



1 This striking-looking race with their blond hair and blue eyes were descended from Germanic tribes that settled in what is now Scandinavia. Most Vikings were at heart farmers and fishermen, not warriors. They grew vegetables and cereal crops and tended their livestock. Skilled Viking craftsmen included blacksmiths, leather-workers and jewellers.



2 They worshipped a variety of gods. Chief among them were **Odin**, **Thor**, and **Frey**. Today we recall them as Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. It is said that Odin created the Runes, the 24 letters of the old Norse alphabet. These were carved on stone tablets with scenes of Norse myths.



3 Above all, the Vikings were skilful shipbuilders and navigators. With their magnificent longships they embarked on voyages of exploration far and wide, from Britain to Baghdad, trading their iron, furs and grindstones for goods which they could not get at home, such as silk, glass and silver.



4 However, in the late 8th century, trading was replaced by raiding. Having the fastest ships of the day they sprang surprise attacks on European monasteries, thereafter extorting protection money, as a price of peace. This was known as Danegeld. This reign of terror began in 793, with a ferocious attack on England's Lindisfarne monastery.



5 By the mid-9th century, the Vikings were seeking to increase their wealth and power even further. They struck out across the unwelcoming Atlantic and, in 870, reached Iceland. As many as 12,000 Viking immigrants ultimately settled there, setting up the Althing, the oldest parliament in the world.



6 In 982, one of these immigrants, the hot-tempered Erik the Red, banished from his homeland for killing two men in a violent feud, sailed westward again. Finally settling down in a grey, desolate land of fjords and glaciers. Cunningly, he named it 'Greenland' so as to attract more settlers to join him and his family.



7 Erik's eldest son, Leif Erikson, became intrigued by tales of yet more lands and, in 1003, he mounted an expedition further west. He finally landed in a place which he named Vinland, today known as Newfoundland, thereby discovering North America nearly 500 years before Christopher Columbus.