?

Defining the Vikings

Traditionally, according to the kings-and-battles school of history, the Viking Age has been seen to begin on 8th June 793 CE with the first recorded seaborne raid on the shores of England, targeting the insular Northumbrian monastery of Lindisfarne. Through the shocked reactions preserved in chronicles and clerical letters, subsequent generations have derived the notion of the Viking raids as an unexpected ‘bolt from the blue’. One of the most famous and frequently quoted is the letter written to the King of Northumbria by the English cleric Alcuin, who was then in residence at the Frankish court:

Never before has such terror appeared in Britain as we have now suffered from a pagan race, nor was it thought that such an inroad from the sea could be made. Behold, the church of St. Cuthbert spattered with the blood of the priests of God, despoiled of all its ornaments; a place more venerable than all in Britain is given as prey to pagan peoples.

This provides a perfect match for the ‘plunder and slaughter’ described in other sources and is no doubt an accurate reflection of what it felt like to be on the receiving end of a Viking raid. The above excerpt from Alcuin’s letter appears in almost every book on the Vikings, but what is hardly ever mentioned is how the *same text* continues:

Consider the dress, the hairstyle, and the luxurious habits of the princes and people. Look at the hairstyle, how you have wished to imitate the pagans in their beards and hair. Does not the terror threaten of those whose hairstyle you wished to have?⁴

Over the following decades and centuries, Christian monks would often use the Vikings (or sundry ‘barbarians’) as a stick with which to beat those of the faithful they perceived as straying from the proper path of obedience to the Church: the ‘Northmen’ as the unwitting instruments of God’s wrath, sent to punish the wicked for their sins, victims who had no-one but themselves to blame. We see a shadow of this in Alcuin’s letter, but in the detail is something else, something specific rather than a vague metaphor. For the Lindisfarne attackers to have formerly been so admired, even down to the copying of their haircuts – and wouldn’t we love to know about those? – they must have been seen frequently, up close, and in favourable circumstances. The raiders who burned Lindisfarne were the epitome of the later Viking image, the origin of its clichés, but it is clear that, in a different context, they were also well-known to their victims, and even envied.

This is supported by a wealth of archaeological material which confirms that Scandinavians had been trading in England for more than a century prior to the Lindisfarne raid and probably much longer.⁵ Especially in the Anglian east of the country, people were proudly wearing brooches and clothing accessories that

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would not have looked out of place on a prosperous Scandinavian farmer. Once we understand that, it can be seen that the shock lay not in the raiders' sudden arrival from the sea, 'never before seen', but in the unprecedented nature of that encounter: nobody expected them to bring swords in place of goods for barter.

As we shall see, the twenty-first century has also brought new discoveries that make it clear the Scandinavians were raiding abroad much earlier than the 790s and in the east rather than the west. Medieval textual sources, especially early poetry on the lives of kings, have long been understood to imply this, but it has only recently been confirmed through archaeology. One particularly dramatic excavation revealed the remains of a large force, apparently a raiding party from central Sweden, who had been buried in two boats on the Estonian island of Saaremaa around 750 (we shall return to this in Chapter 4).⁶

This pre-Viking heritage of Scandinavian contact with Western Europe is important for understanding the later social transformations that lie at the very core of why we think of a 'Viking Age' at all. The irony is that when a few boatloads of tooled-up Norwegian farmers beached on the sands of Holy Island, or some belligerent Swedes came to grief a few decades earlier in Estonia, it would not have occurred to them that their actions were of any historical significance or singularity. Not least, they would not have made much distinction between trading and fighting as viable forms of interaction, both being components of everyday life in their homelands.

This links to another problem, namely the notorious difficulty in determining what the word 'Viking' – *vikingr* in Old Norse – actually means, and how it should be used. To summarise the leading contenders for a definitive reading, it might refer to maritime robbers who lurked in bays (*vík*) of the sea; in its original sense, to raiders from the Viken (Old Norse *Vikin*) region of Norway (an interpretation almost wholly discounted today); or even to those whose main targets were the fledgling market centres (*uic*) of northern Europe. We know that the term did not only apply to people from Scandinavia, but was also in use among other cultures around the North Sea and Baltic littoral. There is general agreement that something close to 'pirate' is about right and that it refers to an activity or a sense of purpose, almost a job description. It was clearly a mutable identity that one could take on or discard, either permanently or as a temporary measure.⁷

To complicate matters further, Scandinavian researchers tend to use 'Viking' in this specific sense, while those from the English-speaking world often employ it far more liberally as a collective term of convenience. Some modern scholars write of vikings in lower case, using the term in a generalising sense, while others retain the distinguishing title case of Vikings though claiming to denote much the same thing; still, others use the case distinction to separate properly piratical Vikings from everyone else. There is no consensus, other than that it is very hard to find a universally acceptable alternative. In this book, it is hoped that the meaning of all such terminology will be clear from its context.

Perhaps the most curious aspect of this period is that if we could somehow talk to a Scandinavian from that period, they would probably be astonished to learn that later generations would characterise her or his lifetime as falling in an 'Age of

Vikings' at all. The scholarly use of this term to refer to the Scandinavian population in general is hard to escape but has been rightly criticised for drawing attention away from all those who never went anywhere and did no harm to anyone. One historian has suggested that it would be more accurate to write of 'the golden age of the pig-farmer'.⁸

The 'end' of the Viking Age is equally problematic and has its counterpart to the Lindisfarne purists in those who see a termination with the Norwegian defeat at the Battle of Stamford Bridge in northern England, on 25 September 1066. Others, including the authors, prefer to look to more long-term processes of cultural change that mark out a significant shift in the course of human history.

For the purposes of this volume, we are safe in framing the Viking Age as the broad period from the mid-eighth century CE to the middle of the eleventh, plus or minus a decade or two, with the proviso that its social motors started up and ran down in different ways in different places at different times, and at radically different speeds. We shall return to these beginnings and endings below.

With all this in mind, however, can we really speak of a 'Viking Age' at all? Some scholars argue firmly that we cannot, seeing it as a redundant relic of an imperial past. According to this view, the Victorians and their contemporaries 'colonised' the understanding of these few centuries as a means of retrospectively legitimising their own ambitions of national glory with a notional heritage, creating the Viking stereotype in the process. By the same token, it is suggested, there was no such thing as a pan-Scandinavian culture at the time in question, but instead a fragmented world of separate identities that should meaningfully be grouped together in quite different ways, or not at all. Other researchers promote the idea of the eighth to eleventh centuries as a period of economic and social change all over the Northern world, in which the inhabitants of the modern Nordic countries simply played a part alongside many others, again without any sense of ethnic unity.⁹

Of course, all historical scholarship tends to create artificial chronological divisions of what would have been experienced at the time as nothing other than the continuities of existence. The cultures of 'Viking-Age' Scandinavia were certainly heterogeneous, varied, and changeable, dynamic rather than static or monolithic. However, beyond the local and regional identities so clearly visible in the archaeology, there was also a general pattern of consistent material culture from the Danish border to the High Arctic, not to mention a pan-Nordic language with mutually intelligible dialects. In addition, all of this was also different to what was going on beyond the broad geographical borders of Scandinavia. More importantly, conceptual critics of the Viking Age overlook a basic fact, namely that the centuries packaged into this historians' artifice really did see unprecedented changes, something fundamentally different from what came before and after.

It is certainly true that this process was appropriated, distorted, or just misunderstood by the intelligentsia of several European nations during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, reaching a terrible culmen in the 1930s when the Vikings were enthusiastically adopted by Nazism. The SS even formed its own 'Wiking' division of recruits from the Nordic countries, and the propagandists of the Third

Reich actively promoted the German conquests of the 1940s as latter-day raids on an Iron Age model. Nonetheless, morally repugnant though these efforts undoubtedly were, in themselves they say *nothing* about the actual time of the Vikings. Our research interpretations today should not be directed or diverted by the wishful thinking of romantic nationalists in earlier centuries, or by what fascist pseudo-scholars wrote about the same subjects more than 80 years ago, or by what their successors claim today.

When viewed in contemporary context, the Viking Age emerges as a period of genuine and distinctive social development. The early medieval Scandinavians' brief period on the global stage saw the transformation of their homelands from scattered tribal groupings to the nation states of Norway, Sweden, and Denmark that we still recognise today. With the rise of statehood also came unified kingship and a shift of religion, as the traditional beliefs and practices of the North were gradually absorbed into the more formal structures of the Christian church. Over little more than 300 years, Scandinavians ranged over the northern world as never before, engaging with cultures and places from Afghanistan in the East to the Canadian seaboard in the West. As traders, raiders, mercenaries, explorers, and settlers all across this vast region, 'Viking' men and women left a diaspora and political legacy with echoes into the twenty-first century. In this fundamental reshaping of Northern identities, their vibrant material culture and art played a vital role, as the Vikings changed – and were changed by – all those they encountered. The Vikings, in short, were real.

Like any field of research, Viking studies has its debates, arguments, and competing interpretations; there is a sense in which every scholar has their own Viking Age.¹⁰ However, in this book, we have tried to avoid controversies of this kind, to present a concise, introductory overview of a remarkable ancient people and their place in a world whose widening was partly of their making. We begin with where they came from, the region known today as Scandinavia, and how their own unique culture developed from the prehistoric past.

Notes

- 1 Sams (1986).
- 2 Roesdahl and Sørensen (1996); Wawn (2000); Raudvere et al. (2001); Jón Karl Helgason (2017).
- 3 Back Danielsson (2007); Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir (2020); N. Price (2020a, ch. 5).
- 4 Chase (1975).
- 5 The revisionist view of Alcuin's letter, its implications and archaeological correlates, were first fully explored by John Hines (1984). See also Carver (1990).
- 6 The Saaremaa boat burials are not yet fully published, but for an interim overview see Peets (2013); N. Price (2020a, 275–9); Konsa (2021); and Chapter 4.
- 7 Herschend (2006); Brink (2008a).
- 8 Christiansen (2002, 6).
- 9 Svanberg (2003); Hodges (2006); Woolf (2022).
- 10 For a range of views, see Croix (2015c); Lund and Sindbæk (2021); Sävborg (2022). N. Price (2020a) provides a personal view of this kind from one of the authors.

1

THE VIKINGS BEGIN

In the past two decades or so, the concept of the ‘North’ has been taken up in numerous academic contexts, embracing climate, sociology, politics, the literary imagination – and, of course, history and culture.¹ At times its geographical range can span the circumpolar region, occasionally it refers to the High Arctic specifically, but it is also employed with greater focus and slightly more southerly latitude to mean northern Eurasia, northern Europe (including areas such as Scotland and the Isles), or the North Atlantic. However, in seeking specifically ‘Northern’ expressions of lifestyle, environmental adaptation, and in particular the spiritual interaction with nature as expressed in localised religion and folklore, Scandinavia has always been at the centre of this notion.

Northern Landscapes, Northern Peoples

The sheer scale of Scandinavia can be hard to grasp, not least since it is usually relegated to the periphery of our conventional map projections. Measured from the southernmost tip of modern Sweden, as the crow flies it is the same distance to the North Cape of Arctic Norway as it is to Istanbul.

Whether we focus on its indented coastlines, deep fjords, or still lakes, it is widely understood even now that Scandinavia is – and always has been – a world with contours of water: it is after all no accident that the ship is probably the most recognisable of all Viking images. In fact, the landscape of what is now Norway, Sweden, and Denmark was literally created by water, more exactly carved out of bedrock by the slow grinding of the glaciers. While most of the European landmass was settled by mobile communities of gatherers and hunters, until some 13,000 years ago Scandinavia remained locked beneath more than a kilometre’s thickness of ice. Over the following millennia of melt and glacial retreat, the long river courses, valleys, and fjords of Scandinavia were formed around the mountainous spine of the



FIGURE 1.1 Map of Scandinavia in the late Iron Age, with selected places mentioned in the text. Danish fortresses of the late Viking Age: (1) Aggersborg; (2) Fyrkat; (3) Nonnebakken; (4) Trelleborg; (5) Borgring; and (6) Borgeby. Produced by Tom H. Lundmark.

peninsula, interspersed with clay flatlands and marshes in the south, coniferous taiga forests to the north, and ultimately the treeless tundra zone of the Arctic.

The combination of land uplift as the weight of the ice receded, and the flood of meltwater released into the sea, set in motion complex processes of shoreline displacement that continue today. At varying rates throughout Scandinavia, in broad terms the sea level has fallen steadily since the last glaciation. During the Viking Age, the shorelines were up to 5 m higher than today, meaning that the lakes were larger, the rivers and fjords wider, and the natural harbours deeper – all of which made waterborne transport easier and more efficient, as people travelled through a landscape dotted with far more islands and archipelagos than we see now. The Vikings were supreme mariners but behind them stretched millennia of human experience with the sea.

Living on the land, its terms and conditions, was also largely dictated by the legacy of the glaciers.² To the west of the mountains in what is now Norway, heavy year-round rainfall and cold winters were mitigated by the warming effects of the Gulf Stream. Over 20,000 km of indented coastline was in places sheltered by offshore islands, affording safer maritime passage, and secure harbours in the outer reaches of the fjords. The banks of these same waterways also comprised the bulk of the arable land, as less than 5% of the country is suitable for agriculture. These fertile zones were especially in the Trøndelag and in the south-eastern heartlands of Østfold and Vestfold; it is no accident that it is here the later political centres and early towns (including the capital city of Oslo) would later be founded. Beyond the farmland, the majority of the population was reliant on marine resources – the fish that could be eaten fresh or salted for the winter; the seals that were plentiful in the coastal waters; the walrus off more northerly shores; and the whales of the open ocean. On land, large game such as bear and elk (the animal called moose in North America) provided a wealth of both meat and raw materials, especially furs and skins, while smaller animals were hunted and trapped.

On the eastern side of that natural mountain border, sheltered from the worst of the Atlantic weather, a markedly different environment characterised what is now Sweden. The northernmost two-thirds of the country – known as Norrland ('Northland') – was and remains an elevated, undulating landscape of steep valleys covered with vast, impassable taiga forests of pine and spruce. All along the Norrland coast, a series of strong, navigable water courses run down from the hill country to empty into the Gulf of Bothnia. Superficially similar to the Norwegian fjords, the northern Swedish river valleys provided efficient transport routes into the interior, while their shores sustained the only viable agricultural subsistence in the far north. Further inland, the farms gave way to a more transient settlement pattern of hunters and reindeer herders that have left minimal traces in the archaeological record, though new discoveries are steadily adding to our knowledge.

Further south, the Swedish landscape opened up into deciduous woodland with broad plains of glacial clay, fertile soil that was perfect for large-scale cultivation. Extending in a belt across the country, interspersed with enormous freshwater lakes, this agricultural heartland was the foundation for the competing political powers that would emerge in the course of the long Iron Age, culminating in the time of

the Vikings. Deep bays and rivers provided access to the sea – as waterways or ice roads, depending on the season – while inland movement was possible along glacial eskers and gravel ridges. The climate was warm and temperate, with an annual cycle of pleasant summers and snowy, freezing winters.

The farming country of the central Swedish lakelands was bordered to the south by a belt of dense forests, roughly corresponding to the modern province of Småland. This formed a natural topographical barrier that, over millennia, had real social and political impact in that it developed into the effective frontier between the ‘Swedes’ and ‘Danes’ – it was not until long after the Middle Ages that the provinces of Skåne, Blekinge, and Halland would be transferred from Danish to Swedish control as a political decision.

Denmark itself consists of the Jylland peninsula as an extension of the European continent, and a great number of islands of which the two largest are Sjælland and Fyn, with other insular centres of strategic and political importance including Samsø and Bornholm. The country is very low-lying by comparison with the rest of Scandinavia, rich in agricultural farmlands between belts of deciduous woods. This was also a marine landscape – nowhere in Denmark is more than about 40 km from the sea – and deep fjords penetrate far inland, albeit with gentler profiles than their Norwegian counterparts. The interior was also dotted with bogs and marshes that would play a significant role in the spiritual world-view of those who lived around them.

Through the sea passages of the Skagerrak and Kattegat, and the complex channels between their islands, the inhabitants of Denmark largely controlled access to the Baltic from the west. However, Scandinavian influence and settlement also extended far into the central regions of the ‘Eastern Sea’, on the islands of Öland, Gotland, and the Åland archipelago. Each developed its own distinctive social organisation and material expression, separate from the ethnic and political structures of Scandinavia itself but also all clearly part of the same, broad cultural collective. Gotland in particular formed a key node in Baltic contact and trade, a role it would retain far into the medieval period; today, it is a province of Sweden. The Åland islands – numbering in the thousands, though less than a hundred are inhabited – are effectively an eastern extension of the ‘Stockholm archipelago’ which begins in the seaward reaches of the modern Swedish capital. Culturally Swedish but today part of Finland, in the deep past they formed a bridge between mainland Scandinavia and the peoples of the eastern Bothnian shore.

In terms of the populations of all these regions, the difficulty of finding a suitable nomenclature for the Viking-Age peoples of what is now Scandinavia has been mentioned in the Introduction. The modern national identities of Norwegians, Swedes, and Danes are largely irrelevant when applied to that time (or at least in correspondence to their modern scope), and labels such as ‘Norse’, ‘Nordic’, and so on are not much better. The only thing we can be sure of is that they all shared an approximately similar ethnic heritage with southerly links to the peoples of the north European continent.

The earliest glimpses we have of ‘Scandinavian’ ethnonyms – the names of peoples or coherent ethnic groups – come from a mixed bag of written sources,

all originating outside the region concerned. Among the primary examples are the *Getica* of Jordanes, written c.551, and the tenth-century English poem *Widsith* that both include much-debated lists of named populations.³

In what is now Sweden, two larger ethnic groups appear – the Svear who controlled the area north and south of Lake Mälaren, the brackish body of water connecting to the Baltic on which the modern city of Stockholm now lies, and the Götar, divided into eastern and western groups, and inhabiting the region to the south-west around the great lakes of Vänern and Vättern, bordering the Småland forests and the ‘Danish’ frontier. There were internal divisions and local names for peoples among the Svear and Götar, but at least some general level of identification and allegiance is evident early on. There were organised social and political clusters around the Norrland rivers, each controlling a valley and its connections between sea and mountain, but we have little idea what they called themselves. In the Baltic proper, the Gutar occupied the island of Gotland. There seems to have been no name for ‘Sweden’ as a generalising entity, and *Svitjod* appears later to describe the land of the Svear in the sense of an expanding political polity. The modern Swedish name for the country, *Sverige*, literally means the Kingdom of the Svear.

The Latin term *Dani*, ‘Danes’, appears before the Viking Age, and at least from outside it was used as a catch-all for almost any kind of Scandinavian. Even though it is clear that the Danish peoples achieved some kind of political cohesion much earlier than their northern neighbours, it is far from certain that the collective name referred to much more than discrete regions such as the Jylland peninsula. The first mention of a place actually called *Denamearc*, ‘Denmark’, comes from a most unusual source, a set of notes inserted in an English text from the 880s that records a visit to the Wessex court of a merchant from the Lofoten Islands in the Norwegian Arctic.⁴ This man, called Ohthere in the Old English but probably named Óttarr, seems to have aroused considerable curiosity in the English King Alfred, who asked him a long series of questions about his homeland, how he made his living, and the routes by which he sailed. Not least, the interest that the king showed in Óttarr’s description of his homeland also demonstrates how little the English really seemed to know about their neighbours across the sea: the Scandinavians went frequently to at least parts of the British Isles, but the traffic was largely one way. Albeit at second hand through the words of the scribe, the discussion that ensued provides our first description of Scandinavia by one of its inhabitants.

Apart from mentioning Denmark (where Óttarr traded), it is not surprising that he devoted most attention to his own country. He calls it *Norðveg*, meaning the same as the modern name, the ‘North Way’, referring to the natural coastal sailing route inside the chains of sheltering islands.⁵ The people who lived there were the ‘Northmen’, again approximating to the modern equivalent, effectively the ‘Norðvegians’. Óttarr’s description is succinct, eloquent, and to the point:

He said that the land of the Norwegians was very long and very narrow. All that they can either graze or plough lies by the sea; and even that is very rocky in some places; to the east, and alongside the cultivated land, lie wild mountains.

Although this might seem to describe Norway in two sentences, there are deeper conceptions of the land buried in Óttarr's text. As he relates what can be seen from a ship when sailing north along the Norwegian coast, a subtle change comes into the nature of the settlements he depicts. This introduces one of the most important aspects of life in Viking-Age Scandinavia, not the main subject of this book but nevertheless a feature of Northern culture that must be acknowledged and built into our understandings of this time and place: the presence of the Sámi, with whom the 'Scandinavians' shared much of Fenno-Scandia, incorporating present-day Norway, Sweden, Finland, and parts of northern Russia.

The Sámi

For most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Sámi were known in English as the Lapps, with corresponding terms in the Scandinavian languages, but these are today regarded as pejoratives and should be avoided. There persists a general perception of the Sámi as an arctic people of the far north; though there is some truth in this, it is misleading even now, and it certainly does not reflect their population distribution during the Viking Age.⁶

The Sámi speak, and have always spoken, a Finno-Ugric language, of the same family as Finnish, Hungarian, and Estonian and thus utterly different to the Indo-European tongue of the majority population in Scandinavia. Their name for themselves seems to go back at least to the medieval period and probably extends to the Viking Age or even earlier. In a curious echo of the later dichotomy between external labelling and self-description, the Vikings appear to have called them something different, *Finnar*, 'Finns', sometimes with a prefix that referred to their abilities on skis or their skill with the hunting bow.

The origins of the Sámi – where exactly they came from, when they moved into Fenno-Scandia – have been much debated, often with uncomfortably nationalist overtones concerning who 'arrived first'. The key fact is that both the Sámi and the majority population had been present in Scandinavia for millennia prior to the Viking Age and that they lived side by side while maintaining clearly distinct cultures and lifestyles. There is a degree to which these correspond to a nomadic path of reindeer herding, fishing, and hunting for the Sámi, contrasting with the settled agrarian life of the rest, but this is an oversimplification and in reality there was no such firm division of ethnic subsistence.

The Sámi homeland today is known as Sápmi, spanning (and ignoring!) recognised political borders to encompass the northern regions of Norway, Sweden, and Finland, as well as the Kola Peninsula in north-west Russia. In formal terms, Sápmi is a relatively recent creation, but it may well extend back in time in the cognitive perception of 'Sámi-ness' and a link to the land. In the present day, the cultural distribution of the Sámi more or less coincides with the borders of Sápmi, as the area where a Sámi identity and expression is visibly promoted. However, even now this belies their actual distribution, which follows the same socio-economic trends as the Nordic population: for example,