

Viking skills and achievements

The Vikings were highly skilled craftspeople. They built seagoing ships and made their own weapons and armour. These skills increased their success in trade and, later, in the search for and conquest of new lands.

Shipbuilding

The Vikings were expert shipbuilders with easy access to the timber of Scandinavia's forests. They built trade ships, ferries, rowing boats, fishing vessels and ceremonial longships such as the *Oseberg* (see Source 6.14).

By the end of the 8th century, Vikings had been sailing as merchants for some time. They were skilled at navigating, using the sun and stars, weather patterns,

bird-flight trails and coastal features as guides. In other words, they were well placed to be either sea traders or sea pirates. Their strong navigational and shipbuilding skills gave them all the expertise they needed to make and sail efficient warships. These included the **longships** they used for lightning raids. The Vikings called them *drakkar* – meaning 'dragon'.

Longships

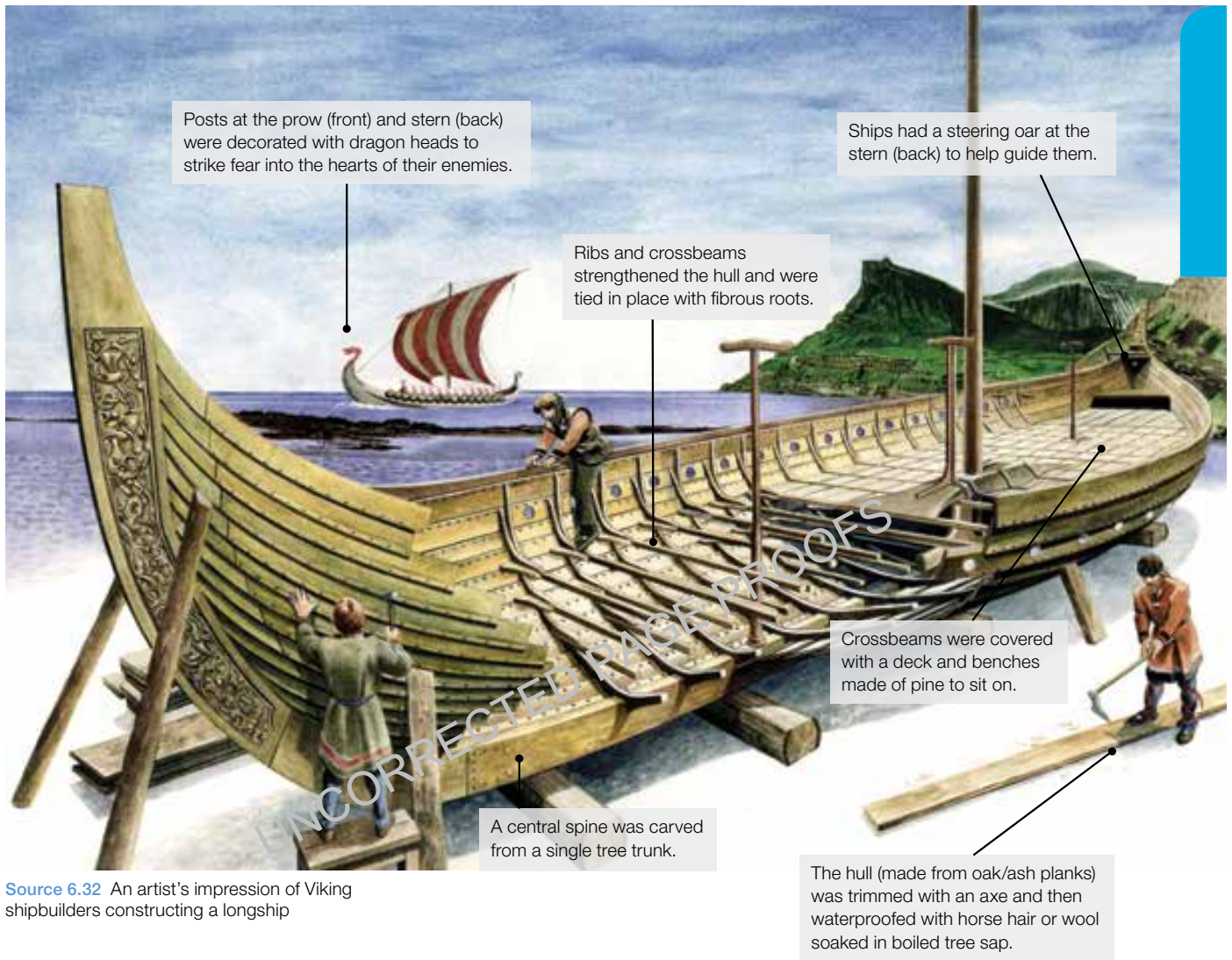
Longships were up to twice as long as trade ships (up to about 37 metres in length). With a thinner, lighter hull, they could carry 100 warriors (68 of whom were oarsmen; 34 on each side). Being so light, the longships were easily able to be carried overland when necessary.



Source 6.30 A Norwegian shipbuilder carving a stern post (back) using the same methods his Viking ancestors did more than a thousand years ago



Source 6.31 A dragon head on the prow (front) of a replica Viking longship in Norway



Source 6.32 An artist's impression of Viking shipbuilders constructing a longship

The longships were wide and shallow, helping them to stay upright in rough seas and to be taken into shallow water. Because longships could be sailed very close to shore, Viking raiders were able to wade in very quickly for a surprise attack.

The huge square sails (made from pieces of woollen or linen fabric, stitched together) were commonly dyed blood red and coated in animal fat to make them more water resistant. In strong winds, the sail provided for a fast sea or ocean crossing. The longships were also equipped with oars. If there was no wind then the sail could be lowered and the men could row the longship instead. Rowing was also necessary to navigate rivers.

The blood red sail together with the dragon heads at the prow (front) and stern (back) helped to heighten the terror for raid victims. Vikings also believed that these dragon heads would frighten away any evil spirits or monsters during sea crossings.

Weapons and armour

Weapons were very important to the Vikings. For a start, they were essential for hunting animals for food. They were also traditional symbols of a man's wealth and power. For example, the swords of rich men often featured hilts (handles) decorated with silver, copper or bronze (see Source 6.34). Swords were the most valued weapons. The Viking sagas tell of some weapons (particularly swords) being so highly valued by their owners that they were given 'pet' names (see Source 6.33). A man's sword was usually buried with him when he died.

By the start of the Viking Age, the Vikings were highly skilled metalworkers. As a result, Viking warriors were heavily armed. As time passed and raids became more a part of Viking culture and tradition, weapon makers were kept busy forging arrows, spears and axe heads from iron. They also became skilled at sharpening the steel edges of swords until they were razor sharp.

Wealthy Vikings could afford metal armour, including helmets with nose bridges and **chain mail** (see Source 6.35). By the time William the Conqueror (whose

ancestors were Vikings) fought in the Battle of Hastings in 1066, chain mail was worn by most soldiers.

Most other Vikings fought with a shield and either a spear or an axe. Spears were up to a few metres long and made from wood with an iron spearhead at the end. Axes had a thick, rounded blade, were light to use and extremely effective. These blades were strong enough to cut through armour. The shields were generally made of wood and reinforced with either leather or iron. They were the main form of defence for the Viking warriors.

Source 6.33 A selection of 'pet' names used to describe weapons recorded in Viking sagas

Weapon	'Pet' name	Translation
Sword	<i>Fótbitr</i>	Foot biter
Sword	<i>Gunnlogi</i>	Battle flame
Sword	<i>Leggbitr</i>	Leg biter
Sword	<i>Saeta'spillar</i>	Peace breaker
Axe	<i>Rimintelgja</i>	Heaven scraper
Axe	<i>Rimmugýgr</i>	Battle hag
Coat of chain mail	<i>Full-trúi</i>	Old faithful



Source 6.34 Two Viking swords and a spearhead



Source 6.35 Reproductions of authentic Viking armour, including helmets, on show at a battle re-enactment in Iceland

keyconcept: evidence

Horned helmets

Many people today think that the helmets of Viking warriors had large horns on either side – mainly because Vikings are often shown this way in popular culture. Movies, comics, books, games and even the mascots of popular sporting teams perpetuate this image, even though there is no evidence to support this at all. Think about it – horns on helmets would have made them easier to grab or knock off, leaving Viking warriors defenceless against blows to the head from swords or axes. For more information on the key concept of evidence, refer to section HT.1 of ‘The historian’s toolkit’.



Source 6.36 Vikings are often shown in popular culture wearing horned helmets – like these characters from the 2010 animated film *How to Train Your Dragon* – even though this is historically incorrect.

Check your learning 6.7

Remember and understand

- 1 Explain why the Vikings’ skills as shipbuilders and sailors made it easy for them to be effective sea pirates.
- 2 How did some Vikings display their wealth and social position through their weapons and armour?
- 3 What Norse word did the Vikings use to describe their longships? What is the meaning of this word in English?

Apply and analyse

- 4 Why is shipbuilding considered by many historians to be one of the most significant Viking achievements?

Evaluate and create

- 5 Use Source 6.33 as inspiration to create Norse names for the items displayed in Source 6.34.
- 6 Conduct some Internet research into the Battle of Hastings in 1066. In particular, look for information about (and images of) the Bayeux Tapestry – a medieval embroidery that retells the events leading up to the battle. Start at the beginning of the tapestry and click through, scene by scene. Locate the section where William the Conqueror’s warriors are loading up their ships to invade England. Study it carefully. How do they transport the chain-mail tunics?