

6.
**COMES A NORSEMAN:
VIKINGS TAKE LOOT,
LEAVE LANGUAGE**

Lindisfarne, a small island off the far northeast coast of England, housed a wealthy monastery that the Vikings promptly sacked. But it was not, as is sometimes believed, the Vikings' first such raiding rodeo in Britain. As the bioarcheologist and Viking expert Cat Jarman reminds us in her book, *River Kings*, there had been at least one raid elsewhere six years earlier.

Regardless, Lindisfarne grabbed the historical headlines. The monastery was renowned for its Lindisfarne Gospels, a sumptuous illuminated manuscript that the British Library says "has long been acclaimed as the most spectacular manuscript to survive from Anglo-Saxon England." When the Vikings sailed from what today we call Scandinavia to pay their infamous visit on 8 June 793, they left the manuscript pages alone. After all, those gospels were written in Latin and Old English, nothing like the runic language these Norsemen wrote with.

The Vikings' preference for "exotic looted objects," as Jarman describes it, ran more to items like "fragments of stunning clip-carved book covers [that they] repurposed into brooches or a near-perfect reliquary shrine." That shrine, most especially, for its gold and silver.

Rhymes with ‘raid’

While these future Swedes, Danes, and Norwegians were indeed ruthless raiders (“brutally enterprising,” as one contemporary Brit who can claim Danish heritage describes them), they were also sophisticated traders. They traveled west, as to England and later North America; east, into Ukraine and beyond; and also south to France, Spain, and Morocco. England was just one of many stops, but it was not merely a smash-and-grab gig. It was more like: raid-leads-to-trade-leads-to-stayed. (And bathed, which they did more frequently than those English did—thus our **bask**, which some language sleuths believe evolved from Old Norse *bathe*.)

The Vikings first set up temporary encampments in England but eventually set down permanent roots. In fact, so many of the Danes settled in northeastern England that for a time it was called Danelaw. “By the end of the Viking Age, in the mid-eleventh century,” writes Jarman, “the Scandinavians’ impact on Britain would be profound, affecting everything from the development of towns to the currency, culture, language and art.”

It left the Vikings speechless

Not that all this happened without some serious hiccups. When in the ninth century the Vikings tried to overrun the entirety of England, in particular the prized southwest kingdom of Wessex, they ran up against the fierce resistance of Alfred, Wessex’s king. Alfred prevailed: he not only kept his existing kingdom through battle and treaty, but then expanded it through (drum roll here) language.

“Alfred quite consciously used the English language as a means of creating a sense of national identity,” observe McCrum, Cran, and MacNeil in *The Story of English*. His stroke of genius, say the authors, “was his inspiration to use English, not Latin, as the basis for the education of his people.”

But first, Alfred had to learn the Latin himself.

Which he did, in his late thirties, so he could translate important Latin writings into English. Being biliterate helped him take his place in history as Alfred the Great.

Short & bleak

Even so, when it came to linguistic invasions into the English language, Vikings could give as good as they got as far as short, punchy words. (Guess where **give** and **get** come from?) McCrum, Cran, and MacNeil estimate that around nine hundred words that made their way from the Norse languages into English were “typically plain-syllabled.”

And some were downright gloomy, as Kevin Stroud, the host of *The History of English* podcast, has observed. “Very often—not always—but very often, they have a negative connotation,” he says.

How do **dank**, **dreg**, **grime**, **muck**, and **scab** strike you? These are some—but not all—of Stroud’s gloomy examples. A couple more: “English gives us right, and actually also gives us the word straight, but Old Norse gives us **wrong** and **crooked**.”

And yet, the real kicker lay not with the glum but with the grammar. By introducing three short words we use all day long, the Vikings left an indelible mark on the language.

Triple threat

They, them, their.

And there you have them. Now English had this handy set of third-person plural pronouns that had it all over the Old English version.

“Pronouns do not change very often in the history of a language,” observes David Crystal, “and to see one set of forms replaced by another is truly noteworthy.”

Okay, maybe you had to be there, but this is what happens when you not only raid and trade but then stay. As the Vikings settled in, they succeeded in settling down the language . . . somewhat. By simplifying some of the grammatical structure of English, it meant that the natives and the Norse could better understand one another.

So while it's true that the French made a huge impact on English with the number of words they added, the Vikings may have one-upped them with their sentence structure and stolen their linguistic thunder. (Note the three pronouns in that sentence.)

But guess where those *Normandy* French originated? (Hint: *Norman*, as in Norseman.)

As for those so-called *paganus* that first barged into England in the eighth century, it wasn't all that long before the Vikings took something else of the country's: its Christian religion. As Gareth Williams, a curator at the British Museum, points out, "the Vikings had many gods, and it was no problem for them to accept the Christian god alongside their own."



What Do These Seven Words Have in Common?

scant
scare
scorch
scrub
skill
skillet
sky

Yes! They're all from the Vikings. Extra credit if you noticed that they all possess the "sk" sound, which many Viking-to-English words do. The Viking "sky," by the way, meant the English "cloud."



No Thrill in This Thrall

In English we might say that someone **enthralled** us—meaning left us spellbound. It's a good feeling. Now let's walk back that word to "thrall." It holds a stronger suggestion of captivity—we are "in thrall to" someone or something. Not always a good feeling. Go back even further, to the word's root: the Old Norse word *throell*, meaning the worst kind of captivity: slavery. Those who were enslaved were referred to as *trell*.



Let Them Eat Skate

Skate, as in the type of fish, is courtesy of the Vikings. But you could just as easily have titled this little section "Let them eat cake," and you'd still be in Viking World.

Cake was another one of their words, along with an ingredient in many cakes: **egg**. The Vikings also used the word in the expression "egg on," which they were no doubt good at doing.



So Like What We Think Would Be a Viking

Old stereotypes die hard, and some don't die at all. So it often is with the Vikings. (**Die**, btw, can be traced to Old Norse.) It may come as little surprise, then, that these words were Old Norse before they were English.

Berserk. Back in the day, “berserk” indicated a fearful warrior—a Viking, in other words. The word may have evolved from “bare shirt,” as this was part of the warrior (un)dress.

Ransack. From the Viking words for “house” and sack.”

Slaughter. As in butchering meat.

Outlaw. Ironically, the Danelaw also gave us “law.”

Take. But remember the Vikings also gave us **give**—and **gift**, in the sense of talent. And so we land on this next little list:



So Not Like What We Think Would Be a Viking

Here are some words the Vikings gave English that poke holes in the stereotype.

Freckle. Take it back to PIE and you find “scatter,” a perfect segue into “freckle.”

Gasp. The Old Norse word for opening the mouth wide was *gaph*, something we tend to do when we gasp.

Sleuth. This started off in Old Norse as meaning the track of an animal or person. In English, “sleuth” started off as “sleuthhound,” which suggests some creature following that track.



Great Scot—They’re Not!

Who would have guessed that these two words were Old Norse rather than Celtic? Just when you think you’ve mastered two more pieces of this jigsaw puzzle called English . . . you haven’t. English can be so maddeningly wonderful.

scot. *Oh come on, seriously?* you may be thinking. Seriously, when the s is lowercase, “scot” has nothing to do with Scotland or the Scots. This scot is Old Norse for “contribution.” The expression we still use today of “getting off scot-free” means someone not having to pay, often metaphorically speaking.

kilt. The Scots may wear them but it’s the Vikings who named them. “Kilt” is Old Norse for the fold of a gathered skirt.