What it was like to be a ...

VIKING

DAVID LONG

Illustrated by Stefano Tambellini

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For Leopold "Pop" Scott

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STRANGERS FROM AFAR

Who Were the Vikings?

In the eighth century, Europe was a very different place to live compared to today. The countries we know didn't exist more than a thousand years ago, and hardly anyone went to school. People belonged to tribes instead of nations, or they lived in small kingdoms ruled by powerful chiefs and kings.

Each population was much smaller too. There were probably only around two million people living in the whole of the British Isles, for example, compared to nearly 70 million today.

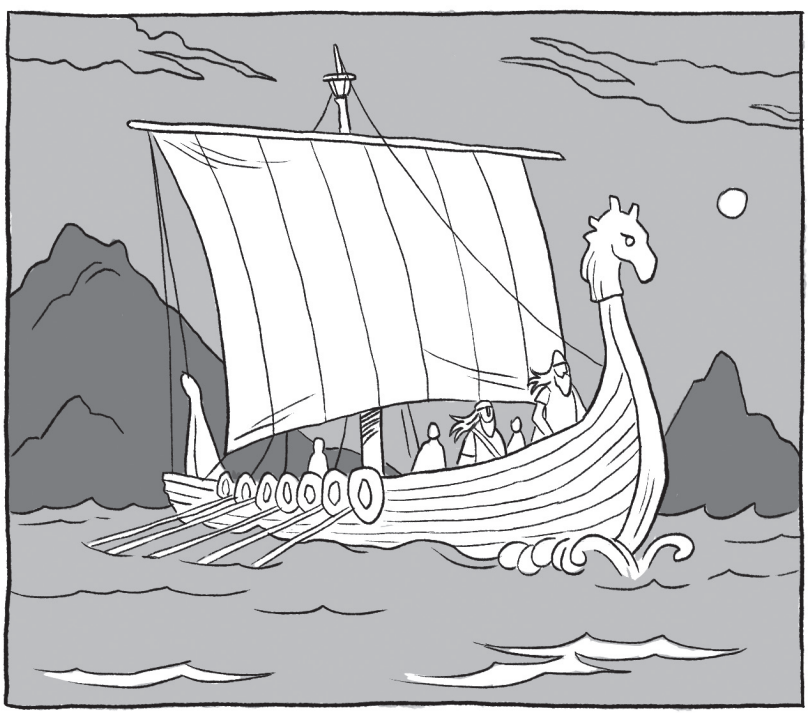
The people in what we now call Scandinavia were mostly blue eyed and often had blonde or reddish-brown hair. They were called Norse or Vikings. Norse probably relates to Norway, but experts still don't agree where the name "Viking" comes from or what it really means. Viking men are mostly shown in films as bearded warriors with horned helmets. We see them sailing across the sea in vessels known as longships to attack members of other tribes.

Some of the Vikings did do this. Many of their most spectacular treasures were stolen

from other tribes in violent and bloodthirsty raids. Anyone they captured alive became a slave. But the Norse people weren't all bloodthirsty warriors, and none of them fixed horns to their helmets.

Most Vikings lived peaceful, normal lives. They loved poetry and telling stories as they sat around roaring fires at night. They made beautiful works of art out of stone and metal and by carving animal bones and antlers. The Vikings also began the world's oldest surviving parliament, where they voted to make laws and settled any arguments they had between themselves.

Many of the most famous Vikings were incredible explorers and adventurers. They sailed thousands of miles in their beautifully designed longships. Both men and women risked their lives crossing the Atlantic Ocean to settle in new lands. Other Vikings worked as traders and merchants, travelling almost

as far as the sailors did. They exchanged goods and ideas with people from the ancient empires of Europe, Asia and Africa.

All this helped the Vikings to develop a rich and fascinating culture. What became known as the "Viking Age" lasted for nearly 300 years, and it has captivated archaeologists and historians ever since.