outside Scandinavia. In written Scandinavian literature, "Viking" denotes going on a raid or act of piracy; hence the occasional reference to someone having "gone a Viking." Northmen or Norsemen were how most outsiders described them. The "Vikings" certainly thought of themselves as Danes, Swedes, or Norwegians depending on where they lived. Ragnarok uses Northmen as "official" because the Northern Kingdom within its pages is the one that best mirrors Dark Ages Scandinavia.

Another common misconception regarding Vikings is that they were bloodthirsty raiders. Certainly, raiding was a part...
of their martial prowess, but they were also traders and colonizers. In fact, they did so with much greater regularity than raiding. Viking trade routes reached the New World in a quest for furs and Baghdad for silks and spices. The legacy they left in the lands they visited was much more than bloodshed, and places like Ireland were transformed by the colonists who settled down and mingled with the native populations. (See the GREENLAND SAGA supplement from Avalanche Press for more on the fate of one of these colonies.)

The why of their sudden appearance on the international scene (the first recorded encounter being 789 CE) is a bit more open to question. Certainly the increased opportunities afforded them due to centralized European governments stabilizing mercantile development in the West (the Carolingian Empire being the prime example) gave rise to both trade and piracy. Finally, their neighbors had something worth stealing. The colonization impulse seems to have been due to a massive population explosion in the 7th and 8th Centuries.

**Weapons and Warfare**

Despite their prowess in both colonization and trade, the Norse were great fighters. Indeed, the stereotype of the barbaric Viking warrior fits many a classic image present in fantasy literature and role-playing games. As usual, an element of truth exists within the popular conception. The Norse fought with more discipline than is often credited them. Coupled with a culture that stressed individual bravery and feats of courage, they became a formidable foe who dominated Western European battlefields for nearly 300 years.

Their most common battle formation was a solid phalanx of infantry, often aptly called a shield wall. The men were tightly packed, shields somewhat overlapping to afford protection against an initial charge. The better-armed and armored men were to the front. Once battle was joined, they pushed into the enemy ranks to create room for a solid axe or sword hack. Thus, the formation opened up after the initial contact unlike the old Greek pike phalanx or even the Roman legionary formation.

The shield wall could also be formed in a circular fashion, though this was almost exclusively done for defensive purposes. Archers would be stationed at the center to rain death upon approaching foes. Commanders would sometimes lead from the center of such formations set up around them.

Another commonly used formation was the “swine-array,” a type of flying wedge that was used more offensively. Two men would form the point, three more took the second rank, four worked the third position, and so on. According to legend, Odin himself instituted this formation, which displayed its antiquity. It is essentially a flying wedge as employed by the ancient Germans, last seen in Gaius Marius’ lifetime and reflects the strong Teutonic roots that the old Germans shared with the Norsemen of the Dark Ages.

Cavalry was rarely used in large numbers since the extra room taken up by horses on ships meant less space for men and loot. However, some English chronicles describe Norse horsemen in a few battles. They would have primarily been used for scouting and extra mobility.
with the men dismounting to fight in a fashion similar to King Harold’s elite Saxon Housecarls.

**Norse Naval Capabilities**

The Norse were great sailors, and many battles that were fought among them were contrived to be fought on sea, not land. That is, just like the Romans, the sea battles were fought as if they were land engagements. Ramming was not commonly employed, nor was the old tactic of shearing off oars. Any maneuver was designed to bring about boarding actions. As the ships closed bows, javelins and rocks were employed to cause casualties and disrupt an enemy’s approach. Shields were used extensively to defend against such actions, and the popular image of shields lining the sides of ships is not without justification. As sails were furled and battles fought under oar, shield men were specifically designated to protect the vulnerable oarsmen. As the ships came alongside, heavy rocks were dropped in great numbers on an enemy, and a ship with higher prow therefore had a distinct advantage. Rocks were quite useful for breaking shields, arms, and even damaging the wooden ships themselves.

It was common for ships to be lashed together to create stable battle lines. This was a cumbersome formation to move, but it gave the commander a stable platform to lead the troops once the battle was joined. Faster ships were used as skirmishers and to bring reinforcements to critical points along the battle line.

While the Viking Long Ship or Dragon Ship is well known, the heavier Knorr is also worth mentioning. It was primarily used for trading due to its large cargo capacity, but that same advantage made it an excellent warship since it had a greater capacity for carrying troops. Sail and oar were the means of propulsion for Norse ships, and the two means were alternated as need dictated. The most common ships seem to have had 13-18 pairs of rowing benches, though ships with both more and less have been uncovered. Some had as many as 30 pairs of benches, and King Harald Hardrada’s Great Dragon had 35. The Gokstad ship (circa 900 CE), a typical vessel, was 76 feet long, 17 1/2 feet wide, and had 16 rowing benches for a total of 32 oars. The bow and stern of Norse vessels had raised decks. The mid-section could be covered with tarp to give the crew protection from the harsh elements.

**Berserker Women**

Compared to the rest of Europe in this time period, when women were seen as the source of Original Sin and treated like property, Norse women were quite liberated. Women were seen as a vital part of society and helped in keeping the social structure from disintegrating into feuds and other upheavals. Stories abound of strong-willed women who are more than simply the power behind the throne. Still, it was mostly a man’s world, and the everyday life of a woman definitely consisted of putting up with her man’s foolishness. There is one heroine, Hervor, who even has her own saga. So adventuring women, while rare, are not unheard of and are hardly ahistorical for the campaign setting.

The Berserkers are the subject of much literature and even more speculative conjecture. The word actually is derived from a Norse term meaning, “bear shirt.” There was also a cult dedicated to the wolf. These warriors, often detailed as a jarl’s personal bodyguard, could work themselves up to a great rage just before
The Trollborn

The Trollborn are called so due to their large frames and ugly countenances, but whether the name is accurate is matter of some debate. They are not now the offspring of Trolls and humans. They are their own race, breeding among themselves. To have a Trollborn baby, two adult Trollborn have to mate.

It is the origins of the race itself wherein the mystery lies. At some time in the distant past there may have been a union between a Troll and a human that created the first of the species. But it is just as likely that they are cousins to humanity. The Norse had no understanding of evolution, but the relationship between the races is best understood by seeing the Trollborn as an evolutionary precursor to humankind. They are more advanced than, say, Neanderthals, but they aren’t quite to the level of *homo sapiens*.

In general, the Trollborn are not well accepted by most human cultures on Midgard. They are ugly and savage in a way that makes them repulsive to humanity. For the most part, they live in small tribal communities of their own, set apart from major human colonies. They trade with their human cousins when they can, join them when they are allowed, and war with them when they must.

Sadly, fully 50% of the Trollborn are sterile. Thus, they are a dying race in an apocalyptic age. With each death, it seems more likely that the memory of them will be wiped from the Nine Worlds forever.
battle was joined. How this was accomplished isn’t fully understood. Stories tell of them biting their own shields in anticipation of battle and wrestling trees afterwards if their battle lust was not satisfied so as not to turn on comrades. More mundane explanations have hinted at the use of narcotics.

Religion

The Norse were one of the last great Pagan peoples of Europe to resist the coming of Christianity. The triumph of the latter was assured under the reign of Saint Olaf, the King of Norway, and completed by the end of the 11th Century. As a result of missionary vitriol, few records of how the Norse worshipped survive. Much is known about their gods, largely due to an Icelandic poet in the 13th Century named Snorri Sturleson, who romanticized his country’s history.

The names of the gods are familiar, and they represent Jungian archetypes in a mystical sense. In far less esoteric terms, their influence is still felt today in mundane matters. Days of the week in the English language are based on the old gods. Wednesday is Woden’s Day (Woden being the Germanic form of Odin). The Aurora Borealis was said to represent the Valkyries in flight taking dead heroes to their Valhallan reward.

The Norse Gods were a grim lot overall, reflecting the people who worshipped them. The gods struggled in much the same manner as mortals, and, in the end, they would fail since Chaos would be unleashed upon the world at the battle of Ragnarok. Yet they fought the good fight, never giving up while the breath of life still existed within them.

Religion was essentially seen as a personal matter. A priesthood of sorts did exist, and the term, God, was used to describe such a person. Some organized temples existed, notably the Great Hof at Uppsala (in Sweden), destroyed by the Christians in 1100 CE. Sacred sites were common and could be anything from a Runic stone to a simple roadside altar. As in all the old Pagan cultures, blood sacrifices were practiced. Families would often have altars and shrines in their homes dedicated to the gods. Few worshipped only a single god because it was deemed more prudent to placate them all.

Worship seems to have been something of a contract, however, and not a mere abasing of one’s self before an almighty being. The Norse expected something in return for worship, and it is not uncommon to read in the sagas where a hero might turn his back on the gods out of anger. Devotion was often expressed in a personal way. Icons were used in a fashion similar to the Eastern Orthodox faith with little bronze statues of Odin being common household items. Likewise, warriors often wore a hammer symbol around their necks like a Catholic would wear a crucifix today (see the GREENLAND SAGA cover for an example).

The Coming of Christianity

Conversion to Christianity was politically motivated at first, and King Olaf had various diabolical ways of getting his jarls to convert. Sometimes they were not effective, as in the case of Raud the Strong. Refusing to renounce the gods of his ancestors, he was rewarded by having a poisonous snake forced into his stomach by way of a large drinking horn shoved in his mouth.