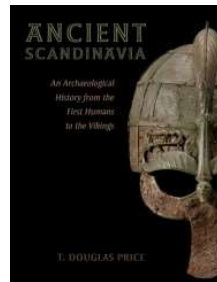




What five recent archaeological sites reveal about the Viking period



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The famous marauders, explorers, traders, and colonists who transformed northern Europe between AD 750 and 1100 continue to hold our fascination. The Vikings are the subject of major new museum exhibitions now circulating in Europe and a popular dramatic television series airing on [The History Channel \(http://www.history.com/shows/vikings\)](http://www.history.com/shows/vikings).

Recent years have revealed many spectacular new finds from the Viking age that expand our understanding of their lives and times. Some of these finds — from England and Estonia, reveal the warrior/raider side of Viking life and the dangers therein. Discoveries from Denmark document the extraordinary quality of their ships and shed light on the nature of political and military organization in the Viking period.

Ridgeway, England. The English did not warmly welcome their Viking visitors. Conflict appears to have been common. There is dramatic evidence for this at several places in southern England, especially at a site called Ridgeway near Weymouth, not far from Dorset. During highway construction in 2009, a mass grave was found containing 54 headless human skeletons and a pile of 51 detached skulls that had been cast into an old quarry from Roman times. The grave is dated to around AD 1000. The bodies were those of young men, most less than 30 years of age, who were executed following a violent encounter. Isotopic evidence indicates these men were not natives and may well have come from Scandinavia. The evidence is consistent with a Viking raiding party—50-some men might constitute the crew of a Viking longship with 25 pairs of oars. Perhaps this was a group of raiders who encountered a superior force. They must have been captured, taken to the old quarry, and slaughtered.

Salme, Estonia. Two buried Viking Age ships were uncovered at Salme, Estonia, between 2008 and 2012. Dated to ca. AD 750, these are the earliest known Viking ships to have crossed the Baltic and the earliest examples of mass ship burials. Buried with the two ships were the skeletal remains of 41 individuals, a variety of weapons and tools, and the bones of a number of animals. The materials appear to document the hasty

burial of the two ships and the members of their crews who died violently. The grave-goods – weapons and other objects – were of Scandinavian design, largely unknown in Estonia. Isotopic ratios of strontium and oxygen in the tooth enamel of the deceased, in conjunction with the exotic artifacts, point to the Stockholm region of Sweden as a likely homeland.

Jelling, Denmark. Jelling is a sleepy village in the center of the Jutland peninsula with a well-deserved UNESCO World Heritage rating. A series of Viking Age monuments were placed there more than a thousand years ago including rune stones, two huge burial mounds, the largest-known stone ship setting, and an old church. A three-sided rune stone recounts how King Harald Bluetooth united the kingdom of Denmark, the first mention of the name of the modern nation. Harald also built two large burial mounds at Jelling for his parents. The North Mound sits at the center of the ship-shaped stone setting. The present stone church was originally built around AD 1100 and was likely the first such church in Jutland. There are also the foundations of wooden buildings beneath the stone church, two of which were probably wooden stave churches.

Interest in the Viking monuments has been ongoing for more than 400 years, but the surprises keep coming. Excavations since 2007 revealed an entirely new view, including a massive palisade enclosing a large area around the mounds. The entire palisade would have been ca. 1,440 m (4,800') in length and enclosed some 12.5 ha (30 acres). The symmetry of the constructions is remarkable. The northern burial mound sits directly in the center of this huge timber palisade. The great stone ship setting runs from one end of the palisade to the other. The South Mound lies near the southern side of the palisade, and the largest rune stone at Jelling is exactly halfway between the two mounds. A series of three almost identical buildings were found around the northeast corner of the palisade. These houses are massive wooden halls with heavy walls of vertical timber and several interior divisions. These large buildings or halls were likely part of a magnate estate at Jelling. Thus this sleepy village was once the royal manor of Viking Denmark.

Vallø Borgring, Denmark. There were four known, almost identical Viking ring fortresses in Denmark before the summer of 2012, including the namesake tourist destination at Trelleborg on the island of Zealand. All built around AD 980, each of these fortresses was about a day's march apart, between 30 and 40 km. But Danish archaeologists noticed there was a gap on the east coast of Zealand. Careful investigations, laser mapping of the landscape, and some trial trenches at a place near the modern town of Køge, south of Copenhagen, exposed evidence for a circular earthwork 145 m (500') in diameter, the same size as some of the other known fortresses. In Viking times, this fort — known as Vallø Borgring — was strategically located at the intersection of the old road and a small navigable river. There may well be more Viking Age ring forts to be discovered, further documenting the might and sway of the Viking kingdom.

Roskilde, Denmark. The Viking Ship Museum in Roskilde, Denmark, holds the salvaged and reconstructed remains of five ships deliberately scuttled around AD 1070 to block the shipping channel and protect the Viking town. This Museum is one of the more popular tourist attractions in Denmark and has grown substantially over the years. Expansion to a new artificial island was planned and excavation of a channel to create this island began in 1997. Nine new ships were discovered during the digging and eventually removed. One of the ships, the Roskilde 6, is incomplete but estimated to have been 32 m (100') in length, the longest known Viking warship. A ship of this size must have been the property of a king or noble. Both the timber and craftsmanship were of the finest quality. The ship would have had 78 rowing positions and a crew of 100 men. The mast would have held a single square sail of perhaps 200 m² (2,150 ft²). The ship was built around AD 1025 and was finally put on exhibit in 2014 after years of conservation and analysis.

These new discoveries prod the imagination and inspire archaeologists, historians, and the general public to learn more about this dynamic period in Scandinavia. The end of the Viking period was ultimately brought about by the arrival of Christianity after AD 1000, leading to the onset of the Middle Ages and long centuries of oppression by the church and state. Some in Scandinavia today would prefer to see a return to the old ways; the religious beliefs of the Vikings, as described in various sagas and myths, have been adopted by some modern individuals and groups. The Vikings are gone but certainly not forgotten!



Jelling Runestones

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