

THE VIKINGS

AND THE SILK ROAD



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The Vikings were the first people to explore and visit the four continents of Europe, Asia, Africa and America. Their mercantile empire stretched from the North American coastline in the west to the shores of the Caspian Sea in the East. They obtained trading rights with the mighty Byzantine Empire, and permission to roam the bazaars of the Caliphate city of Baghdad. Nearly everyone in the world has heard of the Vikings, but the truth behind their story is far more complex, interesting and important than most people realise.

This is the story of the Vikings and the Silk Road.

The Silk Road

The Silk Road had been in existence long before the Vikings arrived on the international scene in the early 9th century. Merchant caravans heading towards China were laden with precious metals such as gold and silver, ivory, gems and glass. Luxurious foods such as pomegranates and figs were also traded. While from the opposite direction came porcelain, jade, bronze, fur and of course silk. It was not just material goods, but also ideas such as religion, technology and artistic influences.

The Vikings added a new dimension to this lucrative trading route by opening up the Russian rivers systems using their sleek long ships, which were capable of traversing the shallowest rivers to the open seas, thus creating new opportunities and markets for both trade east – west and visa-versa.

The Viking 'Rus' and the age of expansion

In the 9th century armed Viking traders were heading across the Varangian Sea (Baltic Sea) and setting up small colonies to trade with the native Slavs in modern day Russia and Eastern Europe. Viking merchants joined together to protect themselves from the sometimes hostile tribes of the Russian steppe and became known as Varangians, which in Old Norse (the North Germanic language of Scandinavia) means varar = oath, pledge. Alternatively, the Russian word varyag means trader, pedlar, (from vara "goods"). These Varangians infiltrated the great inland river systems of the Volga, Dvina and Diepner to trade in furs and amber from Finland and the Baltic region to silver from the Islamic world. Trade flourished and some settlements became large towns and cities such as Novgorod and Staraja Ladoga (Russia). In 862 AD a group of Varangians called the 'Rus' (Finnish name for Sweden) led by their warlord Rurik founded the Rurik dynasty. According to the Russian primary chronicle, Rurik was invited by the native peoples of the Slavs, Chuds and the Krivichians to rule over them. In establishing a political union, the Kingdom of the 'Rus' was able to expand east, creating a new network of trading routes to link up with the Silk Road in Central Asia.



The Invitation of the Varangians: Rurik and his brothers arrive in Staraja Ladoga (Public domain)

The Rivers of the Dnieper, Dniester and Don allowed access to the Black Sea towards the capital of the Byzantine Empire, Constantinople (now Istanbul). While the river Volga provided the Viking 'Rus' access from the Baltic Sea at Staraya Lagoda to the shores of the Caspian Sea to join up with the merchant caravans on the Silk Road .

Military incursions

As the trade increased, so did the appetite of the Viking rulers of the 'Rus' to control and profit from it. Between 864 AD – 1041 AD several military expeditions were launched to try and bring the countries and Kingdoms around the Caspian Sea (Azerbaijan, Dagestan, Georgia, Iran, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan) into the dominion of the 'Rus'. The raiding fleets ranged in size from 16 – 500 ships. The last raid took place in 1041/42 AD and was made up of mainly Swedes under the command of Ingvar "the far travelled". After fighting several battles, possibly including the Battle of Sasireti in Georgia the fleet of 200 ships was



Gripsholm Viking runestone, Sweden

decimated and only one ship returned back home to Sweden. 26 runestones were erected in Sweden and can still be visited today that recount the exploits of Ingvar "the far travelled" and his men.

Grave goods

In recent years a vast array of precious Viking age grave goods has been uncovered in archeological excavations in Scandinavia.



Map of the Eastern Viking trade routes and the Silk Road © Destination Viking Association

These have included the 'Helgo Buddha' statue, dating from the 6th century and made in Northern India / Pakistan. The Buddha probably arrived in Sweden via Viking merchants whose eastern trade routes were concentrated along Russian rivers such as the Volga.

The Oseberg ship mound in Norway revealed that two high status women were buried with extravagant silk textiles originating from Persia. Other silk textiles found in Scandinavia can be traced back the China itself, revealing the true extent of global trade via the Silk Road.



Helgo Buddha © Swedish History Museum

For more information about the Vikings and the Silk Road please visit



Silk Road Programme

World Tourism Organization (UNWTO)

Calle Capitán Haya, 42, 28020 Madrid, Spain

Tel: +34 91 567 81 00

Fax: +34 91 571 37 33

Email: silkroad@unwto.org

<http://silkroad.unwto.org/>



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of the Council of Europe
Itinéraire culturel
du Conseil de l'Europe



Destination Viking Association

Museivägen 29
236 91 Höllviken

Sweden

Tel: +46 707 620 612

<http://www.destinationviking.com/>

The Viking Cultural Route (Council of Europe)

<http://culture-routes.net/routes/the-viking-routes>