

The ships of the Vikings

The ships of the Vikings have become a symbol of the Viking Age. In these, the Vikings were able to sail everywhere in the known world - from North America in the West to Baghdad in the East - for war, to plunder, to trade or to settle.

Construction

Viking ships were clinker-built - they had a hull of overlapping planks, fastened by iron rivets. The planks were made by cleaving tree trunks and working them by axe. This method of construction resulted in a very strong ship which could interact with the waves and remain flexible. The rigging consisted of a large rectangular sail. With a good wind, they could travel up to 10 knots - about 18 km/hour. The square sail was most efficient in a sideways or following wind. When sailing against the wind, tacking was necessary.

Two types

Viking ships are divided into two main types: warships and trading vessels. The warships were long and slender, and could be powered by sail and oar. They were very suitable for rowing which was important for manoeuvring in a battle situation.

The rig could be taken down and the shallow draft made it possible to land the ships quickly and unnoticed on hostile beaches.

Trading vessels were shorter and wider. They were not as fast as the warships, but they could hold a larger cargo. The smaller ships were used in coastal waters, whereas oceangoing traders were able to sail the rough seas of the North Atlantic.