Top Ten Myths About Vikings

**1. Vikings were a nation.** Vikings were not a nation as such, but groups of warriors, explorers and merchants led by a chieftain. As often as not, in the expeditions to the west Vikings were Norwegians, Danes and Swedes, but also anyone who joined them. The point is that the Old Norse word *víkingr* denoted not a nationality, but occupation: a Viking was anyone who took part in an overseas expedition.

**2. Vikings wore horned helmets.** [Gjermundbu helmet](http://www.vikingrune.com/2009/01/viking-helmet/), the only extant authentic Viking helmet, does not have horns. No depiction of Viking helmets dating to the Viking Age represents horned patterns. There are two or three representations of ritual processions where warriors wear helmets with protrusions ending with stylized bird heads or resembling to snakes, but even the ritual use of the horned helmets by Vikings remains unproven.

**3. Vikings’ preferred weapon was a massive double axe.** Vikings did use axes in battle, as the Lindisfarne tombstone graphically illustrates. However, they were of a very different type than suggested in the modern popular culture. It should be remembered that no double-headed axe has ever been found from early medieval Europe. Viking axes were light and used single-handed. The most common weapons found on Viking sites are spears.

**4. Vikings had tresses.** As for hairstyle, to proclaim their Viking roots, Norman men shaved the back half of their head entirely, behind a line drawn from over the crown from ear to ear. On the front half of the head, forward of this line, the hair was left to grow long. There is an 11th-century letter in Old English, which mentions “Danish fashion with bared neck and blinded eyes.” There is no historical evidence of Vikings wearing tresses.

**5. Viking armies were huge.** The sources cite wild numbers for the size of Viking armies. P. Sawyer noted that they could be more specific on the size of the fleets. On the basis of the archeological evidence for the size of the boats, he suggested that Viking ships may have held fifty to sixty men. It means that Viking armies have to be numbered in the hundreds, not even in the thousands.

**6. Vikings were exceptionally cruel and bloodthirsty.** Vikings indeed were sometimes very violent. However, the question is whether Christian armies of the time acted in any substantially different manner. For instance, Charlemagne, who was Vikings’ contemporary, virtually exterminated the whole people of Avars. At Verden, he ordered the beheading of 4,500 Saxons. Vikings certainly were not as bloodthirsty as many Christians of their time.

**7. Abroad, Vikings did nothing except fighting and pillaging.** Vikings did pillage many lands. However, plunder was only one among many other goals of their overseas expeditions. Vikings peacefully colonised Iceland, Greenland and many smaller islands. As explorers they crossed the Atlantic and reached America 500 years before Columbus. As international merchants of their time, they also peacefully traded with almost every country of the then known world.

**8. Vikings used human skulls as drinking vessels.** This misconception goes back to *Runer seu Danica literatura antiquissima* by Ole Worm, published in 1636 and reprinted in 1651. There the phrase saying that the Danes drink *ór bjúgviðum hausa* (“from the curved branches of skulls,” that is from horns) was translated into Latin as *ex craniis eorum quos ceciderunt* (“from the skulls of those whom they had slain”).

**9. Vikings were unclean.** In England, because of their custom of bathing every Saturday, Vikings had a reputation of excessive cleanness. Ibn Rustah, a 10th century Persian explorer, explicitly notes the eastern Vikings’ cleanness. During excavations of Viking sites, combs are among the most frequent objects found. Vikings used tweezers, razors and special “ear spoons” to keep their ears clean. They also produced soap.

**10. Viking ship from Oseberg was a war ship.** Oseberg ship is a very well preserved Viking ship found in a burial mound in Norway. In modern popular culture Vikings are often depicted crossing oceans and engaging in battles on ships that are copies of the Oseberg ship. However, her freebord is so low and the scantings so light that she could be nothing more than a ceremonial vessel that never left coastal waters.