Viking Raids - Looking at the Sagas.

From the eighth century onwards, the Vikings travelled far and wide. They traded with many nations, but they also raided foreign lands, stealing goods and treasures. These extracts from Egil's Saga tell about Viking raids from the point of view of the Vikings themselves.

The first extract tells about Egil's uncle Thorald when he was a young man:

- When Thorald was about twenty years old he made up his mind to go on a Viking expedition, so his father gave him a longship. Evind and Obir joined him with another longship and a good number of men, and they spent the summer plundering. There was plenty of loot so each man got a good share. That's how things were for a number of years - every summer they'd go on Viking expeditions and every winter they would stay at home with their families and parents. Thorold brought his parents a lot of valuable things.

The story about another Viking says this:

- Bjorn was a man of outstanding talents and a great seafarer. He divided his time between Viking raids and trading voyages.

And here is the story of an expedition on which Egil himself was present:

- In the spring they started getting a big longship ready. Once it was manned they went plundering that summer in the Baltic. They captured a great amount of loot and fought many good battles. One day they put in near a large estuary that lay beneath a vast area of forest. They decided to go ashore and divide into groups, each of them twelve strong. They went into the forest and it wasn't long before they came to the settlements where they started pillaging and killing. Some people made a run for it and got away, but no one fought back. Late in the day Thorold sounded the horn to call his men back down to the ship.

A successful raid was not always as easy as it sounds in this extract. People in small villages might run away when they were surprised by a sudden attack, but things did not always go so smoothly for the Vikings. Indeed Egil's Saga goes on to tell that Egil did not return to his ship as he had been captured.

Viking Raids - What the Monks thought.

Not everyone saw the Vikings as brave warriors, however. The monks whose monasteries were attacked by Viking raiders had very different opinions.

Read these extracts carefully and see if you can understand the monks' attitude to the Vikings. The Annals of Ulster were probably written by an Irish monk. Here is a summary of his entry for the year 820:

- The sea belched forth a flood of foreigners over Ireland. No harbour, no beach, no town, fort or castle could be found that survived the waves of Vikings and pirates. The Danes conquered land throughout Munster. They attacked chiefs, churches and holy sanctuaries, destroying our shrines and our books.
A round tower was erected on many monasteries and was used as a place of refuge from Vikings and other attackers. 

This is the tower at Ardmore, Co. Waterford

Along the margins of another manuscript are these words. They were probably also written by an Irish monk. They are probably the most famous words ever written about a Viking raid:

- Rough is the wind tonight
- Tossing the sea's white hair.
- I need not dread the fierce Viking
- Crossing the Irish Sea.

Can you say why the monk seems pleased about the bad weather?

This is what a French monk wrote about Viking raids in France:

- The endless flood of Vikings is on the increase. Everywhere, Christ's people are the victims of massacre, burning and theft. The Vikings destroy everything. Towns are emptied and evil triumphs! Monks, townspeople and everyone else have been slaughtered or taken prisoner. Monasteries along the river Seine have been destroyed. The Vikings have left the remaining people in a state of terror.

Looking at the Evidence.

The Viking sagas give us one picture of the Vikings. The writings of the monks show us something completely different. In order to form an accurate opinion, historians must look at all the evidence available.

- From the evidence you have read what is your opinion of the Vikings?
- Why do you think they carried out their raids?
- Why did they especially want to attack monasteries?

Find words in the sagas which describe how the Vikings saw themselves and list these
Then look at what the monks thought of the Vikings and list their ideas under *Monks*.

**Source:** The Viking Network Ireland, Updated January 2001 by the Viking Network Irish, Co-ordinator Michael Farry.
URL: [http://www.ncte.ie/viking/less2.htm](http://www.ncte.ie/viking/less2.htm)