The Vikings

**Raiders, traders and intrepid explorers**

“From the fury of the Northmen, O Lord, deliver us!”

The year is 793 AD, and this was the petrified cry of the ancient Anglo-Saxons, pleading with God to save them from the Vikings (or Norsemen). For nearly 300 years, from the 8th to the 11th century AD, this warrior race set out from Scandinavia on raids and voyages of discovery and colonization across the northern world. They struck fear in the hearts of the peoples of Europe, but the archaeology of their settlements and the literature of their sagas reveal a complex and fascinating culture. They were not only violent raiders and pillagers, they were a lot else besides.
1 This striking-looking race, with their blond hair and blue eyes, were descended from Germanic tribes that settled in what is now Scandinavia. Most Vikings were, at heart, farmers and fishermen, not warriors. They grew vegetables and cereal crops and tended their livestock. Skilled Viking craftsmen included blacksmiths, leather-workers, and jewellers.

2 They worshipped a variety of gods, chief among them were **Odin, Thor, and Frey.** Today, we recall them as Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. It is said that Odin created the Runes, the 24 letters of the old Norse alphabet. These were carved on stone tablets with scenes of Norse myths.
Above all, the Vikings were skilful shipbuilders and navigators. With their magnificent longships, they embarked on voyages of exploration far and wide, from Britain to Baghdad. They traded their iron, furs, and grindstones for goods which they could not get at home, such as silk, glass, and silver.

However, in the late 8th century, trading was replaced by raiding. Having the fastest ships of the day, they sprang surprise attacks on European monasteries, thereafter extorting protection money as a price of peace. This was known as Danegeld. This reign of terror began in 793, with a ferocious attack on England's Lindisfarne monastery.
By the mid-9th century, the Vikings were seeking to increase their wealth and power even further. They struck out across the unwelcoming Atlantic and, in 870, reached Iceland. As many as 12,000 Viking immigrants ultimately settled there, setting up the Althing, the oldest parliament in the world.

In 982, one of these immigrants, the hot-tempered Erik the Red, banished from his homeland for killing two men in a violent feud, sailed westward again. He finally settled in a grey, desolate land of fjords and glaciers. Cunningly he named it ‘Greenland’, so as to attract more settlers to join him and his family.
Erik’s eldest son, Leif Erikson, became intrigued by tales of yet more lands and in 1003 he mounted an expedition further west. He finally landed in a place which he named Vinland, today known as Newfoundland, thereby discovering North America nearly 500 years before Christopher Columbus.