

The *Secret Diary* of the

WORLD'S WORST

Viking Raider

Written by Tim Collins
Illustrated by Isobel Lundie



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Viking Raider

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THE VIKING WORLD

This map shows our hero
Halfdan's journey.



Chapter I



Halfdan Skull-splitter



Denmark 1000 AD
First Day of the First New Moon
of Summer

Lightning will strike. Thunder will crack. Rain will fall. A scowling dragon will glide out of the ocean and frightened locals will scatter, fearing that the beast will spew fire onto their helpless village. But the truth is even more terrible.

It is not a dragon that has come to terrorise them, but a ship with a carved dragon's head. And on board are a fearsome band of raiders led by me, Halfdan Skull-splitter.

We will take all their silver and all their jewels, and we will even prise the weapons from their cold hands once they are dead.

For we are the Northmen, and we are doom.

None of this has actually happened yet, by the way. But I'm sure it will soon. I just need Dad to agree to let me go raiding. And to change my name from 'Halfdan' to 'Halfdan Skull-splitter'. And then I need Thor to provide the dramatic weather, because all we've got at the moment is light drizzle.

GET REAL

The Vikings used many imaginative nicknames to tell people with the same name apart. Examples include Thorfinn Skull-splitter, Eric Bloodaxe and Harald Hardrada, meaning 'hard-ruler'.



Second Day

Dad is refusing to let me change my name to Halfdan Skull-splitter. He says he'll change it to Halfdan Annoying-moaner if I ask again.

He was carving wood in the shipyard opposite our house, and he gave me the same talk I've heard a hundred times before. He said that building ships is just as important as raiding. Our great ships are the reason we can cross seas and sail down rivers and grab exciting things from weaker folk.

He advised me to spend more time learning how to craft wood, and less time pretending to be a raider. That way I'll have something to fall back on if the raiding doesn't work out.

I'll never need anything to fall back on. I will surge forever onward, swinging my axe,

and hacking through wood, flesh, bone and whatever stands in the way of my plunder.

At least I would if I had an axe. Dad won't let me have one in case I cut myself.



Third Day

Forget what I said. I do have an axe now. Sort of.

I met my best friend Astrid to play at raiding, and she brought one from her dad's workshop. He's the best blacksmith in our village, and he makes amazing shields and weapons.

We went to the forest north of our village and took turns playing with the axe. I pretended I was in a raid and all the trees were terrified locals. I ran towards them, roaring and swinging my axe, then I planted it right into



the bark, and gathered some twigs, which I imagined were precious jewels.

I have to admit that Astrid was faster than me, and she didn't miss the tree with the axe as much, but my roar was louder, so we both proved ourselves worthy.

I told Astrid about how Dad wants me to be a shipbuilder instead of a raider, and she said that when she's older she probably won't have a job at all. She'll just have to gather fruit and berries, bake bread and mend clothes. That sounds even more boring than making ships.

Astrid wants to be a raider too. And she's convinced it's going to come true because she looked up into the night sky and asked Thor if she should become one, and he answered with a huge clap of thunder that sounded like

the word 'YES'. But even if the thunder had sounded exactly like 'NO! STICK TO THE HOUSEWORK!' it wouldn't have put her off. She's even more determined than me.

We played all day until I got exhausted and accidentally cut my leg with the axe. I've wrapped the wound in a spare tunic and gone to bed early so Dad can't gloat about how right he was.

GET REAL

In Viking society, men were traditionally expected to be hunters, fighters and traders, whilst women looked after their children and homes. But Viking women had more freedom than in many other societies at the time. They could own property and get divorced, run farms whilst their husbands were away battling or trading, and even take over permanently if their husbands died.



Fourth Day

I'm so glad the days are getting longer again. All those evenings in our house, wrapped in a blanket and watching the fire get very boring.

Mum and Dad have never been raiding, so they don't have any exciting stories to tell. And when I tell my Loki stories, they say they've heard them all before. Dad's thin face sags into a scowl and he picks the wood chippings out of his grey beard. Mum slumps down next to him, fixes her small blue eyes down on her embroidery, and starts to yawn.

I don't care. At least I find my Loki stories exciting. Loki is the naughtiest of all the gods, and he loves playing tricks on the others. They

get so annoyed with him that they tie him to a stone under a snake that drips poison onto his face. His wife tries to catch the poison in a bowl, but whenever she goes off to empty the bowl, it goes all over his face and he screams in agony, making the whole world shake.

Anyway, it's spring again now, so I don't have to spend my evenings telling my amazing stories to an ungrateful audience. I can stay outside, playing raiders with Astrid. She brought a shield as well as a sword today, but we weren't able to use it properly because it's new and her dad would notice marks on it.

But it still felt good to grasp it and pretend I was charging into a village of weak locals.



GET REAL

The Vikings worshipped many gods and goddesses, all of whom had distinct personalities. These included Odin, the ruler of the gods and the god of war, Thor, the god of thunder and storms, and Loki, a mischievous shapeshifter.

Fifth Day

Astrid couldn't play at raiding with me today as she was helping her dad Frode with his work. He has blond hair like her, and you can see where she gets her height from. He basically looks like a version of her that's been stretched and roasted over an open fire. He works bare-chested, and his skin is covered in red marks from where the metal has burnt him.

He spends all his time standing next to a huge clay mound with a fire inside that's called a 'furnace'. It's so hot that metal goes soft when you stick it inside. He gets chunks of metal from rocks, or broken weapons, and hammers them into new shapes.

Astrid stands next to him and pushes a huge leather bag called the 'bellows', which keeps the furnace hot. The heat makes it a good place to be in winter, but it's a shame to waste a nice day like today there.

I asked Frode if Astrid could come to the forest with me, and he said they'd both need to work hard as he'd heard that a group of raiders were moving their ship across land towards us.

I panicked and cowered on the floor with my head in my hands. I couldn't stop myself

imagining the raiders stealing all my stuff, chopping me into pieces and then setting me on fire for good measure.

Frode laughed and said they weren't coming here to raid. If they were, they'd hardly push their boat overland. They'd surprise us at night, creeping up so stealthily that we'd know nothing about it until our heads had been split into two soggy halves. I think this was meant to be reassuring, but it only made me whimper even louder.

He said he'd met the raiders before. They're led by a huge man with a gruff voice called Ulf. They sometimes cut across the forest to the east of our village rather than follow the river all the way north and sail back down the coast. Frode wasn't making new weapons to fight them, but to trade with them.

My breathing went back to normal and I got up from the floor and wiped the tiny scraps of metal from my tunic.



Sixth Day

I can't believe I got frightened about the raiders yesterday. I shouldn't be worrying about them. In fact, this is my big chance. All I have to do is show them that I'm worthy of joining their crew, and I can set out across the sea for a life of adventure and mayhem.

I could even invite Astrid along for the fun. She was helping her dad again today, so I had to practise fighting on my own. Frode said I could take one of his axes as long as I didn't get scared and run away from it. Ha ha. He'll see how scared of danger I really am when the raiders ask me to join them and I grab lots of amazing treasure.

As well as honing my axe skills, I thought about how to introduce myself to the raiders when they arrive. I considered running out at them with my axe held high to prove how fierce I am, but I realised they'd probably think I was attacking them and slice me in two before I could explain myself.

It's fine. I just need to calmly greet them and explain why I would be a worthy addition to their crew.



Seventh Day

I heard thudding from the forest to the east of our village this morning and raced towards it.

The first thing I saw was a wooden dragon's head emerging on the path between the trees. But rather than gliding smoothly as it would on water, it was juddering from side to side.

Behind it were about forty men with filthy tunics, ripped leggings and boots that were caked in mud. They were running around the bottom of a long and narrow ship that was being dragged along on tree trunks. Some of the men were pulling the ship forward, whilst others were working in pairs to carry the trunks from the back of the ship to the front.

Even though Frode had told me what to expect, it was still very strange to see a ship travelling through a forest. Not as weird as seeing someone riding a horse across the sea would be, but close.

As I approached the group, I could make out a man with straggly ginger hair and a few missing teeth who must have been Ulf, the leader. He was growling instructions to the others as he examined the ship.

I raced up to him and announced that I was a fearless raider who wanted to join his crew. Unfortunately, he didn't hear, and kept shouting at his men.

I tapped him on the shoulder so I could say it again. It turned out not to be a great idea to surprise a grizzled old raider. He shoved me to the muddy floor, drew his sword and pressed it to my throat. It was so sharp that a single burp could have killed me. I was glad I hadn't eaten too much porridge that morning.

I begged him not to kill me, and told him that he could have anything he wanted if he let me live, including my collection of carved Thor and Loki figures.

He nodded, tucked his sword back into its sheath and asked me what I wanted from him.

I told him I was a fearsome warrior and wanted to join his crew.

Looking back, I can see that might not have been the best time to make the announcement.



My knees were still shaking and my voice was broken and squeaky.

He snorted out a laugh and went back to shouting at the others. I tried to explain that I'd been practising and would be brilliant at raiding, but he took no notice.

I realised that actions would speak louder than words. I sprinted around to the back of the ship to pick up the end of a log. I shoved my hands underneath it and tried to hoist it up. Even though I put all of my strength into it, it wouldn't budge.

A man with red hair jogged around from the front and took the other end. Between us, we managed to get it into the air. My arms were quaking from the effort, and I felt like giving up and asking if there were something else I could do to impress them instead.

But I forced myself to stagger on. All I had to do was make it to the front of the ship, drop it to the ground and act like it had been no big deal.

The man with red hair lifted his end of the trunk onto his shoulder. I tried to do the same.

The pain hit me right away. My whole arm ached, my knees buckled and my feet slipped on the muddy ground. The log was going to push me into the ground as if I were a nail. I let go.

The red-haired man yelped with agony as the full weight of the trunk pressed on him. He yelled at me for being an idiot, and one of the others had to come over and grab my end.

Ulf ran back over to me and drew his sword again. This time I wasn't going to be able to talk my way out of it. I turned and ran back to the village.

GET REAL

One of the reasons the Vikings were so successful as traders and raiders was their longships. They were narrow enough to travel down rivers, and light enough to be rolled over the ground on logs. Some believe they had dragons' heads carved at the front to frighten people as they approached.



Eighth Day

The raiders moored their ship in the harbour yesterday morning and spent the rest of the day putting up their tents and trading their plundered goods for weapons, clothes, wheat and dried fish. Our village leader, Birger, has said he's happy for them to stay and share our



food for a while, which is unusually generous for him. I expect it has something to do with the fancy new silver brooch he's been wearing.

Astrid finished her work in the afternoon, so she was free to spend the day spying on the raiders with me. We watched them fill their water buckets from our wells and wash their tunics and leggings in our stream.

In the evening, they sat around the harbour drinking ale and boasting about how many people they'd killed. We couldn't resist approaching them and telling them all about our raiding skills, but they weren't interested.

The red-haired raider, who turned out to be called Arne, was comparing scars with a tall raider with black hair. Arne had a wide diagonal scar across his chest that had been

made by a sword. The tall raider had a long thin one across his chin that had been made by a knife. I tried to join in by showing them the cut I made on my leg with the axe. It wasn't as big as either of theirs, so I made up a story about how I'd got it on a raid where I'd stolen hundreds of rings, brooches and beads.

They were starting to look impressed, but then a raider with three fingers and one ear missing came over to show off his war wounds. There was no way anyone could compete with that.



Ninth Day

I've found out what the raiders are planning. A trader has told them about a small village on the east coast of England, which has lots of valuable treasure and hardly anyone capable of defending it. They're going to sail across the sea, take all the valuable stuff from it and come back here.

That sounds perfect. I could go with them, join in with the raid and come right back. The English village is an easy target, and I'll be with some very experienced fighters, so I'll be in no danger. I'll get some excellent raiding experience and I won't be away long. There's no way Mum and Dad can object to that.



Later

Dad and Mum have objected. They think it will be too dangerous, even though I've explained that it won't be. I've warned them that I'm going to keep asking until they agree, but they don't think I actually mean it. They'll find out.



Tenth Day

My plan was to keep asking all night, but I think I must have fallen asleep whilst speaking. I woke them both up before dawn with the same question. I kept going as Dad ate his bread and buttermilk and Mum brought the fire back to life.

All morning, I went back and forth from inside our house, where Mum was grinding corn to make flour, to the yard opposite, where Dad was carving a long wooden plank. I asked my question over and over again, even though they were pretending that they couldn't hear me.

Finally, Dad snapped. He said the raiders probably wouldn't want me, but he'd ask them if I promised to shut up.

I didn't trust him to explain my skills properly, so I went along with him.

I'm glad I did, because all Dad asked when he found Ulf was if he wanted to take a fourteen-year-old boy who couldn't shut up with them. Obviously, Ulf said no. He also recognised me from the other day and said that even if he did, he wouldn't choose one who'd risk the lives of his crew by dropping trees on them.

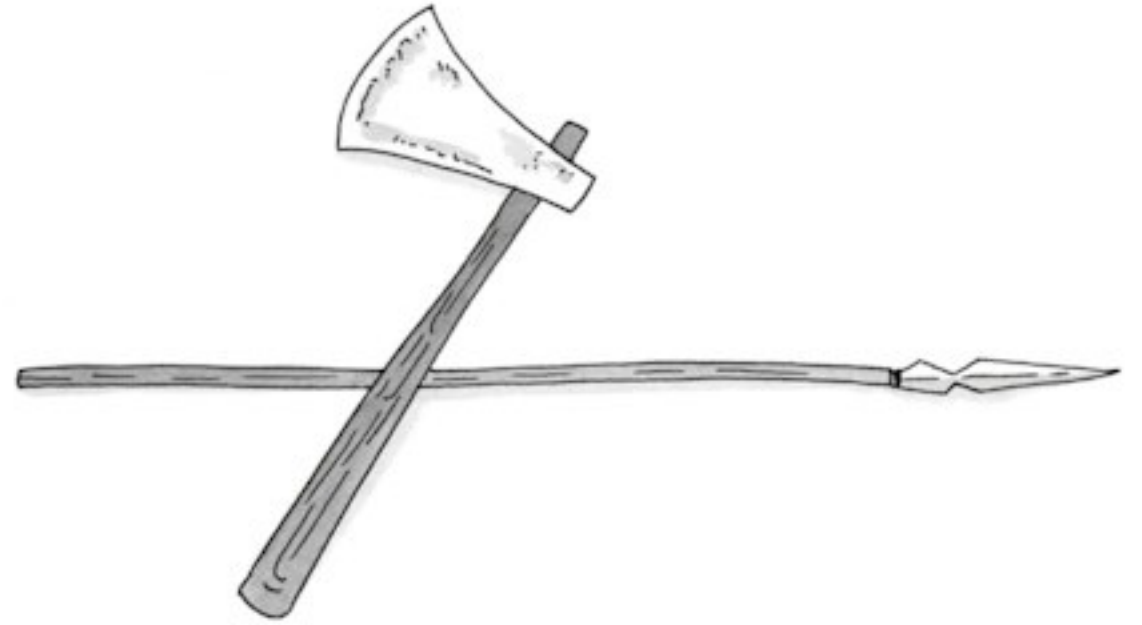
I explained that I only wanted to go on one raid to see what it was like, and promised to be very quiet. He scratched his beard and thought about it for a while. Then he said he'd gather his men in the centre of the village tomorrow morning, and set me three challenges. If I passed them, he'd let me come.

So it's all worked out brilliantly. I'm bound to pass his tests after all the training I've done. I'm sure I'll be off raiding with my new friends very soon.

Chapter 2

Viking trials





Eleventh Day

I found the raiders gathered on the flat strip of land outside Birger's house. I pushed through and found an axe and spear lying on the ground. A few of the raiders were pointing and laughing at me, but I took no notice. I was about to prove them wrong.

Ulf dragged an old wooden barrel, which was full of straw, along the grass. He said he was going to start with an easy one. I had to throw the axe into the side of the barrel.

After all the practice I'd had throwing my axe at trees, this seemed like it would be simple. I stared at the barrel and felt the weight of the axe in my hand.

The raiders stomped their feet, clapped their hands and shouted 'go'. Not only did this break my concentration, but it got the attention of everyone in the village, who joined the crowd to see what was going on.

Men, women and children swarmed around on both sides. Dad and Frode appeared and pushed people back, reminding them that an axe might not necessarily go straight ahead if I am the one throwing it.

I spotted Astrid on my left. She was telling everyone to be quiet, so I could focus. At least someone was being sensible.

Birger emerged from his house and told everyone to get back to work. His long grey hair was flopping about in the wind, and his cracked cheeks were even redder than usual. Ulf explained that I'd been set some special challenges, and everyone wanted to enjoy the entertainment. Birger sighed and said everyone could watch as long as they went back to work straight afterwards.

I tried to block it all out and pretend I was back in the forest with no one but Astrid nearby. I took a deep breath, lifted the axe and let it go.

It spun through the air, the ornamental silver lines on the blade catching the sunlight as it went. It was heading right for the middle of the barrel. It wasn't just going to hit the thing. It was going to smash it to pieces.

But right at the last minute, it curved to the left. It swept so close to the barrel that it could have shaved splinters off it, but it landed helplessly on the grass beyond.

I blamed the wind and begged Ulf to let me have another go. He refused, saying that I only got one attempt at each challenge. I tried to look on the bright side. I hadn't killed anyone yet. And if I did well enough on the next two challenges, he might still accept me.

Ulf dragged the barrel a few feet further back and told me the next challenge would be to hit it with the spear.

I grabbed the weapon and held it up, trying to work out the best place to grip it. Unlike the axe, I hadn't had any practice with one of these.

I breathed slowly in and out, staring at the barrel. All I had to do was aim the spear and release it. It was simple.

I ran forward and let it go. Or at least, I tried to. The weapon didn't fly through the air like I was expecting. It just plummeted down to the grass. I should probably have released it sooner or something. But how was I to know? I'd never even touched one before.

The raiders laughed and shook their heads.

There was still one remaining challenge, and one chance to prove myself.

Ulf approached me with a flaming torch in his hand. He said the last challenge was the hardest of all. I had to throw the flaming torch into the barrel and set the straw on fire. It was a vital skill if you wanted to burn a village.

Then he pulled the barrel back even further.

I grabbed the handle of the torch and felt the heat of the flame. Surely there was no way anyone could throw the torch all that way?

I looked around, wondering if there was something I was missing. Then I had an idea. I stepped forward and picked up the spear again. Then I undid my belt and tied the end of the burning torch to the spear.

I glanced over at Ulf and grinned, as if to tell him I'd worked out his little puzzle. He looked slightly confused, but was probably just reflecting on how useful it would be to have someone so cunning on his crew.

I took three steps back, held my flaming spear in position and ran forward. This time I

released it sooner, and it flew up into the air. I watched it go, waiting for the moment that the spear would arc down and hit the barrel. It didn't come.

The spear kept on soaring higher, and passed straight over the top of the barrel.

I sighed. I'd missed the target for the third time. I'd failed all my tasks.

That turned out to be the least of my worries. There were gasps and shrieks from the crowd, and at first I couldn't work out what was going on. Then I saw. The burning spear was heading right towards the straw roof of Birger's house. I found myself running towards it, as if I could catch up with it and stop it. But the spear hit the roof, and bright orange flames spread across it.

Leif said I was obviously letting my imagination run away with me, and told the others to ignore me and get back to work.

GET REAL

The draugr were undead beings who featured in some Viking sagas. They were stinky, swollen corpses with super-strength who guarded treasure and got revenge on whoever had wronged them in life.

Chapter 7



Meeting the locals



Fifth Day

Last night some of the crew approached me when Leif wasn't around to check if I'd been telling the truth. I told them I had.

This morning several of them announced that they wanted to abandon this settlement and find somewhere without any living dead nearby.

Leif said they were being ridiculous, and we needed to settle the whole matter right away. He told me to lead them to the spot where I'd seen the creature so he could investigate.

We set off into the woods, with the crew following behind, holding up their axes and shields. I don't know what use they thought they were going to be. The draugr would just eat their weapons too.

It was hard for me to locate the exact place again, but eventually I recognised the branch I'd tripped over, and reckoned the encounter must have happened a few paces beyond.

Leif strode ahead, but then came to a stop. He hissed at us to be quiet. There was something moving. A figure was creeping around the trees. The others were gazing at it with open mouths and wide eyes.

I was slightly relieved that I hadn't been imagining it after all, but mostly terrified of being eaten. I scuttled back behind the others, reckoning that the creature might swallow them first and give me time to get away.

Leif inched forward. It was quite brave of him. I'd have sent one of the others out to meet the monster instead.

As he went on, he did something very strange. He dropped his axe and shield. I could see they wouldn't be much use against a super-strong corpse, but why get rid of them?

He went further, making a slow, beckoning gesture to the monster.

The figure emerged from the gloom. It was short, with dark eyes and long black hair. Now I could see it properly, it was obvious this wasn't a monster at all, but a human.

It was a man who was wearing trousers made from animal hide. He looked at Leif, who held his hands up to show he had no weapons, and then over at us. He made a nodding gesture and sank back into the forest. Leif told us the man must be one of the native peoples of this land.

On the way back, the others teased me for thinking I'd seen a genuine monster. I don't remember them being so casual about it on the way there.



Sixth Day

Now that my panic has gone, I'm a little disappointed I didn't see an actual monster. And I'm even more disappointed that we weren't the first people here after all. I wonder if the natives have been here forever?



Seventh Day

The native ventured into our settlement this morning, and brought four friends with him. They were all a similar height to him, at least a foot shorter than Leif and the others.



Some of the crew thought we were under attack, and grabbed their axes, but Leif told them to hold off. The natives were carrying piles of animal pelts rather than weapons, so they wanted to trade rather than fight.

The natives laid their pelts out and beckoned us over to look at them. From the gestures they made, they seemed to want some of our spears and axes in return, but Leif refused. Only the stupidest explorer would swap their axe for a pelt, so that the other person could chop them up with the axe and take the pelt back.

Leif went to the ship and returned with a roll of red wool, and the natives examined it before accepting it and leaving the skins.

Leif said that they seemed friendly, but we should be wary of them, especially during the winter months.

I need to talk to him about all this winter stuff. We've done plenty of exploring. Isn't it time to go back?

Eighth Day

Our settlement is finally complete. A row of three long huts with turf-covered roofs now look down onto the clear lake. The first bucket of wine was ready too, so there was lots of rowdy shouting and singing to celebrate.



Ninth Day

I spotted Leif on the shore this morning, gazing out across the lake with his hands planted on his hips. He was on his own for once, so I thought it would be a good chance to ask when we were going home.

I tapped him on the shoulder and said I wanted to talk about what would happen next. He grinned and said that he knew what I was going to ask.

He said I must have guessed he was planning on sailing back to Greenland soon to gather more people. And obviously I would want to know if Astrid and I could rule the colony whilst he was away. And the answer was yes.

This threw me so much that I forgot everything I'd planned to say. I staggered off to tell Astrid that we could be the temporary king and queen of Vinland and she was overjoyed.

Lots of odd things have happened since we left home, but being offered a chance to become a king has got to be the strangest.



Tenth Day

Although being a king would be amazing, I've decided I still want to go back. I've been very lucky to travel this far and see so many new things without getting eaten by sea monsters or dead people. But I've had enough for now. Maybe one day I'll return here and help Leif with the colony, but I need to go back to normal life for a while. Also, I'm scared that the natives will attack when Leif is away, and we'll be in charge of fighting them off.

I told Astrid, and she said I was right, and it was probably for the best, as our parents must be worried about where we are. I could tell that she was disappointed about not getting to be a queen, though.





Eleventh Day

Today we told Leif about our decision. He said he understood, but he still wanted to thank us for supporting him in Iceland and Greenland, so he was going to make us king and queen for the day.

He made special chairs for us from the storage boxes and had the crew bring us salmon and grapes. We spent the day thinking of all the things we could command everyone to do, like build a hall as long as seven houses, or have a feast in our honour every day for a year.

Being a real ruler would be much harder, of course. You'd spend so much time solving petty disputes and making sure no one used up the winter supplies, that you'd never have time to sit on a big chair and make ridiculous demands.



Twelfth Day

We are back at sea, sailing north up the coast so we can cross over to Greenland. We're going to stop there for a few days whilst Leif tells everyone about Vinland, then he's going to take us all the way home, just as he promised.

Eighteenth Day

We're back in Greenland now. Everyone wants to know all about Vinland, and Astrid and I have been answering questions all day. It's only a few weeks since I arrived here and marvelled at how these brave folks had made a home on the very edge of the world. Now I know it isn't the edge of the world, and we're seen as the brave ones.



Twenty-Ninth Day

Back home at last.

We arrived this afternoon. We leapt into the waves whilst Leif and the crew were still pushing the ship to the shore, and staggered to the village. It was exactly as we'd left it, except that Birger's roof had been fixed.

A crowd soon gathered and yelped questions at us. Dad and Mum pushed their way through, followed by Frode.

Dad glared at me with his face turning purple and his fists clenching into balls. He exploded into a rant about how I ran off with the raiders when I was meant to be working to earn enough money for Birger's roof.

Frode joined in, yelling about how Astrid had not only left without his permission, but also stolen his shields and axes before doing so.

Astrid took out her bag of coins and gave some to her dad to pay for the weapons, and some to my dad to pay for the roof. They both examined the coins briefly before returning to their shouting. Then Birger appeared and told everyone to get back to work.

Leif came over and stood next to us, whilst his crew gathered behind him.

He announced that he was Leif, son of Erik the Red. His voice boomed above the yapping of the crowd, and they fell silent.

He slapped me and Astrid on the back, and said everyone ought to be careful how they spoke to us, as we were now the former king and queen of Vinland.

The questions started up again. Everyone wanted to know what Vinland was, why it needed a king and queen, and why on earth anyone would choose us.

Leif said we would tell them everything, once they'd served a great feast in our honour.

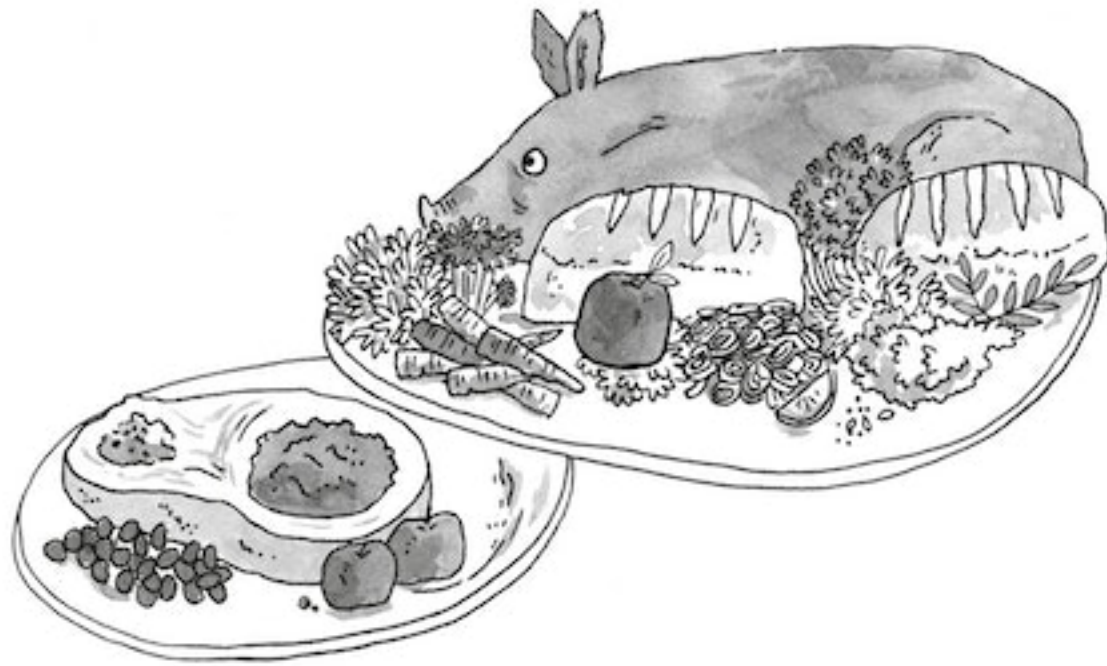
Astonishingly, everyone agreed, including Birger. It must be great to have a voice so commanding that complete strangers will obey your wishes.

The others wandered away, whilst Leif told Dad, Mum and Frode about our amazing deeds. It struck me that last time I was standing on this stretch of grass, everyone was laughing at me for failing the tasks I had been set. Now I was returning as a hero.



First Day of the New Moon

Our feast carried on long into the night, and I woke up late this morning. We had pork, mutton, bread, carrots, cabbage and leeks, followed by an oatcake, apples and blueberries.



After the meal, Leif gave a long speech about how we'd crossed the ocean and discovered two new lands, before founding Vinland. He hopes it will grow to be even bigger than Iceland and Greenland one day, and said that everyone was welcome to join it. And if they did, they should never forget the names of Halfdan the Intrepid and Astrid the Fearless.

It's not too long since I wanted to be called Halfdan Skull-splitter, and renowned for my ruthless raiding skills. But raiding didn't turn out to be much fun. What's so great about stealing stuff from people who are weaker than you anyway?

Exploring, on the other hand, is much more impressive. We sailed further than anyone had gone before. We discovered new lands beyond the edge of the world. And we even met people that nobody knew existed. Now that's truly something to be proud of.

The End

The Vikings in North America

We use the term 'Viking' to refer to the people who lived in Denmark, Norway and Sweden in the 8th to 11th centuries. The word was once used for the pirates who sailed out to violently attack and steal from others. But we also use it for the more peaceful people from these countries too.

The Vikings were traders and explorers as well as fighters. They were farmers, who tended land and kept animals. They were craftsmen, who were skilled at working with metal and wood. And they were traders, who gathered silver, jewellery and pottery from around the world.

There is no doubt that the Vikings could be extremely violent, but violence was common in their era. So why are the Vikings remembered for being particularly bloodthirsty?

It's partly because the written evidence we have about them is biased. The Vikings raided churches and monasteries, and the accounts written by their victims describe them as savage and terrible.

But it's also because our notions of Vikings were formed long after their era. The image of the bare-chested warrior with the horned helmet was created in the writing and art of the 19th century.

The Viking Age is said to have begun in 793 AD, with the first raids on England. It continued until 1066 AD, with the defeat of the Norwegian King Harald Hardrada by the Saxon King Harold Godwinson.

The sophisticated longships and knarrs of the Vikings let them launch quick and brutal raids, and also allowed them to travel great distances for trading, with some reaching the Mediterranean and others venturing far down Russian rivers.

The ships allowed them to venture to Iceland and Greenland to set up new colonies, and even reach North America. The excavation of a Viking site in Newfoundland in the 1960s sparked

interest in their exploration of the area, which took place nearly 500 years before the famous voyage of Christopher Columbus.

According to the *Saga of the Greenlanders*, Leif Erikson and his crew sailed from Greenland and came upon places he named 'stone-slab land', 'wood land' and 'vineland'.

The Vikings never managed to settle in North America, partly because of conflict with the native peoples. But the fact that they managed to get so far away from home is a testament to their great thirst for exploration.

How do we know about the Vikings?

How do we know about the Viking age, when it happened so long ago?

The truth is that much of the written evidence we have about the Vikings was written by others. These were often their enemies, so the accounts could be unreliable.

But the Vikings did have their own form of lettering, known as 'Runes'. These were usually carved in wood or stone, and used for short pieces of writing.

There are also inscriptions and images

on coins that can help us to learn about them. Other objects such as weapons, jewellery and household utensils have been found. Chests of buried treasure from the era have even been unearthed.

Some Vikings were buried in their ships, along with their belongings, and locating these sites can be incredibly useful. Archaeologists now use radar to help discover them.

We can learn a lot about Vikings from their sagas. These were epic stories about things like voyages, rulers and feuds. The Vikings told these stories to each other, and they were eventually written down, although not until long after the events described in them had happened.

The most important ones for learning about Viking exploration beyond Greenland are the *Saga of Erik the Red* and the *Saga of the Greenlanders*. They don't agree on the details, but they both describe how Leif Erikson found new lands in what is now North America.

There was little evidence to back up these accounts until the 1960s, when a team of archaeologists discovered a Norse site on the island of Newfoundland. The remains of eight buildings, thought to be houses and workshops, were found.



Timeline

793 AD

Viking raiders attack the abbey on Lindisfarne, off the coast of northern England. This date is seen as the start of the Viking Age.

795 AD

Vikings raid the monastery on Iona, off the west coast of Scotland.

841 AD

Vikings travel up the river Seine and attack the French town of Rouen.

845 AD

King Charles the Bald offers the Vikings a payment in silver to stop them attacking Paris. They begin to demand similar bribes elsewhere.

Timeline

865 AD

Viking forces land in Britain, seize land and eventually begin to settle.

c.874 AD

A colony is founded on Iceland.

878 AD

King Alfred of Wessex, later known as 'Alfred the Great', is victorious against the Vikings at the Battle of Edington. He draws up a treaty, in which the area controlled by the Vikings is known as the 'Danelaw'.

911 AD

Viking chieftain Rollo establishes a kingdom in France, becoming the first ruler of Normandy.

Timeline

980s AD

Vikings launch a series of fierce raids on England, during the reign of Aethelred the Unready.

c.982 AD

Erik the Red is exiled from Iceland and explores Greenland. He soon returns to set up a colony there.

c.1000 AD

Leif Erikson voyages to North America.

c.1030 AD

The colony in Vinland is abandoned.

1066 AD

King Harald Hadrada is killed at the Battle

Timeline

of Stamford Bridge, near York in northern England. The date is seen as the end of the Viking Age.

c.1230 AD

Snorri Sturluson writes *Heimskringla*, a history of the Norwegian kings. This and other 'kings' sagas' give us the story of the Vikings from their point of view, but they were written too long after the events recorded to be reliable.

15th century AD

The Viking settlement on Greenland disappears in mysterious circumstances. Could disease have wiped them out? Did they perish in a conflict with the Inuit people? We don't know.

Viking Hall of Fame

Egill Skallagrímsson
(c.910–c.990)

The hero of *Egil's Saga*, which was written in the 13th century. He is described as a warrior and a poet, capable of both bloody violence and artistic expression. It's said that he composed his first poem at the age of three, and killed his first enemy at the age of seven. If you ran into him, you'd have to hope you caught him in a poetic mood, rather than a murderous one.

Eric Bloodaxe
(c.885–954)

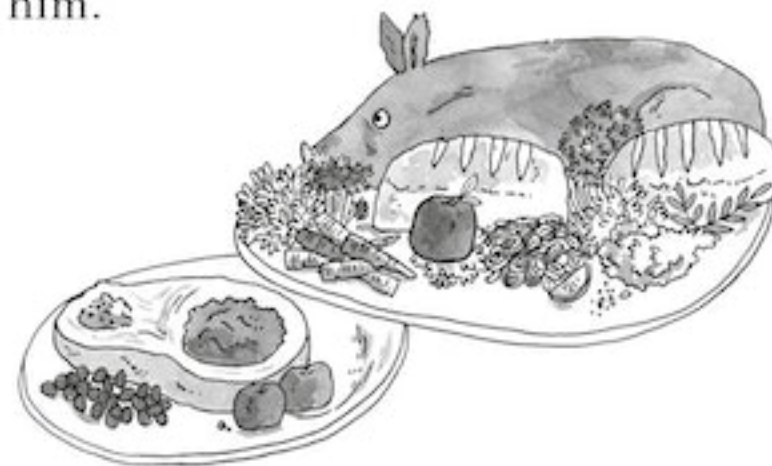
Norwegian who served as both King of Norway and Northumbria in northern England, and whose violent nickname has made him one of the best-known Vikings.

Viking Hall of Fame

According to the sagas, he killed his brothers in an attempt to retain power, which might explain his name. But we have no idea if this really happened, or if he was even called by the name at all in his lifetime.

Erik the Red
(c.950–c.1003)

Viking explorer who's thought to have founded the first settlement in Greenland. According to the sagas, he first explored the land whilst he was exiled from Iceland for murder. He eventually returned to Iceland and convinced people to start the new colony with him.



Viking Hall of Fame

Freydís Eiríksdóttir (born c.970)

The daughter of Erik the Red, who was described as a fearless warrior. In the *Saga of the Greenlanders*, it's said she set off on an expedition to Vinland once her brother Leif had returned. However, she got into a dispute with some of her fellow settlers and ended up killing them.

Gudrid Thorbjarnardóttir

Viking explorer who features in the *Saga of the Greenlanders*. It's said she travelled to Vinland with her husband Thorfinn Karlsefni, shortly after Leif Erikson's voyage. Whilst they were there, the couple had a son, Snorri Thorfinnsson. If the account is correct, it would make Snorri the first baby born to a European in North America.

Viking Hall of Fame

Harald Bluetooth (c.910–c.988)

Danish King who united different tribes into a single kingdom. He fought wars against the Germans, and converted to Christianity. In 1997, a method of exchanging data between devices, and therefore uniting them, was named after him. You can find the runic Bluetooth logo on phones and computers.



Viking Hall of Fame

Harald Hardrada
(c.1015–1066)

Norwegian king whose name translates as 'hard ruler'. His reign came at the very end of what we class as the 'Viking Age'. In 1066, he attempted to invade England, but was thwarted by King Harold's forces at the Battle of Stamford Bridge. Harald Hardrada was killed by an arrow to the neck, but King Harold's victory turned out to be short-lived. He was defeated just a few weeks later by William the Conqueror at the Battle of Hastings.



Viking Hall of Fame

Ivar the Boneless
(died c.870)

Viking leader who invaded England, supposedly to get revenge for the killing of his father Ragnar Lothbrok. According to legend, he was so ruthless that he executed his enemies using the 'blood eagle', a gruesome method of killing in which the ribcage is opened and the lungs are pulled out so they resemble a pair of wings.

Lagertha

According to the Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus, who wrote in the 12th century, Lagertha was a fearsome warrior and the wife of the famous Ragnar Lothbrok. Saxo describes how she fought alongside the bravest men with her hair flowing loose around her shoulders. She may well have been fictional, but her story was remembered by generations of Vikings.

Viking Hall of Fame

Leif Erikson

Viking explorer who's thought to have been the first European to visit North America. According to the sagas, he established a settlement at Vinland, which could be Newfoundland in Canada. So whilst some may believe that Christopher Columbus was the first European to 'discover' America in the year 1492 AD, there is plenty of evidence that the Vikings were there first.



Viking Hall of Fame

Ragnar Lothbrok

Legendary warrior who lived in the 9th century, and features in Norse poetry and sagas. He's said to have launched vicious attacks against England and the Holy Roman Empire, and to have died when he was cast into a snake pit by the King of Northumbria. Historians now doubt whether he really existed at all, but his name lives on as the ideal of the fearless Viking.

Snorri Sturluson

(1179–1241)

Icelandic clan chieftain who wrote narratives of Norse mythology and sagas about Viking kings. He was writing centuries after the events he described, so we can't take his work to be accurate, but it has shaped our idea of the Vikings for centuries.

Glossary

Adze

A tool with a sharp blade at the end that's used for shaping wood. It looks like a miniature axe.

Archaeologist

Someone who studies the remains of ancient civilisations.

Asgard

The realm of the gods in Viking mythology.

Bifrost

A burning rainbow bridge that connects the world of humans to the world of gods in Viking mythology.

Boss

A round piece of metal in the centre of a shield that's used to deflect blows from weapons.

Clinker

A method of boat building in which the edges of planks overlap each other.

Colony

A group of people who leave their country to form a settlement in a new one.

Draugr

Hideous corpses that have come back to life, in Viking mythology.

Fjord

A long and narrow body of water that reaches inland from the sea.

Jörmungandr

A sea serpent that circled the realm of humans, in Viking mythology.

Glossary



Knarr

A type of ship used by the Vikings to carry cargo. They were wider and deeper than longships, and had a taller mast and a bigger sail.

Longship

A type of ship used by the Vikings for sea voyages and raids. They were also narrow enough to be rowed down rivers.

Glossary

Midgard

The realm where humans lived in Viking mythology. It was also known as 'Middle Earth'.

Norse

A term used to refer to the Scandinavian people in ancient or medieval times.

Northmen

Another term for Vikings.

Parchment

An animal skin that has been stretched and smoothed so it can be written on.

Plunder

To steal goods violently from somewhere, in a war or a raid.

Ragnarok

The great battle in Viking mythology that would destroy the world.

Runes

The letters used by the Vikings. They were made from straight lines, which made them easy to carve on stone or wood.

Saga

Entertaining tales that the Vikings told to each other, that were later written down.



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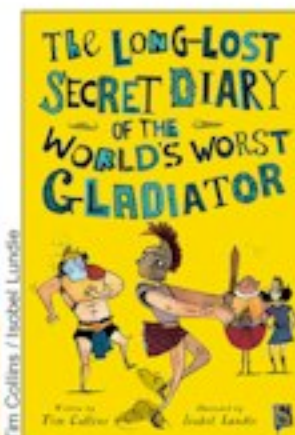
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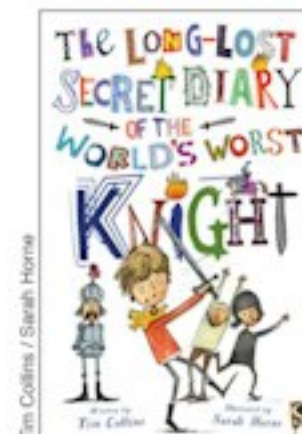
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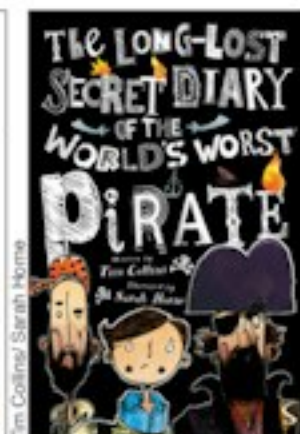
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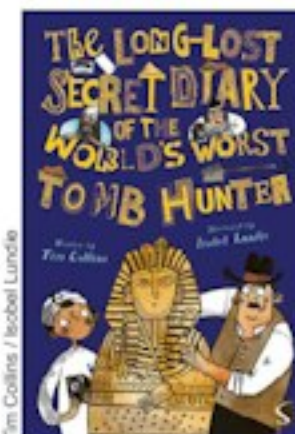
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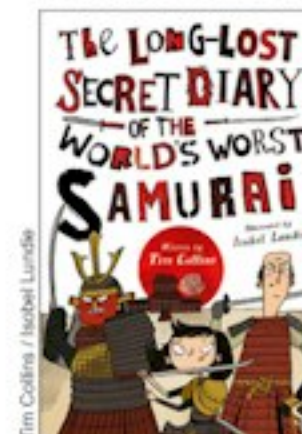
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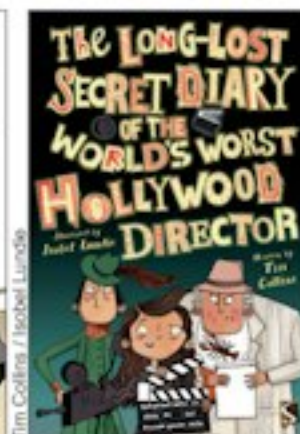
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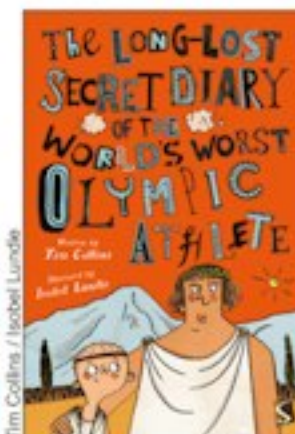
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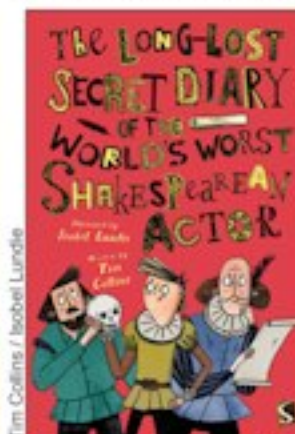
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