CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Fury of the Northmen

Finally the chieftain took his high seat. The warrior band had waited eagerly on the benches around the great hall, warmed by the crackling fire, quaffing bountiful mead. The chieftain's servant girls had spent weeks this fall mixing honey and water, brewing barrels full for his famous party at Yule, the old Scandinavian festival of midwinter. Now the chieftain was there in his best clothes demanding to know why his famed warriors had been given such simple drink. Did they not deserve better hospitality after all they had accomplished in Frankland? Had they not hauled home barrels of the best Frankish wine from the rich cellar of that monastery last summer and paid dearly for their loot with their blood?

The appearance of the pitcher, its perfect regularity so unlike the clumsy local earthenware containers that most of them were used to, hushed the rowdy warriors in the vast hall. Tin foil in several horizontal lines and, between them, sequences of rhombuses decorated the pitcher, a glorious vessel for an exotic drink. The chieftain, served first, received a chalice with an artful decoration of blue glass in delicate strands after which the man in the seat of honor was handed a matching glass. The rest of them drank out of horns or simple mugs, but now everyone drank wine instead of mead to celebrate their bravery and their success when they had gone on Viking raids during the summer. Some of the warriors, recognizing the glassware bought by the chieftain when the band of warriors had visited the town of Hedeby on the way home from raiding, whispered that the blue-shimmering glasses were from a

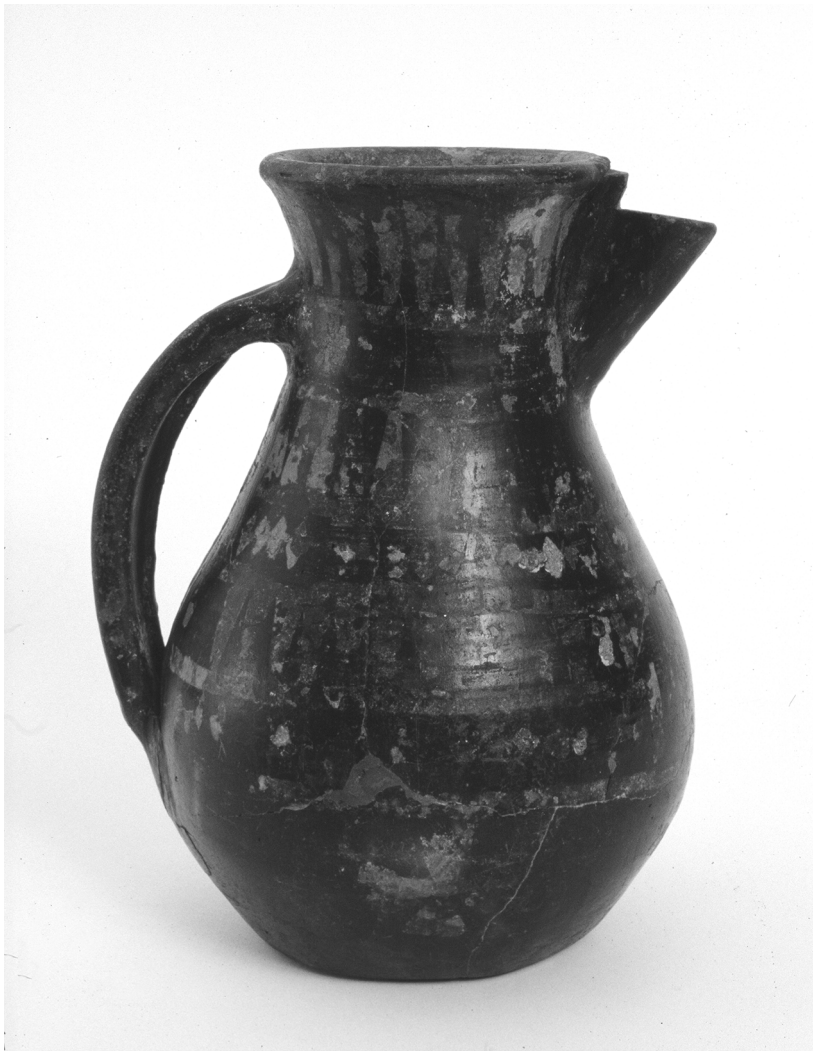

FIG. 1. This beautiful pitcher made on a fast-spinning potter's wheel was manufactured inside the Frankish Empire but found in a grave in Birka, Sweden. The pattern was made by attaching thin tin foil. Photo: Gunnel Jansson, courtesy of Statens Historiska Museum, Stockholm.

faraway kingdom called Egypt; the chieftain could have procured a good longship for what he had paid for them after hard negotiation.

Used to coarser drink, some of the warriors were unfamiliar with the taste of wine. What a great leader of men who so generously shared such luxuries! And he looked the part, too. His cape

featured embroidered leopards and silver sequins, and it was trimmed with lustrous fox fur. He sported a silk cap on his head. An eiderdown pillow with a beautifully embroidered cover depicting a procession of people, horses, and wagons cushioned his seat, and by his side stood a ceremonial ax with rich decoration in silver-wire inlay depicting a fantastic animal. This was a real chieftain! Where did he get all these amazing things? Few of the warriors had ever been this close to such luxuries. They had never seen foxes as darkly glistening as these, nor had they experienced any textile that could shine this luminously.

Not everyone in the hall had sailed out last summer with this chieftain to seize opportunities in Frankland; many newcomers had come to the chieftain's celebration. They could be heard bragging about how they, next summer, would go with this chieftain to redden their swords with the blood of the Franks and the English, or why not the Moors in Spain? And they were going to gain undreamed-of riches.

This past summer, they had not been so fortunate. Of the three ships that had gone out under another chieftain, only one came back, and that was without their leader, who had fallen, it was rumored, when the Frisians had unexpectedly fought back. Nobody was really sure what had happened, for those who had returned were not eager to talk about it.

It was time for the food to be brought in, but first the gods must have their share. The chieftain cut the throat of the sacrificial animal and let the blood stream down on the floor, pouring some wine on top of it. The chieftain also held up a tiny gold foil between his fingers for everyone to admire. Those who sat closest could just make out an embossed picture of a couple embracing. The chieftain attached the foil to one of the posts supporting the roof. Not all of his warriors were sure exactly what this ritual implied, but they were certain it must be beneficial. The sacrificed lamb was taken out to be roasted, and the rest of the food was brought in, large chunks of roasted meat, cauldrons of boiled fish, and sweetmeats. The warriors feasted heartily and happily on all that was on offer. One certainly did not need to bring any packed food to the feasts of this illustrious chieftain!

Their bellies full of a glorious meal, everyone was leisurely cracking the hard shells of nuts to get to their sweet contents as dessert, but the chieftain himself and his closest men were having larger nuts that were easier to open, for their shells were softer and thinner. Were their contents more delicious, too? Few in the hall had ever tasted these foreign "welsh" nuts, or "walnuts." Some of them remembered seeing a single walnut when it had been put in the magnificent grave of the last great chieftain before this one.

That funeral had been something to behold: the dead man was given a huge, gorgeous ship with exquisite wood carvings, which was going to ferry him to the Afterworld. People were impressed that his son was willing to sacrifice such a grand vessel, although malicious tongues whispered that the ship was anyway not very seaworthy and had capsized twice, drowning the chieftain's brother. The son of the old chieftain had also sacrificed an unheard-of number of horses on the foreship. People talked at length of the sea of blood on the deck of the funeral boat before soil was thrown over the boat to form a mound, from which, as a reminder, the mast still protruded.

The skald stood up in the middle of the hall, and the warriors, by now boisterous, did not quite fall silent, but the hall became still enough that most people could hear him. He turned to the chieftain and declaimed: "Listen to my poesy, destroyer of the dark blue, I know how to compose." This skald was a good one, even a very good one; one could hear from his accent that he was an Icelander as, everyone knew, were all the best skalds. The warriors enjoyed the euphony of the verses he recited: the rhythm, the alliteration, the end rhyme, the slant rhyme, the assonances, but they did not quite understand every stanza. So unnatural was the word order, so complex the waft of rhyme, and so far-fetched the poetic circumlocutions. Dark blue . . . what exactly? Wound-swans? Meals of giants? But the verses clearly celebrated the achievements of last summer's Viking adventure. The warriors recognized individual words: Franks, fire, gold, horses, a raven. A warrior suddenly burst out, "We fed the raven well in Frankland!" when he suddenly realized that this was the solution to part of the riddle of one stanza. Everyone cheered, and the poet had to fall silent for a moment. In

the ancient poetry of the Norse, to feed the raven (also poetically known as the wound-swan) meant to kill the enemy, providing a meal for beasts that feed on carrion. It was difficult for the drunken warriors to make out even such phrases, for the Icelander excelled not only in far-fetched expressions, but also in using unnatural word order and rare locutions. The beginning line had been easy enough, for the skald began, strategically, with expressions readily understandable. There could be no doubt, either, of the ending, for his gestures and inflections made it abundantly clear when he reached the grand peroration of his praise of the chieftain.

The chieftain rewarded the skald with a golden arm ring that he took from his own arm, and he lavished on the expectant warriors, for their bravery and loyalty, arm rings in gold and silver, swords with richly decorated pommels, clothes, helmets, chain mail, and shields. Even those who had just joined the chieftain received tokens of his new friendship, mostly weapons, each according to his standing and promise as a warrior.

At the end of the evening, everyone was happy. They had eaten and drunk to their satisfaction and beyond, listened to and half-understood what they were sure was great poetry, and they could proudly carry their new arm rings or swords that proclaimed to everyone that they were the valued friends of this great chieftain. This winter, a lot of men were spending months building a new, even more formidable ship for next summer's raiding season. Slave women and servant girls were spinning and weaving a great woolen sail, an investment of thousands and thousands of hours, but the sail would be worth it. The new vessel would not only sail faster but its greatness would also ensure that the chieftain's reputation spread even further, prompting even more warriors to volunteer to fill the rowers' benches.

Of course, he could easily afford any expense after all the silver and gold he had collected last summer; some he had simply taken in monasteries, churches, and homes; some had been paid out in return for his promise not to attack hapless Europeans; some had been his payment for men and women he had captured and sold as slaves. Life was good for this chieftain, who presided over a band of devoted warriors. They were all excited to go out and fight loyally

for their chieftain, to the death if necessary. They were all looking forward to raiding again in Europe as soon as spring returned.

It all began in the great feasts in the halls of Norse chieftains. Viking raids started here, springing from the loyalties and friendships inspired by the drinking, eating, and gift giving. And in the halls it also ended with the distribution of the loot as gifts, laying the foundations for a new cycle of violence the next year. The warriors loved their generous chieftain who provided food and drink, entertainment, jewelry, and weapons. They were happy to give their allegiance and military prowess in return. Although the humiliation of Europe's powerful kingdoms, the sacking of the rich treasuries of monasteries, and the great battles between Vikings and Europeans may comprise the most spectacular and best-known events of the Viking Age, the real story of the time unfolded in the great halls of the North. They were the focal points of the early medieval geography of power in Scandinavia. Each hall was the centerpiece of its chieftain's honor, worth, and reputation, the focus of his world, the locus of his power.

The ancient king of the Danes, Hrothgar, resided in a most splendid hall, Heorot, at least in the imagination of the Viking Age *Beowulf* poet. When the Swedish warriors of the eponymous hero Beowulf approached Heorot in friendship, they were endlessly impressed by the tall and magnificent hall, famous throughout the world. Hrothgar had ordered it built so that his reputation would grow and remain forever great. The poet emphasized the glory and the excellence of Heorot, which gave Hrothgar bragging rights and a basis for his power. That was exactly the purpose of building a hall, a structure that impressed and a famed place to which warriors would flock to share in the hospitality and generosity of its chieftain.[1]

Chieftains built halls all over northern Europe, where archeologists have discovered the remnants of dozens, teaching us just how many warlords strove for power in early medieval Scandinavia. Each chieftain cherished his hall, built it as large and tall as he was able, had it decorated, if not with gold as in the imagined

Heorot, then at least with painted wood carvings, weapons, and other embellishments.

The halls of Scandinavian chieftains are the largest buildings known from the early Middle Ages in northern Europe. Measuring 48.5 by 11.5 meters, the hall at Lejre on the Danish island of Zealand was the greatest of them all. Beyond a few fragments of wood at the bottom of some postholes, nothing is preserved of the great building, the pride of its chieftain, except the imprint of its foundations in the Danish soil. That imprint is sufficient, however, for us to know the dimensions of the hall and to learn that it was solidly built: sturdy timber posts held up the roof, and the walls were six inches thick, made up of planks cut from ancient forests. A great hall should be a tall and impressive building. At Lejre, archeologists conclude that the roof reached at least 10 meters. It was held up by two rows of interior posts, and also by posts in the walls, which needed to be buttressed by twenty-two raking planks on each side, 1.5 meters apart. In the middle of the building, two sets of roof posts were omitted, creating a large interior space of some 9.5 square meters with the fire burning in the main hearth on one side.[2]

This open space was fundamental to the political power of the Lejre chieftain. His thronelike chair, or high seat, stood here, richly decorated with wood carvings and probably paint. Scandinavian artisans during the Viking Age were capable of splendid wood carving. Furniture found in a grave mound in Oseberg, Norway, displays, for example, exquisitely carved dragons, with large stylized eyes; the animals intertwine legs, creating a richly detailed interlaced pattern. Around the chieftain, his warriors would sit on what the *Beowulf* poet called "mead-benches," enjoying their leader's hospitality, certainly including much mead, but also more distinguished drinks, as well as food and entertainment. It was here that the Viking raiding bands first came together as communities of warriors under the leadership of the chieftain. Bonds of loyalty, fellowship, friendship, and blood brotherhood were established and oaths of solidarity were sworn. In the mead hall, throngs of Scandinavian warriors came together, drinking and feasting and generally having a good time. The generosity and wealth of the chieftain impressed them all deeply. As often happens when men drink

together, they came away with a renewed sense of solidarity with one another and loyalty to their leader.

We will take the hall of the Viking leader as our starting point for exploring the history of the Viking Age, just as it was the starting point for Viking raids attacking Europe. Here, all strands of that history come together—politics, military prowess, trade, agriculture, exploration, religion, art, literature, and much else—and we will follow them from the hall out into the early medieval world, in some cases going very far indeed, to exotic places like al-Khwarezm in central Asia and Newfoundland in America, Seville in southwestern Spain, and the White Sea on the north shore of Russia. For the Vikings, experienced by Europeans as a kind of unqualified evil coming from the ends of the world in fulfillment of Biblical prophecies, were in fact deeply embedded in the texture of early medieval European society.

We continue to be fascinated by the Vikings and stories about their exploits. Ferocious barbarians in horned helmets with gleaming swords and sharp axes, descending on Lindisfarne, Hamburg, Paris, Seville, Nantes—almost everywhere—to slaughter, raid, rape, and generally wreak destruction, toppling kingdoms and laying waste to Europe; the Vikings pique our imagination. We picture them killing and maiming without regard for age, gender, or status in society. We imagine them as super-masculine heroes, practitioners of frenzied violence for its own sake, devotees of strange pagan religions that required bloody sacrifices necessitating horrendous torture. Just as we as a society continue to have a fraught and complex relationship to violence, we are both spellbound and repelled by the Vikings. While we may sympathize with and grieve for their helpless victims and feel put off by all the mindless slaying, we can scarcely help admiring the strength, courage, and virility of the Vikings.

But the Vikings also represent a more unambiguously positive image: we like to think of them as youthful, courageous, and exciting adventurers devoted to travel and exploration. We think of the Vikings as accomplished and fearless discoverers who sailed across

the Atlantic five hundred years before Columbus. On the other side of Europe, they navigated the rivers of Russia and discovered overland trade routes to central Asia and the Arab Caliphate, connecting with China via the Silk Road. The new trade routes helped them make fortunes as traders and merchants.

Despite their propensity for violence, the reputation of the Vikings remains predominantly positive, and their image is constantly used in ever more inventive ways in metaphor and marketing. Viking-related trademarks promote herring, lutefisk, river cruises, computer games, kitchen interiors, power tools, and the NFL football team in Minnesota. A widely used computer communication standard borrows its name from a famous Viking king, while many musical bands—particularly those devoted to various shades of heavy metal, it appears—derive their name from Norse culture and lore. Viking-themed feature films, television dramas, and documentaries draw huge audiences, while college courses on Viking-related themes seldom fail to entice large crowds of students. Vikings sell and intrigue. They evoke an attractive blend of masculinity, strength, adventure, and northern heartiness.

Yet, do we truly know the real Vikings? Do we genuinely recognize who they were, what they did, and what they stood for? The modern cultural imagination captures only aspects of the Vikings, and what we think we know is skewed, exaggerated, or simply misunderstood. Their iconic horned helmets, for starters, never existed, or at least not before the premiere of Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelung* in 1876.[3] While we recycle myths, some of the most fascinating stories about the Vikings are seldom or never told.

The Vikings were violent, even ferociously so. They hunted slaves, killed, maimed, and plundered over much of Europe, including in Scandinavia itself, and it would serve no reasonable purpose to deny their thirst for blood. We need, however, to understand the context of and reasons for what they did. They were not simple mindless killing-machines. The Middle Ages were a violent time overall, and this was especially the case in the stateless societies of the early period. Violence played a pivotal role in the political economy of the time, even for purportedly civilized rulers like Emperor Charlemagne and early English kings, who operated within much

the same violent framework as the Vikings, but if anything on a larger scale.[4]

Yet amid all the violence and warfare, the Viking Age was also a moment of great cultural, religious, and political achievement. Intense Scandinavian contacts with Europe unleashed not only the "fury of the Northmen" onto their European victims, but also a battery of European cultural and political influences on Scandinavia. The people of the European North responded in creative ways. Literature flourished, especially poetry of a complexity seldom rivaled. During the Viking Age, Scandinavians experienced a great boom in decorative art, much of it produced by artisans and craftsmen in the thriving trade towns of the region or at the courts of ambitious rulers. Some Viking Age Scandinavians embraced a newly fashionable religion, Christianity, while others fomented a resurgence of the old pagan religion. The Baltic and North seas saw unprecedented commercial activity precipitated by the new economic structures of the Eurasian continent after the rise of the Arab Caliphate. That trade and exchange, largely run by Scandinavians and other northern Europeans, brought not only untold riches to the Baltic regions, including enormous amounts of minted Arab silver ultimately deriving from the rich mines of Afghanistan, but also all kinds of exotic trade goods. Chieftains impressed people by drinking Rhenish wine from Egyptian glasses, by procuring the strongest steel in the world for their swords from central Asia and India, by wearing Chinese silk and Indian gems, and by offering those they counted as friends a share in all that wealth. The Viking raids were another source of riches, bringing to the North not only Western coins—more Anglo-Saxon pennies survive in Scandinavia than in the British Isles—but also other kinds of valuables, including jewelry, silk, gold and silver treasures from the church coffers of western Europe.

The wealth that Scandinavians accumulated was put to inventive use in the political economy of the region; chieftains who gained riches gave them away to inspire friendship and loyalty in those who gratefully received the gifts. Similarly, marriage alliances, blood brotherhoods, and godparentage were used to create and strengthen morally obliging ties of allegiance between warriors and

their leaders. Each chieftain strove to build up as good and powerful a private army as possible. They therefore competed over who was most impressive, generous, eloquent, and well-connected, and over who could give the greatest gifts. Such competition involved open and violent warfare among rival chieftains, in a constantly shifting kaleidoscope of unstable political constellations. Some chieftains went under and some took their ambitions elsewhere, while others prevailed, accumulating more and more power, until, out of the turmoil, the three medieval kingdoms of Scandinavia crystalized around the year 1000.

Some Scandinavians moved away from their northern habitats into Russia, France, England, Scotland, and Ireland, taking with them not only their ambitions but also their language and customs. In doing so, they fundamentally changed the places where they settled. Other Scandinavians moved to Iceland, Greenland, and, if only briefly, Newfoundland, bringing Norse culture across the North Atlantic. Transatlantic migration, long-distance trade, and the Viking raids themselves would not have been possible without the sturdy, fast, and eminently seaworthy ships that Scandinavians learned to construct and equip with efficient sails just before the start of the Viking Age. The Norsemen were well aware of how important their ships were, and they created imaginative ideologies and mythologies around them.

The Age of the Vikings engages every major facet of Viking and Scandinavian endeavor from the end of the eighth century through the eleventh. This was when ordinary Europeans for the first time learned more than vague generalities about their neighbors to the north. They quickly came to fear them greatly, since Scandinavians discovered that wealth was to be easily gained by raiding along the coasts and rivers of the continent. The Viking longships provided an invaluable advantage: the ability to surprise the victims, who had no warning of the impending attack. The peoples of Europe were no strangers to indiscriminate violence in an epoch that always was violent, but when the enemy arrived overland, rumors of their approach spread fast. The Vikings also had a propensity for attacking monasteries and churches, which were soft and undefended targets but which Christian armies for the most part

spared. Monks and clerics well-nigh monopolized early medieval literacy, so preserved chronicles and other literary works preserve their perspective, which understandably was utterly hostile to their attackers. The Vikings thus earned an unfavorable reputation as "a most vile people" and "a filthy race."[5] In contrast, I argue that their violence, seen in broad historical context, was no worse than that of others in a savage time, when heroes like Charlemagne (d. 814) killed and plundered on a much greater scale than the northern raiders.

During the Viking Age, Scandinavia pursued a distinct and different path from the rest of Europe. Art, literature, and religion developed in idiosyncratic ways, and Scandinavians opened trade routes that had never before been used, or at least not on the same scale. Many of them moved away to settle in places as different as Greenland and the interior of Russia, eastern England and northern France. Overall, the Viking Age was a dynamic and creative time when Scandinavia was bursting with energy. Multitudes of Norse men and women eagerly grasped the opportunities that had become available to them since the recent invention of the longship. The kingdoms of Europe also suffered through many periods of weakness and confusion, such as the Frankish civil war of 840–843 or the revolt of the English king's son Edmund in 1015, which made opportunities for Scandinavian enterprise much richer. In taking advantage of these opportunities, Scandinavians spurred political and social change, which in the long run enabled them to enter the mainstream of European history, though at the cost of losing some of what made their culture distinctive.

In *The Age of the Vikings*, I draw on an array of contemporary written, visual, and material sources, as well as abundant scholarship in history, archeology, literature, and neighboring disciplines, in order to recapture from a broad contextual perspective something of the excitement and innovation of that difficult period without glossing over its destructive heritage. The book is anchored in concrete and lively stories about the men and women who helped shape one of the most unique and interesting periods in history, the Viking Age.

The word "Viking" is rare in the Viking Age sources, but in modern times it has become a ubiquitous but ill-defined label. The original sense of the term is unclear, and there are many suggestions for etymological derivations.[6] In this book, I reserve the term "Vikings" for those northerners who in the early Middle Ages raided, plundered, and battled in Europe, in accordance with how the word is used in medieval texts. Otherwise, I refer to the inhabitants of Scandinavia as Scandinavians. The language they spoke is called Old Norse, so I have sometimes used the term "Norsemen."