

# The Vikings

## Osprey General History

By Rene Chartrand, Keith Durham, Mark Harrison, Ian Heath

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### Review by Jonathan Aird

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Introduction

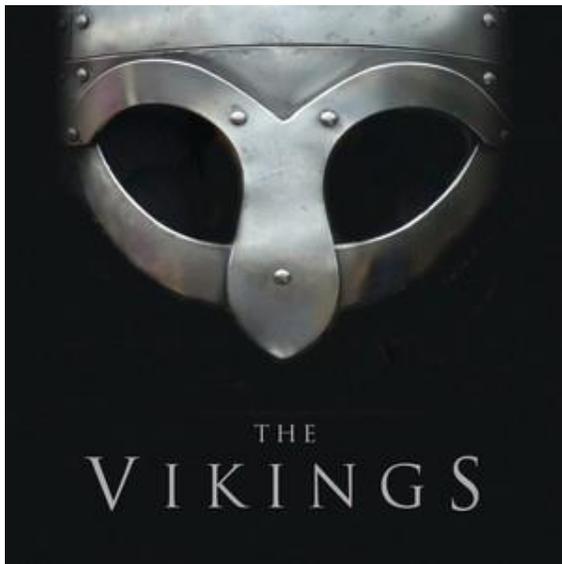
The Vikings at home

The Viking Hersir

The Vikings in battle

The Viking longship

In addition to their well-known specialist military history titles, Osprey also has a line in general histories aimed at the non-specialist, but interested, reader. These often benefit from the reuse of illustrations from a number of the specialist volumes such as the Men-At-Arms series, making them particularly attractive books. And such is the case with *The Vikings* ó a hardback



volume of some 200 pages with pictures and material gathered from a Men-At-Arms, an Elite and a New Vanguard. This new book is really an update of a previous similar looking book ò*The Vikings: Voyagers of Discovery and Plunder*ö by the same authors which was published a decade ago and, presumably, was felt to be in need of a freshening up.

After a brief introduction, which sets the Vikings in their historical and geographical context, the main meat of the book begins with a look at the structure of Viking society from the King down to the thrall. There is also a good description of everyday living ó the types of farms and homesteads the warriors who went out on Viking raids would have been

familiar with, a look at the role of women in society ó more equal than might be imagined ó and a survey of legal structures and religion. This is illustrated mostly with wonderfully crisp photographs of artefacts demonstrating the undeniable quality of the craftsmanship produced within the Viking cultures.

There then follows a series of chapters addressing the more military aspects of *The Vikings* ó the individual high status warrior, the Hersir, is covered in some depth, with, as might be expected, some concentration on arms and armour, but also as much on methods of recruitment and the psychological aspects of the warrior's motivation. A couple of contentious issues are also addressed ó berserkers and Jomsvikings. The authors are believers in both ó ascribing berserk behaviour such as the adopting of wolf skins in battle to forms of paranoia and a deep religious belief in lycanthropy. Well, perhaps. The authors also credit the existence of the Jomsvikings, giving credence to the descriptions provided by later chronicles. This is still a much debated point, but it does allow for some wonderful illustrations of the Jomsvikings in

training and in battle. Alongside some beautiful photographs of objects such as the Lewis chessmen, there are many evocative and colourful illustrations by Angus McBride and Gerry Embleton taken from other Osprey books. This mixture of illustration style continues through the following chapter on the Vikings in battle which takes the reader from Hafsfjord in 872AD, through the campaigns in England up to the climactic clash at Stamford Bridge of 1066AD, as well as the Irish and Eastern European wars to finally conclude with the history of the Vikings in North America ó as far as we currently know it ó with again a superb Angus McBride illustration of a dramatic clash with native peoples. It's certainly an attractive side-show for the wargamer to think about!

The final chapter concentrates on one of the most important things that enabled the Vikings to spread their raids and conquests so far and wide ó the longships. Inevitably this chapter draws heavily on the New Vanguard title on the same subject, but there are many fine photographs of restored and reconstructed vessels, as well as the illustrations from that other Osprey book. The text is admirably concise and clear, with interesting insights into such non-obvious aspects of the ship building as the denuding of Danish forests of oaks due to the sheer amount of wood required to create a single large vessel. It's a fascinating read for anyone in the least fired up by matters naval.

Overall, this is the kind of book I'd expect to find selling well in places like the Jorvik centre in York ó simply because it's a very attractive item and also very well priced. It should also, one would hope, find its way into every school library as it is not an over-taxing read and with luck would fall into the right hands and really fire up an interest in this part of the woefully misnamed Dark Ages. The wargamer who is well entrenched into all things Viking will doubtless already own several of the Osprey titles, but someone new ó or less dedicated to the period ó may well find there's enough here for their needs as well. Certainly, the background history is a good summary ó and those wonderful Angus McBride and Gerry Embleton illustrations are pure inspiration for the figure painter. Overall óThe Vikingsö offers a good introduction to the subject at a very good price.