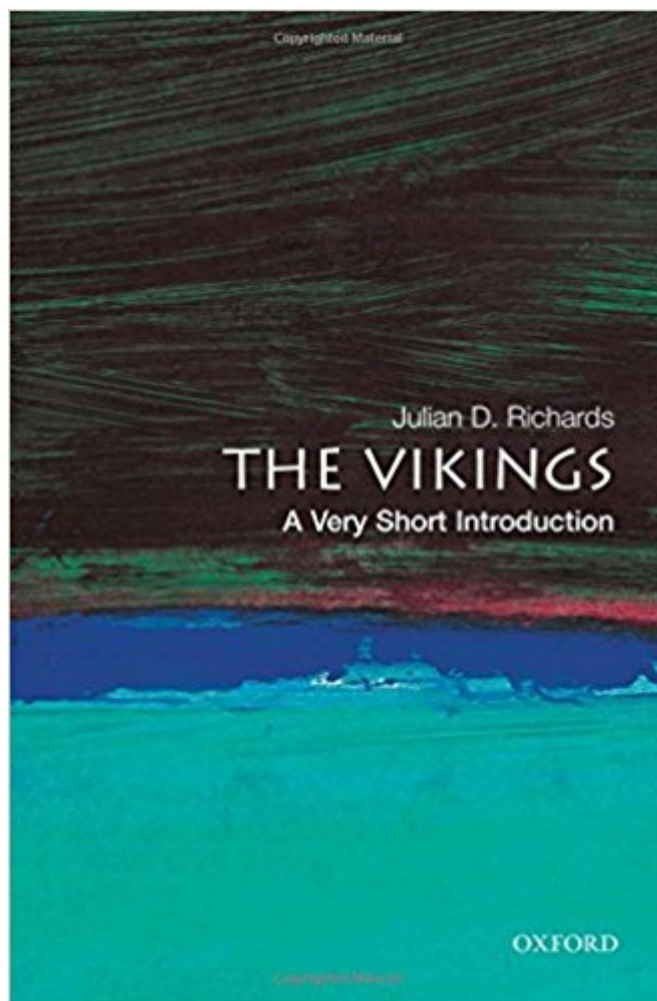


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# The Vikings: A Very Short Introduction



## Synopsis

The Viking reputation is one of bloodthirsty seafaring warriors, repeatedly plundering the British Isles and the North Atlantic throughout the early Middle Ages. Yet Vikings were also traders, settlers, and farmers, with a complex artistic and linguistic culture, whose expansion overseas led them to cross the Atlantic for the first time in European history. Highlighting the latest archaeological evidence, Julian Richards reveals the whole Viking world: their history, their culture, and their legacy of overseas expansion for trade, colonization, and plunder. Viking identity is explored through what we have learned about their towns, art, shipbuilding, and religious rituals. Here the Viking story is brought up to the present, from the tales of adventure found in medieval Icelandic sagas, to their exploitation as a symbol of nationalism in the nineteenth century by Wagner, and later by Hitler and the Nazi party. The author also highlights their impact and influence on the history and people of Northern Europe. Vikings, a fascinating new look at a people and culture that have been reinvented throughout history, will take readers closer to discovering who they really were.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Julian Richards is Professor of Archaeology at the University of York, and co-director of the Centre for Medieval Studies. He specialises in the archaeology of Anglo-Saxon and Viking Age England, and has directed several excavations of Viking settlements, including the only Viking cremation cemetery in the British Isles. Previous publications include Viking Age England (Tempus, 2000).

A common misperception held by individuals today is that the Vikings were a group of bloodthirsty,

village plundering warriors who wreaked havoc amongst the civilizations of the British Isles and the North Atlantic throughout the Middle Ages. In his book *The Vikings: A Very Short Introduction*, Julian D. Richards, a professor of archaeology at the University of New York, provides an in depth look at the true Viking world by introducing the reader to a Viking history, society, and culture based upon the latest archaeological discoveries. Through these archaeological finds he attempts to alter this misperception that is held throughout most of the modern world. Professor Julian D. Richards begins his introduction into the Viking legacy by comparing the Vikings of the past with the Viking ancestors who currently inhabit the British Isles. He then carries the reader on a journey through the early Scandinavian kingdoms, the religious transition from Paganism to Christianity, the daily lives of the average Viking, the trials of seafaring and overseas expansion, the survival and reinvention of a Viking identity and culture, and finally backs to his original thesis, which focuses on a determination to change the world perception of the Vikings by introducing a network of traders, farmers, and settlers with a complex artistic and linguistic culture. Professor Julian D. Richards does provide some key factual evidence to support his claims on the existence of a network of traders, farmers, and settlers within the Viking communities. He provides archaeological evidence of dozens of settlements that display a growing concentration of power from the seventh century onward. His analysis of the city Hedeby, which is today known as "heath settlement," at the foot of the Jutland peninsula, displays aspects of this more sophisticated lifestyle with evidence that between four hundred and one thousand individuals living in this tenth century town were directly involved in trade, import craft industries, iron working with Swedish ore, the dressing of lava querns from the Mayen era, bronze jewelry production, antler, bone, leather and wood-working, and the manufacture of glass and amber beads. The evidence of so many trades coexisting within a single dwelling accompanied by the fact that the town began minting its own coinage from the early 9th century displays a new aspect of the Viking world that existed in the early Middle Ages (Richards 2005). Perhaps the most intriguing and supporting evidence provided by the author is the fact that the Vikings were so technologically advanced that they were able to expand overseas; becoming the first Europeans to cross the Atlantic Ocean. When reading *The Vikings: A Very Short Introduction*, it is important to remember the professional background of the author. Professor Julian D. Richards is the director of the Archaeological Data Service and Co-Director of the ejournal *Internet Archaeologically*. He has devoted much of his career to the application of information technology in archaeology with a primary emphasis on Anglo-Saxon and Viking archaeology. Because of his extensive background in Viking archaeology, Professor Richards uses documentary, artifactual, archaeological, and linguistic evidence to open up new interdisciplinary dialogue on Viking studies.

While a background in archaeology is not necessary in understanding the core process of the book, some knowledge of archaeology and the way it ties into cultures and society would prove useful in helping the reader form further analysis on the information provided by the author. Because *The Vikings: A Very Short Introduction* serves as part of the Very Short Introductions series, Professor Richards is forced to include a lot of information into very few pages, which causes him to be extremely brief in his presentation of topics. This brief style of writing requires Professor Richards to rely on hard archaeological facts when providing evidence for his claims. At the same time, this brief style does not allow Professor Richards an opportunity to further explain the exact relationship that these archaeological findings share with the information being presented. Professor Richard's inclusion of archaeological evidence discovered at gravesites across Viking territories from the early Middle Ages to the late Middle Ages provides the most accurate evidence to support his central thesis, which is attempting to establish a new perception of a Viking society that has been largely regarded and portrayed as strictly barbaric in many books preceding Professor Richard's short introduction. Compared to other books written by the same author, Professor Julian D. Richards, *The Vikings: A Very Short Introduction* appears to be lacking the same degree of passion and knowledge on the subject of Anglo-Saxon and Viking history and archaeology. While other books by the same author go into accurate detail about society and culture while focusing on more specific segments of the Middle Ages, such as his work entitled *Cultures in Contact: Scandinavian Settlement in England in the 9/10th Centuries*, *The Vikings: A Very Short Introduction* is more focused on providing the basics of a society and culture spread out across the entirety of the Viking existence. To include so much information into a book entitled "very short" seem counterintuitive to the main goal of the author, which is to shed light on the true society that dwelled beneath the rugged outer barbarian-like shell presented by the Vikings. Despite this counter intuitiveness, the author does effectively provide the reader with enough information to successfully form conclusions on the life and times of the Viking people. Professor Julian D. Richard's *The Vikings: A Very Short Introduction* is an overall affective text for providing information to individuals who have no previous knowledge of the Vikings and are seeking a basic understanding of who the Vikings were and where they came from. For the individual who is seeking a presentation of Viking history through archaeological evidence accompanied by in depth explanation and analysis of the evidence provided, *The Vikings: A Very Short Introduction* will simply leave them intrigued but in search of more information. The information provided in the text will take the reader closer to discovering whom the Vikings really were, but will not bring them to any conclusions on the matter. The text serves its purpose in that it dispels the misperceptions that the Vikings were a civilization of

bloodthirsty, village plundering warriors who wreaked havoc amongst the civilizations of the British Isles and the North Atlantic throughout the Middle Ages and leaves the reader with a better knowledge of the traders, settlers, and farmers that used their complex artistic and linguistic culture to expand their society.

Save your money and search for a better book as this is not well written and boring! The the print is also tiny. I should have listened to the reviews.

I first bought the kindle version, but returned it because the maps were too small to read. I then ordered the print edition and it was too small to read - the whole thing, not just the maps. I did not return the book, but I have not read it so cannot comment on the contents.

I think this book does a very good job with a very difficult task. The writer's purpose is to present the up-to-date evidence in a very brief manner, and succeeds admirably. The archaeological finds themselves tell us much about Viking life: there were swords, axes, animal sacrifices, sacred trees, shamanic instruments, chieftains halls, women held places of prominence. The list could go on. I especially liked the section on religion, which was probably one of the better pieces on Viking religion I have yet read. My only complaint is the insinuation that people reviving the religion of the Vikings are Neo-Nazis. If you are looking for a very short intro to the Vikings, then this is a good place to start.

This book is clearly written by an archaeologist who is very knowledgeable about the Vikings. Unfortunately, he completely fails to make it compelling for someone who is not familiar with the subject and needs a "very short introduction". It mostly seems to list burial sites and talks about town development in the Viking lands. It has little discussion of the broader picture of the Viking civilization (I mean, come on, we want to read about berserkrs) and only a few sidebars about the great personages of the time. This is an archaeology/anthropology book, not really a history.

The author obviously has the credentials to write on this subject, however, sometimes expertise sucks the wonder right out of people. This book is so dry it makes the Vikings seem boring! I amazes me that someone so interested in a subject could make it seem so dull. I felt as though the book spent much more time on the Picts, the Irish, Iceland, and other lands and peoples than it did on the Vikings themselves. I wanted to learn what the Vikings were like. How did they live? How did

they fight? What about their religion? How did they come to adopt Christianity? What about their literature? Who were their greatest leaders? How did they get ominous names like Erik Bloodaxe? The book addresses none of these questions. Instead, the bulk of the book runs down a bunch of archeological sites (e.g., this grave in the UK had five swords and a necklace in it and this other one in Denmark had a spear and a helmet in it). Unfortunately, the author gives no indication what any of these finds tell us about the Vikings. I do not feel that I know anything more about the Vikings than I did before I read this book. If interested in this subject, pick another book. There's got to be something better out there.

Short and sweet topic coverage. Reading this book will give you an overview to the topic.

I bought this book before I read the review by "The Pete". I second his review. I would not buy this book again, nor recommend it.

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