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The Sea Wolves: A History Of The Vikings



Synopsis

In AD 793 Norse warriors struck the English isle of Lindisfarne and laid waste to it. Wave after wave of Norse "sea wolves" followed in search of plunder, land, or a glorious death in battle. Much of the British Isles fell before their swords, and the continental capitals of Paris and Aachen were sacked in turn. Turning east, they swept down the uncharted rivers of central Europe, captured Kiev, and clashed with mighty Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire. But there is more to the Viking story than brute force. They were makers of law - the term itself comes from an Old Norse word - and they introduced a novel form of trial by jury to England. They were also sophisticated merchants and explorers who settled Iceland, founded Dublin, and established a trading network that stretched from Baghdad to the coast of North America. In *The Sea Wolves*, Lars Brownworth brings to life this extraordinary Norse world of epic poets, heroes, and travelers through the stories of the great Viking figures, including Leif the Lucky, Eric Bloodaxe, and Harald Hardrada. This riveting history illuminates the saga of the Viking age - a time that "has passed away, and grown dark under the cover of night."

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I finished this book on my flight tonight. I've listened to two podcasts from Lars Brownworth's "12 Byzantine Rulers" about a selection of Roman emperors after the fall of the West...actually, now that I think about it, at least one of them was before that, Diocletian. It provided the inspiration for a much longer podcast series that I also enjoyed, "The History of Rome." And "Norman Centuries," a history of the former Vikings who took back to the sea and made war across the Channel in

England, and in the Mediterranean in Sicily and the Holy Land. I enjoyed both of them. They showed his key strength, writing a lengthy, coherent narrative about a story in history, while tying the story into wider world history in many places. This book did not disappoint. It traces the Vikings leaving their homes in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway, mostly Danish Vikings brutally attacking the Carolingian Empire, then its successor states the Francian kingdoms. Mostly Norwegian Vikings went west to Shetland, Orkney, Britain, Ireland, Iceland, Greenland, and the America. Mostly Swedish Vikings went East and founded a kingdom in the Slavic lands, including much travel all the way to Constantinople and service for the Emperor, when they weren't fighting against him. The kingdom they founded developed into Russia, Ukraine, and Belorussia. He once again did a great job at telling a gripping story, and tying it to dozens of previously (to me) unrelated stories in Europe, in the East, and in the West. I know much more about European, American, and Russian history after reading this book, and I enjoyed it!

For me, this was by far the best history of the Vikings I have read. From the get go, the author drives the story forward in a historical way, covering the start of the Viking era as we know it, with the attack on the monastery at Lindesfarne, to the last major Viking battle at Stamford Bridge. I don't think anything is left out here, be it the Vikings prowess as ruthless warriors, to their exploration of Island, Greenland, the North Eastern US mainland, today's Russia, countries around the Mediterranean, their gifts as tradesmen and merchants.

I loved this book! Brownworth has a gift for writing about history in a way that is highly informative and, yet, full of suspense and intrigue. An unusual combination for writers of history. My understanding of the Vikings of old, as captured in *The Sea Wolves*, is that they were a complex group of people who should be remembered the way Lars Brownworth portrays them. The stereotype of the brutal warrior has been smashed and replaced with a much more accurate image of not only the Norsemen's fighting prowess but also their mastery of political, social and religious acumen. Lars Brownworth's books should be included in the history curricula of secondary and college education.

If you're looking for an exploration of Viking customs and culture, this probably isn't the book for you. Rather, it explores the profound impact of the Vikings on future history across the entire map of Europe, from Ireland to Russia to Byzantium (yes, you read that correctly--Byzantium). It's rather mindboggling to consider that Harald Hardrada--the Viking invader that the Saxons had to fight off

mere weeks before they lost to the Normans (Frenchified Vikings) at Hastings--had previously traveled east and south through nascent Russia (founded by Swedish Vikings) and served as a commander in a special Byzantine imperial guard unit that had been made up of Vikings for generations. The world was not small to the Vikings, who also discovered the Americas centuries before Columbus. My only real complaint about this book is that it lacks a few extra sentences here and there that could have made it clearer what events were were happening at the same time in the various parts of the widespread area of Viking influence. Perhaps an appendix timeline could have served the same purpose, but it doesn't have one, leaving the reader to try to keep track (something that might have been easier with a paper copy rather the Kindle edition I read).

As an introduction, it is a worthy read. It is only occasionally cited, which is a bit suspect. Brownworth often confirms that he has read the Icelandic Sagas by introducing ideas..."in many/some of the Sagas..." while rarely mentioning them by name. This is unfortunate. But, as a starting narrative framework, it does the job. I am giving it four stars, because I just like reading about Vikings, and this made good reading on the T. After reading this book, I recommend reading the Icelandic Sagas, if you really want to be enthralled. Also, for a more penetrating scholarly analysis of Viking culture and society, read "Viking Age Iceland" by Jesse L. Byock.

The only reason I didn't give it five stars was that it really needed to be longer in order to fill in many details. It is a thoughtfully composed and enjoyable history of the Norsemen and their conquests leading to a remaking of Europe as we know it today. Reading it encouraged me to read his other written history of the Normans which I am now enjoying. I give Brownworth a big thumbs up.

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