

Viking Ships



The Vikings' ship-building craft reached a high point in the 7th century when they invented the keel, a structural beam that runs from the bow to the stern and sits lower than the main body of the ship. This feature increased speed and stability and prevented unwanted lateral movement. The keel, along with the addition of a large mast and sail, would ultimately allow the Norsemen to make long journeys across the North Atlantic. These vessels are now looked back upon as revolutionary in design and a technological miracle.

To begin the ship-building process, the Vikings would drive wedges into freshly-cut trees until the wood split along the grain. Up to 20 great oaks might be cut down for a ship. The wood was shaped and arranged so that the planks fit together perfectly in a clinker construction, overlapping like a fan. In clinker shipbuilding, the outside is started first, and then the frame is put inside it. The ship was coated with a watertight mixture of tar-soaked animal hair, wool or moss and stabilized with iron rivets. The end result was an incredibly fast and flexible longship that nothing could catch.

The men rowed with a series of oars, supplemented with a large sail most likely made of wool. Rather than a rudder, the longships had a steerboard fastened to the right-hand side of the ship at the stern.

By the middle of the 9th century, the raids really picked up as word spread across the Norse region of Europe's removable wealth. Norse villages and communities came together to build ships with the intention of improving their lives through the business of raiding.