



## REACHING VALHALLA

Excerpted from *Reaching Valhalla* by  
Zachary Hamby

“No one may escape dying, and it is my counsel that we not flee, but for our part act the bravest.”

~Saga of the Volsungs~

A burly, bearded man tops the hill. He’s wearing the hide of a bear. On his head is a fearsome helmet, and in his hand he carries an enormous broad-axe. When he sees you (his enemy), his eyes light up with an insane light, and he rushes forward. So much for your life!

This is the most common perception of the Norse people—violent barbarians. To an extent this perception is accurate. The Vikings, the most notorious members of the Norse people, were sailor-warriors, who

raided the coasts of Europe mercilessly for nearly 300 years. But at home in Scandinavia—which includes modern day Denmark, Norway, and Sweden—life was simpler and more peaceful.

The term *Norse* means “Northern” as the Norse inhabited the northern lands of Europe and struggled to survive in the frigid, inhospitable climate. This lifestyle produced a hearty people—a people who valued ingenuity, bravery, and perseverance. The Norse were fantastic craftsmen. Elaborate pieces of jewelry, ornate weapons, and finely-crafted ships have all been unearthed from their burial mounds. They were master ship-builders, and this, coupled with their undaunted courage, led to their Viking exploits.

*Viking* means “bay-warrior”—making it the equivalent of our word for pirate, one who raids from the water. Vikings were young men from Scandinavia, who had no hope of gaining their fortune at home. Scandinavia had become over-populated, and a system of land passing from father to oldest son left younger sons out in the cold—sometimes quite literally. There was little for these disenfranchised men to do but take to the sea and search for wealth elsewhere. Unfortunately, the lands to which they traveled were already inhabited—by Christianized Europeans.

When the monks of Lindisfarne, an island off the coast of Britain referred to as “The Holy Island,” saw boatloads of Viking warriors storm up their beaches, there can be no telling what went through their minds. Who would attack a holy site? Everyone knew what a supreme sin it would be to loot a church or even worse murder a monk. But the Norse warriors did not know the rules of Christianity. They worshipped Odin and Thor, who had

taught them that the strong take the spoils. It was 793 A.D., and the Viking age had officially begun.

Vikings raided the coastlines of Europe for the next 300 years—ignoring any religious significance to holy sites. They saw the wealth of the church, gold that could be melted down into other objects, and took it as their own. Inevitably, the Vikings did more than simply raid. Some conquered and stayed—intermarrying with the Europeans—and bringing Norse culture into the European mainland. The Norse had fair skin and blond to reddish hair.

The same adventuring spirit of the Norse led them further westward to Iceland and then to Greenland and beyond. Based on more recent discoveries, Norse settlements existed on the coasts of North America around 1,000 A.D., making them the first Europeans to reach the New World. And they did it all in a 70-foot-long ship handcrafted from wood.

As for Norse mythology, if you can imagine a complete contrast to the frivolous Greek and Roman gods, it would be the Norse gods. They do not spend their days lightheartedly sipping nectar and eating ambrosia, starting petty quarrels between them for their own amusement. They feast in the halls of Asgard, but only because they know one day soon the time for feasting will be over. The day of Ragnarok will come, the gods will die, and the world will end. And although they know it is a battle they cannot avoid or even win, they daily endeavor to delay its coming.

The spirit of the Norse is still alive today—a tough grit that demands that we stand firm in the face of adversary. The myths of the Norse reflect this grim determination.

## RECOMMENDED READING

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- Clements, Jonathan. *A Brief History of the Vikings: The Last Pagans or the First Modern Europeans?* London: Robinson, 2005. Print.
- Crossley-Holland, Kevin. *The Norse Myths*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1980. Print.
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