

This October,  
step into the  
magical,  
mystical  
world of the  
early Vikings



# The Vikings Begin

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This richly adorned helmet from the 7th century demonstrates the symbolic power weaponry held for the early Vikings.



Bracelet, assembled from beads found in a 7th-century grave. Beads of glass, ceramics, and amber were costly items, imported from abroad.

**I**n late October, the traveling exhibition *The Vikings Begin* will arrive at the new Nordic Museum. This will be its second stop on a two-year US tour, which begins in May at Mystic Seaport in Connecticut. The exhibition includes a number of exquisite, more-than-1,300-year-old original artifacts from the centuries leading up to the Viking Age, held in the vast archaeological collections of Uppsala University. These objects are normally kept in the vaults of the University Museum and have never before traveled across the Atlantic.

To make sense of history, we often think in terms of defined periods and clear developments. Different eras in history replace one another. But when we look closer at how events actually unfolded, the view becomes complicated. Some phenomena seem to be rooted much further back in history while others linger on, even though they should have become obsolete long ago. Never is this more true than when it comes to the Viking Age.

Viking society dominated present-day Sweden, Denmark, and Norway from about 750 AD to the middle of the 11th century, a period of some 300 years. During this time, the Vikings also traveled the world and made an impact in many places. Their settlements can be found along the eastern

shore of the Baltic, up the Russian rivers, in the Byzantine Empire, in England, along the Mediterranean, in Iceland—even as far away as in North America.

We often understand the rise and fall of the Vikings by looking at developments across the rest of Europe. At the beginning of the

there was an opportunity for the raiders and traders from the north to make their way along the coasts and rivers in the west, east, and south. Using their skills as seafarers and warriors—in combination with the element of surprise—they were remarkably successful in their foreign adventures. But as the worldly and religious powers gained

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## With no written sources, religious texts, or records of trade, early Viking society remains elusive—but rich new archaeological finds from graves in eastern Sweden shed light on how it began.

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Viking Age, the Western Roman Empire had long fallen and Western Europe had been in a state of disorder for a couple of centuries. The emerging Carolingian Empire was not really a strong, centralized power (Charles the Great was pronounced emperor in 800 AD) and the Christian Church was not yet the power it would later become. Thus,

momentum, the Vikings lost out. And as Christianity finally reached the north, the spiritual underpinnings of the Viking worldview also disappeared.

In 2015, three prominent Viking Age researchers at Uppsala University received funding for the ten-year project “The Viking

Depictions of religious myths were present in everyday life. Here, adorning a 7th-century sword, is an ornamental figure (possibly a snake) with a gemstone between its lips.





A 7th-century Viking helmet.



Upper: Weapons were also works of art, such as these 7th-century spearheads with intricate patterns.



Lower: All glass items found in the graves of the early Vikings were imported. This costly bowl with a gold thread ornament is from Northern Italy. 15cm x 7cm.

Phenomenon.” One aim of the project is to closely study the emergence of Viking society by looking at the developments within the Scandinavian Iron Age culture that existed before the Vikings. Although the project is only just beginning, some interesting insights have already emerged. The rich archaeological finds from graves in eastern Sweden—treasures that are held by Gustavianum, Uppsala University Museum—tell a more complex and interesting story about why and when Viking society actually began.

*The Vikings Begin* tells the story of this emerging new society through a number of well-chosen original artifacts from the centuries leading into the Viking Age. With no written sources, no religious texts, not even records of trade, this early Viking society remains elusive. Objects—found in the graves of the rich and mighty—are what Neil Price, Charlotte Hedenstierna-Johnson, and John Ljungkvist use in their research. Analyzed with new methods, these stunning artifacts reveal a level of sophistication previously unknown to researchers. The

early Vikings’ spiritual world was rich and multi-layered. They farmed the land, but with a maritime outlook: coast, inland waterways, boats, and navigational skills were essential. They communicated with the rest of the world through trade and travel, but simultaneously valued warrior skills. And they were extremely skilled in two crafts: boatbuilding and metal works.

The exhibition marks the first time that original objects from this period will be on display in the US. It includes magnificent



This figure head, found in a female grave from the 10th century, was carved from animal bone and likely topped a sorceress's wand. 10cm x 5cm.

# ***The Vikings Begin* uses cutting-edge research and a collection of world-class objects to shed new light on the emergence of Viking society.**

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weapons, both for attack and defense, and also smaller treasures such as jewelry and objects with magical importance. The finds come from both male and female graves, as both sexes played important roles in society. Recent finds even indicate that women sometimes actively participated in battle; however, their power resided primarily on the spiritual and magical sides of life.

Researchers have learned a lot about Viking society by carefully analyzing the objects left behind. One particularly interesting type of object is the finely made weaponry. The Iron Age society of the early Vikings was a farming economy—as were all societies during this time. Given its position in the North, the Vikings' agricultural economy was especially sensitive to changes in climate. When a few years of extreme weather struck in the mid-500s, society seems to have changed. Competition for resources became more pronounced, and out of this came an increased emphasis on battle and warfare. As the warrior culture emerged, skills in battle became highly prized. This led to the manufacture of highly refined (and often beautifully adorned) weapons.

The fall of the Western Roman Empire left a power vacuum in Europe, which led to a state of confusion across the continent. However, in southeastern Europe—around Constantinople—the Eastern Roman Empire (also known as the Byzantine Empire) thrived. This meant that even in this partly disorganized world, trade continued to develop. Precious objects from far away—even from very remote places in the Far East—found their way into the market villages and trading posts of Northern Europe. They were, of course, extremely expensive luxury items. In the emerging Viking society, having the resources to

enrich your warrior helmet with an Indian gemstone was a symbol of great power.

But even more powerful than the warrior culture was the spiritual world, which could be accessed through the practice of magic. This magic seems to have ruled the everyday life of these early Vikings. Their religious beliefs were not organized into a coherent religion as we know it; the absence of written texts, the sparsely populated land, and the lack of an organized church means that spiritual practices probably varied quite a lot. Even so, there existed a shared belief in a number of named gods. There was a uniform creation story that mattered to all early Viking Age societies. And in the decorations of the precious weapons, there are often references to these common religious beliefs—to gods and to magical creatures such as snakes and dragons.

Examples of such weaponry are included in the exhibition, but there are many more items on display. Gustavianum's *The Vikings Begin* uses cutting-edge research and a collection of world-class objects to shed new light on the emergence of Viking society; through our collaboration with the Nordic Museum, this light will reach farther west than the Vikings could have ever dreamed. ■

[This brass plate, in combination with others, adorned an 8th-century horse harness and depicted mythological figures. 7cm x 4cm.](#)

