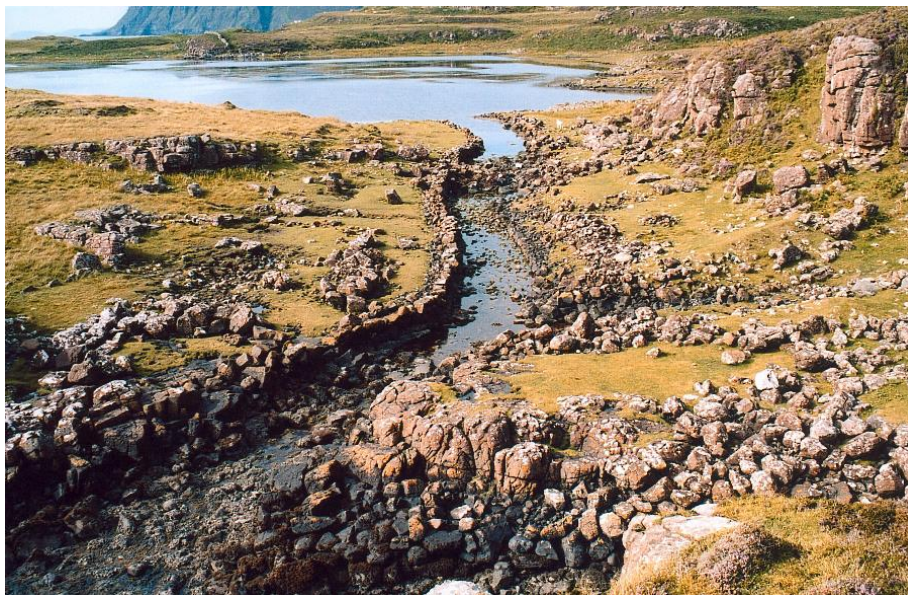




A-Z of Scottish History – V is for Vikings!

It may not come as much of a surprise that for centuries the Vikings had a significant influence on large areas in Scotland. For anyone lucky enough to visit Shetland during the annual Up Helly Aë festival, they will witness Viking culture being celebrated in a magnificent display of fire, horned helmets and fur trimmed cloaks. There are many misconceptions when it comes to the Vikings, for example, it wasn't all pillage and plunder, in many locations the Scandinavian visitors integrated well into society, creating an amalgamation of gaelic and viking life. Nowadays, the viking influence can even be seen in the landscape with evidence of 'viking canals' still visible across Scotland.



Viking canal on Skye

The Vikings, initially from Norway, arrived in Scotland in the late 8th century (around 793AD). It is believed that they were attracted by the vast wealth of the Christian monasteries and the swathes of treasure that they possessed. The Abbey at Iona, which was at the time a beacon of Christianity, was a frequent target and in 806 the entire Iona community was murdered. The Vikings followed the Pagan religion and therefore had no concerns with raiding monasteries, which they considered easy targets as they knew monks would not possess weapons to defend themselves.

The name 'viking' is Old Norse for 'a pirate raid', people who went off raiding in ships were said to be 'going viking'. But not all Vikings were bloodthirsty warriors, although some did come to fight, others came peacefully to settle and became farmers who kept animals and grew crops. They were also heavily involved in trade and commerce, selling goods to buy silver, silks, spices, wine, jewellery, glass and pottery to take back home. Vikings were skilful at crafting and made beautiful metalwork and wooden carvings, many of which still survive today. A fine example of Viking craftsmanship can be seen in the Lewis Chess pieces which date from the mid 12th century. The 93 chess pieces are elaborately made from walrus ivory and whales' teeth. They were discovered in 1831 and are considered as evidence of the Vikings as both raiders and traders, as it is believed that they were buried by a merchant for safe-keeping while they were on route to be traded in Ireland. Eleven of the chess pieces can be viewed at the National Museum of Scotland.



Lewis Chessmen on display in the National Museum of Scotland

Of course, Scotland in this period was not how we know it now. The Outer Hebrides and Inner Hebrides were predominantly Pictish, whereas the southern Inner Hebrides formed part of the Gaelic kingdom of Dal Riata, neither of which managed to avoid the wrath of the vikings. There are several reasons why historians have speculated as to why so many Viking's fled Scandinavia, many believe it was due to a lack of quality farmland, others believe it was due to overpopulation in Norway, Sweden and Denmark. Unfortunately, we don't really know the reason. The Picts living in the Outer Hebrides during the period of the Viking arrival were gradually dispossessed. Historians and archeologists disagree on how this transition occurred, with theories ranging from peaceful integration to enslavement and genocide. Either way, Vikings arrived in droves, bringing their families and establishing a way of life on the islands, until eventually Norwegian ruler Harald Fairhair made Orkney and Shetland part of his kingdom in 875. This remained the case until 1472, when King Christian I of Denmark gave the islands back to Scotland as a dowry payment for his daughter, Margaret of Denmark, who married King James III of Scotland.

Viking influence in Shetland remained an ever-present factor in island life for centuries despite the island returning to Scottish rule. For instance, the language commonly spoken on the island evolved under Viking rule into the West Nordic language 'Norn', which survived in Shetland into the 19th century. Today, Up Helly Ae is not the only festival dedicated to Viking culture on the island, as Shetlanders put on several smaller fire festivals throughout the year, showcasing their pride in their Viking heritage.



Up Helly Ae Festival

The legacy of the Vikings is not confined to Scotland's northern isles. York itself was once the thriving Norse city of Jórúík, where Scandinavian settlers left an enduring mark on language, culture and trade.

Today, that shared heritage links communities from Shetland to northern England, reminding us that the Viking world was one of movement, exchange and connection as much as conflict.