

# Sources of the Viking Age

How do we know?

Our knowledge of the Scandinavian Viking Age stems from many and varied sources. Archaeologists, historians, biologists, geologists and many other scientists have contributed to our present understanding of the period through their combined efforts.

## Archaeology

All over Europe new finds of Viking activity are frequently discovered, such as traces of settlements and the graves of the people. Very often the finds consist of everyday tools and artefacts, but together with the rest of the finds from archaeological excavations they add little pieces to the huge jigsaw of our knowledge of Viking Age society.

During the past three decades, experimental archaeology has advanced greatly. By using authentic building techniques and replicas of Viking Age tools, archaeologists have gained a better insight into the conditions of life and the function and use of, for instance, the ships and houses of the Vikings.

## The writing of the Vikings

Viking Age writing was based on a runic alphabet consisting of 16 signs or "letters". Most runes are short messages, which have been carved into the surface of wood and bone or on large stones. The texts on the rune stones often state the lands owned by and deeds performed by deceased people. In this way, the runic stone is a source of understanding of social ties, land ownership, and events.

## Contemporary sources

Viking Age Scandinavia had no written literary tradition, unlike Christian Western Europe south of the border. Among the most important sources for understanding the life and society of the Vikings are foreign chroniclers, missionaries and clerks, describing their meetings with the people of the north. Especially important are the written papers by Ansgar and Adam of Bremen.

## Saxo and the Sagas

The Icelandic Sagas were almost exclusively written down during the 13th century. The Sagas deal with the period from the colonization of Iceland to its Christianization around AD 1000. This is a vast and important group of sources for the understanding of daily life, legal thought and ideals.

Another well known document is one by the poet Snorre Sturlasson. In his work *Heimskringla*, Sturlasson speaks, for example, about the colonization of Iceland.

In Denmark, Saxo Grammaticus wrote the *History of the Danes* around AD 1200. His famous chronicle was written on the order of the Archbishop Absalon, and the work is highly coloured by his political views. Common to both the Sagas and Saxo's chronicles is that they were written two centuries after the events they describe. This, of course, diminishes their value as historical sources of the Viking Age.