

The Vikings, English 3695H-01

Open to ALL Honors Students, and to non-honors students by arrangement with the instructor.

Oddly, what most people know about the Vikings comes from the reports of their victims. The Anglo-Saxons called them “war-wolves,” French monks vilified them as Godless heathens, and all Europe quaked before them. But there’s much more to the Vikings and the Viking Age than brutal raids on the rich and unwary, as a study of Scandinavian primary texts like the Heimskringla, the Sagas and the Eddas will attest. Indeed, the Vikings seem to have thought of themselves much more as a race of farmers and poets than as pirates, thieves, and murderers. Egil Skallagrimsson, one of the greatest Vikings of them all, was if reports are to be believed a berserk warrior and a bit of a werewolf, but his saga is far more interested in him as a sarcastic poet, a stubborn defender of democracy, and an “unlucky man” whose overdefined sense of honor made him his own worst enemy.

Who were the Vikings, really? And how has the legacy of the Viking Age shaped western culture as we know it? In this class we will investigate Viking culture and its ongoing influence through a study of primary texts in Norse mythology, history, and literature as well as art objects and other artifacts. Secondary texts including books, articles, and modern film and manga borrowings from the Vikings will help us to better see the impact of this people on the development of Western--and increasingly even of Eastern--culture. The class will proceed by seminar-style discussion, covering such topics as Viking warfare, Viking law, Norse mythology, the Christianizing of the Viking world, Literacy and magic, and the Vikings in modern interpretations. Students will be asked to write weekly discussion notes, participate in class activities, and develop a self-directed research project, the presentation of which will constitute the final exam.