

# ***TAKING THE ISLES***

**CRISIS COMMITTEE**





**Dear delegates,**

This committee was not only created to simulate the invasions of Britain by the Vikings, but to also shine light on the political and economic motives behind the actions taken by clans and leaders. Popular media such as cartoons, movies, books and television shows portray Vikings as barbarians who lived and died by the blade. While they were ruthless warriors, this committee will hopefully help create a deeper understanding behind the invasions.

We will start off our committee with the capture of the legendary Viking chief Ragnar Lodbrok by King Ælla of Northumbria. It will be up to you as leaders and members of various clans to decide your course of action and how to deal with the various problems thrown at you. You will create and negotiate deals which some parties may not be satisfied with. There will be death, both glorious on the battlefield, but also treacherous betrayals which will lead to political instability. As delegates you will have to fill the shoes of Viking leaders and truly adapt to the issues you are involved in. Be sure to pay attention to the “Topics of Discussion” section; this part should give you ideas of potential issues which you may want to debate, but the committee is yours to shape.

My team and I hope to make this committee as entertaining, but also as efficient and productive as possible. I look forward to meeting each one of you and am positive we will have a fruitful committee with successful invasions of the British Isles. Do not hesitate to reach out to me if you have any further questions regarding the committee.

Best regards,

**Sinan van der Hoeven**

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**Introduction:****History of Vikings leading to the committee (865):**

Historians consider the Viking Age to have begun in the late 8th century (793 AD to be specific) with the raid on the Lindisfarne monastery in northeastern England (Forte, 2005, p.2). This period of approximately 300 years was a time in history where Norsemen travelled and explored all over Europe to trade, raid and colonize. The majority of written sources acquired on Vikings are from foreign sources as literary tradition had not developed in this region like it had with Christian and Islamic areas (Viking Ship Museum, 2016). The Vikings were painted as the ultimate barbarians by the written documents found by historians and this can be further seen in Alcuin of York's letters and poems. Alcuin of York was an English scholar and poet and his writing on the monastery attack of 793 remains the only contemporary account of the event. He wrote, "Never before has such terror appeared in Britain. Behold the church of St. Cuthbert, splattered with the blood God's priests, robbed of its ornaments (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2017)."

The committee will begin in the year 865 AD with the capturing of the legendary Viking chief Ragnar Lodbrok by King Ælla of Northumbria. The fate of Ragnar is unknown by his sons and other chiefs, but the only certainty is that his disappearance will create political unrest amongst other chiefs and clan. This unrest will most likely be caused by lack of definitive leadership and the indecisiveness which will come from the excessive amount of leaders trying to take action at once.

**Viking Culture and Social Policies:**

The term Viking can only be used properly to describe men who participated in raids. Although all Vikings were Norse pagans, not all Norse pagans were Vikings. Although pillaging was common during raids, this only constituted a tiny part of their lives. Most people in Scandinavia were primarily farmers who grew grains and vegetables during the short summer, and herdsman who primarily depended on livestock such as cattle, goats, sheep, and pigs (Lemonick, Dorfman, 2000).

The Norse was considered a single entity that consisted of various family clans. Within this hierarchy was a structure built from four social classes, the Kings, Jarls, Karls, and Thralls (Kane 2016). Kings are chosen by birth as the heirs to the current kings in power and were at the top of society. Under them were the Jarls, who were the chiefs of their respective clans and warrior noblemen who were subordinate to the Kings. Below them were the Karls, free men (typically farmers) who owned their own land. Most Viking warriors were men from this social class. At the very bottom of this social structure were the Thralls. Thralls consisted of anyone born from a slave or those captured during a pilgrimage. Slaves were distinguished by their closely cropped hair and the white vadmál or kulf (coat) that they wore (McCoy, 2012).



During the early Viking periods, Nordic gods were still being worshipped in Scandinavia. As Christianity was starting to become adopted in Europe, this caused the Vikings in the north to stand out as different from the rest. Nordic gods were essential to Vikings as they would hold regular sacrificial ceremonies in their honour to avoid their wrath. The most important gods that they worshipped were: Odin, the supreme god; Loki, the trickster; Thor, the god of war and fertility; Frey, the god of fertility and a good harvest; and Freyja, the twin sister of Frey and the goddess of love and fertility (National Museum of Denmark, n.d.).

The era of the Vikings was a period of religious change. Although Vikings are commonly perceived to be pagans with a hatred of the Christian Church, that is not actually the case. Although the entirety of the Scandinavian population was Nordic pagan at the beginning of the Viking Age, they worshipped many gods; it would not have necessarily been a problem for individuals to accept the Christian god alongside their own. According to most scholars, the attacks on Christian churches were not as much about religion as for the fact that most monasteries were both wealthy and poorly defended which made for an easy raid. Notably, the raids on the Isles increased contact with Christianity. As Viking raiders started to settle down alongside their Christian neighbours this created further pressure as settlers would take Christian wives. This aided the spread of Christianity into Scandinavia (Williams, 2011).

### **Politics in The Isles:**

In the year 800 CE, the Isles were populated by four main peoples: the Irish (in Ireland); the Picts (in modern-day Scotland); the British (in western and northern England); and the Anglo-Saxons (in northern, southern, and eastern England) (Yorke, 2009, p. 42). It is in this last group, the Anglo-Saxons, that we place our focus.

During this time, the main political system in Europe was that of kingship, and the Isles were no exception. At the beginning of the ninth century, the four largest Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were Northumbria, East Anglia, Wessex, and Mercia (Encyclopedia of the Middle Ages, 2005). The politics between these four kingdoms were complex, and they were constantly vying for supremacy over each other. A large part of this system was the concept of overlordship, in which the authority of a powerful ruler was recognized by a more subordinate king, who paid tribute and served in the overking's armies in return for their protection (Yorke, 2009, p. 79).

During the eighth century, Mercia had gained control over several smaller, previously independent kingdoms to its south. This expansion of power established Mercia as the hegemonic power of England, allowing it loose control over East Anglia and overlordship with Wessex (Redgate, 2014, p. 8). This was a position that Wessex, long the



enemy of Mercia, suffered with great displeasure. Despite this, at the beginning of the 800s, Wessex began slowly growing in influence, and this would continue for the rest of century.

Like Mercia, Northumbria had also recently absorbed some smaller kingdoms, making it the dominant power in the north of England (Redgate, 2014, p. 8). Contrary to Mercia, however, it had suffered political instability in the late eighth century relating to a dynastic crisis. This was a problem that was common among the kingdoms of the Anglo-Saxons, due largely to the fact that rival segments of the royal houses often existed (Yorke, 2009, p. 82). When secession came into question, these rival factions were quick to begin fighting for control. The relationships between the kingdoms of England were complex, and they became even more so with the advent of Viking raids on the island.

### **Reasons for the invasions:**

There are many reasons that the Vikings began conducting raids on the British Isles, and no single cause was more important than another. Rather, they mingled and played off one another, giving rise to both the want and the need to begin raiding in the west. Of the various causes, the ones that are easiest to discern are economic, political, and ideological in origin.

Viking settlements in the Baltics to the east of Scandinavia had recently begun receiving influxes of silver, leading to a rise in “silver fever” amongst the Scandinavian people (Barrett, 2010, p. 293). This, combined with a desire to acquire “portable wealth”, pushed the Vikings to begin seeking out new raiding grounds. As such, this was one of the main goals of the early Viking raids throughout the late eighth and early ninth centuries (Richards, 2010, p. 9).

Around this time, power was beginning to grow more centralized in Scandinavia, leading to an increase in competition amongst the elites (Barrett, 2010, p. 295). There was a growing desire for lands that could be passed down, and they began seeking this land outside of Scandinavia. This led to the later raids in the ninth century being largely concerned with settlement and the acquisition of land (Richards, 2010, p. 10).

Overarching all of this is ideology. The Vikings had a set of beliefs that was particularly geared towards raiding, largely due to the concepts of honour and fatalism. This led to a highly-militarized society, “where religion, mentality, and warfare were inextricably linked (Barrett, 2010, p. 296).” Raiding was a way of life for the people of Scandinavia, a method for them to gain both treasure and land which they expanded west to the British Isles.

**Regional Powers:**

The events in this committee take place almost a century after Saxon England's first contact with Vikings (Logan, 1991). As a result, there are significant numbers of pre-established Viking communities across the Isles. They are led by powerful Kings who eye greedily at the fertile lands around them. Many of these domesticated settlers consider themselves unaffiliated with the current horde from Scandinavia and would not necessarily support them over the local Saxons if it suits them to do so.

The Viking leaders in this region control large amounts of territory and have the ability to raise sizable armies. Unlike their counterparts across the seas, they have the advantages from fighting at home ground (such as knowledge of the local geography, continuous supplies and reinforcements, and the motivation to protect their homeland). Constant in-fighting and decades of civil war have kept the men of these lands battle-hardened, which means their armies do not simply consist of untrained farmhands but capable warriors.

On the other hand, these leaders are also limited by the fact that their armies cannot fight year-round. The men must tend to their farms - especially during harvesting seasons. Due to the abundance of local powers, they cannot push too far in fear of unrest and rebellion. This means that if the leaders are unable to strike a quick victory, their armies will lose morale fast. The invasion also occurs at a time of relative peace in these lands - meaning that these local leaders will struggle to mobilize without significant reasons to do so (Cavill, 2002).

**Topics of Discussion:**

1. A new religion, Christianity, is spreading across Europe. The Kingdom of Denmark already has a significant Christian population and there are many Christian scholars and missionaries arriving at Scandinavian towns and cities to preach their religion. As more and more people convert to Christianity every year, you are pressed to declare your stance in the religious conflict.
  - a. Why does it matter that your people convert away from your ancestral religion?
  - b. Some Danish rulers have also embraced Christianity without distancing themselves from their people and culture. How will you react to the foreigners arriving at your lands to preach their religion? Will you follow the new religion, or fight its expansion?
2. Your raids on the British and Frankish coastline in the past 70 years have drawn heavy criticism from the local lords and they are strengthening their presence along their coastline. The kingdoms of Britain also have new monarchs who are gaining influence over the others because of their stance against the Viking raids. You may soon lose your main source of income in the region as well as control over the North Sea.



- a. Will you continue the policies of your predecessors and continue raiding, or will you change your tactics and find other ways to exert your influence in the region?
3. The cities on your trade routes to Byzantium and the Abbasid Caliphate have voiced their demands for independence or larger autonomy for decades and their rulers are becoming more aggressive in their subversive actions. The rulers of Novgorod, Kiev and Bulgar have already threatened to cut off your trade with the empires of the south. There are also many notable Viking warriors and traders who have pledged their allegiance to the Byzantine emperors since the late 8th century.
  - a. Given that you also have active conflicts in the North Sea, how does this affect your foreign policies? What decisions can be made to keep your eastern trade routes profitable and secure?
  - b. Does the emigration of successful warriors to the Byzantine Empire affect you? If it does, how can you stop them?
4. Several Norse seamen have recently visited an island in the northwest, naming it Snæland ("Snowland") and Garðarshólmi ("Gardar's Island"). The island is mostly uninhabited and explorers have identified multiple suitable locations to establish settlements to claim the land. The climate is unsuitable to sustain a large population, but the explorers believe that the land is more suitable for agriculture than in Scandinavia.
  - a. Is this discovery relevant to you? Would settling on the island be beneficial to your interests, or would it be a waste of men and resources?
5. The Kingdom of Denmark was established more than a century ago when the local chiefs have decided to unite against the Frankish threat by forming a single nation. At the same time, many Norse chiefs also believed that a unified Norway would be stronger than a region of chiefs in constant conflict and competition. The unification talks were halted for many decades now, but there are some chiefs who still believe that Norway should be united.
  - a. Would a unified Norway really be stronger than the current situation or would it be a volatile union of chiefdoms ready to break apart at any moment? If there was a call for unification, how would you choose a king for the new kingdom?

**Character List:**

*A note on the historical accuracy of characters:*

*Many of these characters come from Norse Sagas or Anglo-Saxon/Church manuscripts. These are problematic primary sources as they are heavily opinionated and their accuracy cannot be assumed. Historians studying these characters have admitted to making severe degrees of probabilistic inferences, undermining the value of secondary/tertiary sources as well. As a result, while many secondary sources were consulted, the characters were made with a focus*



*towards committee dynamics rather than historical accuracy. If outside research conflicts with character bios, please refer to the background guide rather than your research. On the other hand, some of these characters are completely fictional. Do not worry if you cannot find historical background on your character, as you will be creating their history.*

**Sons of Ragnar Lodbrok:****Ivar the Boneless:**

Ivar is a Viking known for his skill in battle and ability to create highly effective plans. His name originates from a curse burdened upon him by his father's lust which resulted in him having weak bones. He is known as the one who initially proposed the idea to take revenge for his father's capture by the King of Northumbria: Ælla. His expert planning helped him gain his sibling's trust in planning the invasion and he is known for co-commanding the Danes with his brother Ubba.

**Halfdan Ragnarsson:**

Halfdan (nicknamed Hvitserk) aspires to gain the noble throne of Dublin. If an army is assembled to invade the Isles one of his main goals would be to invade Wessex. His great ambition and continuous desire for power distinguishes him from his siblings.

**Sigurd:**

Sigurd is known for having a "Snake-in-the-eye", an image of the serpent-dragon Fafnir. This was prophesied by his mother prior to his birth. He accompanied his father on several voyages and was very strongly attached to him. Upon finding out about Ragnar's capture, he brutally cut himself with a knife. His emotions are known to get the better of him and defy his sense of logic.

**Ubba:**

Ubba is known for co-commanding the Danes with his brother Ivar. He is known for his ruthless character, having murdered countless other warriors with his bare hands. He is explicit about his love for his father. He will do anything possible to rescue his father or avenge those who hurt him. Ubba is not afraid to get his hands dirty on the battlefield and is an avid supporter of the blood eagle execution method.

**Ímar (Ireland, Scotland):**

While some historians see this Viking leader to be another 'description' of Ivar the Boneless, Ímar is most likely a unique and real warlord who ruled much of Northern Scotland, Ireland and the surrounding isles. He settled in Ireland with his brother sometime in the period of 850-860 AD. Ímar then proceeded to slowly wrestle control from local as well as other Viking leaders using a balanced strategy of peaceful settlements and vicious aggression. While he was a fearsome warrior and leader in his youth, Ímar is now an old man during the period of this committee (recall Viking traditions concerning the elderly).





There is no doubt however, that he holds respect from his people and has the capacity to act decisively if necessary. Unlike some of his compatriots, Ímar has the geographical advantage in that his armies can move by sea and are trained for short, ruthless strikes. However, the relatively long distance between the fertile lowlands and his northern kingdom means that it will be difficult and time consuming if he were to pursue military action. Additionally, he would lack a reliable supply train and knowledge of the land. All of this (in combination with historical precedents, local opposition, and reliance on farmers for the bulk of any large army) indicates he would likely not launch a massive invasion down south without good reason.

**Olaf the White (Ireland):**

The joint ruler of Ireland with Ímar, Olaf is a powerful Viking chieftain who founded a large and prosperous Viking port settlement near modern day Dublin. Unlike Ímar, who is a Dane, Olaf is from Norway. This means that he is less likely to support the Danish army and much more unpredictable with his actions. He is powerful in Ireland but nowhere else, which limits what he can do.

**Rognvald Eysteinsson (Scotland):**

Rognvald is the founding Jarl of Møre and a powerful ally of Harald Fairhair. He was given significant parts of the Scottish coast and mainland before the invasion of England. He thus wields his power in both Norway (which makes him capable of leading mighty armies from Scandinavia) and in Scotland. This is the reason interpretations of his name center around Rognvald the Powerful. While not necessarily power hungry, he would eye the landing of the Vikings with interest.

**Rurik of Dorestadd:**

Rurik is a Danish Viking who controls much of what is modern day Netherlands and parts of Russia. While Rurik is not directly involved in the British Isles at the time of the invasion, he is situated at his home base of Dorestad, right across the English Channel. Rurik has historically been portrayed as ambitious, thus it makes sense that he would see this as a chance to conquer more lands for his kingdom. His strategic positioning would allow him to significant advantages while attacking the English.

**Other Characters:****Harald Fairhair of Norway:**

Also known as the First King of Norway, Harald is the one who united all the lands of Norway. At the age of 15, he was forced to flee his homeland, for his brother was killed in battle. Harald left for Kiev, Ukraine where his cousin Jaroslav was ruler. Once he grew into adulthood, Harald needed a way to gain power, and so became a leading general (and



mercenary) in the Byzantine Empire. His power led him to make money quickly, and he “bought” half the throne from his nephew, Magnus, who was King of Norway at the time. In exchange for half of Harald’s wealth, Magnus offered to co-rule with him. A year later, Magnus died (probably due to Harald). King Harald now has authority over most of Norway’s Western areas, and some of its greatest trading sites as well. His power in terms of wealth allows him to mobilize armies very easily and to buy weaker allies as he wishes.

**Bjorn Ironside:**

Another son of Ragnar Lodbrok and the Legendary King of Sweden, he is known for his strong navy and iron grip on his throne. His land encompasses Uppsala and Sweden. Bjorn is compared with Ivar the Boneless in terms of wits and logic. The Vikings of Sweden did not (historically) participate in the invasion of Britain but they have several incentives to do so. Firstly, the permafrost that covers most of their lands makes agricultural expansion difficult. English lowlands contain some extremely fertile farmland (already cut out from forest by the Anglo-Saxons). Sweden, like almost all Viking nations, was already overpopulated and therefore it needed places to send its young men. While raiding would bring honour and its associated spoils, what Björn really sought was an opportunity for permanent relocation.

**Orn Englisson:**

Right-hand man and chief advisor of Bjorn Ironside, Orn was a just small local chief who had the endless support and respect of his people. His ability to gather the support of the masses was recognized by Bjorn and he swiftly ranked up to become Bjorn’s advisor. He preached moderately in everything, attempting to negotiate deals with neighbouring lands for trade. His communication skills turned Sweden into a trading state with riches and fortunes.

**Skiddi Ornson:**

Son of Bjorn Ironside, Skiddi is being groomed to rule Sweden together alongside his sister, Asfrid Orndottir. Skiddi, unlike his father, has a deceptive character, but is a brilliant orator, able to move the hearts of his subjects. He is a skilled warrior, but prefers to use wit rather than force to dominate his opponents. Despite growing up and training together with Asfrid, he stayed behind to learn more about ruling and crowd control rather than participating in raids like his sister Asfrid. This led to great disputes between the siblings, including constant mockery of Skiddi’s “manhood”.

**Asfrid Orndottir:**

Vikings never had the best of relationships with each other, and this could be seen between Asfrid and Skiddi. Unlike Skidi, who is more in favour of domestic reform (such as innovating the system of raid taxation or rebuilding former great halls in his father’s name), Asfrid is aggressive in her policies. While Skiddi is the sly talker, Asfrid is the brash



warrior, who would not hesitate to enter combat for glory. Asfrid sees the prospect of invading England as an opportunity to make a greater name for herself. Her position as the first Queen of Sweden would give her the power to fulfill her dreams - as long as her brother agrees with it.

**Horik II:**

Horik II was a close relative to Horik I. Horik I is thought to have been murdered by one of his nephews whom he exiled. Upon his death, a bloody civil war left Horik II the only one fit for the throne to become the King of Denmark. Horik II did not have the warrior traits as Horik I since he was simply given the title. For example, while Horik I was ruthless against Christians (embracing the Norse Gods very strongly), Horik II was more tolerant, allowing them to even ring their bells. His goals center around self-preservation and maintaining his position as King. However, he does not have the respect and adoration of the people, which significantly weakens him. His grip on the Vikings continues to diminish and he must find a way to strengthen it.

**Bagsecg:**

Bagsecg is a powerful Jarl and warrior residing in Denmark. He is influential amongst his fellow Vikings and his goal is to gain political power of sorts. Bagsecg spent much of his youth terrorizing the shores across Europe and the British Isles and often makes comments in taverns that he would be more fit to rule than Horik II. He has also expressed interest in participating in the Viking invasion for fame and glory. While he does not have the political power of a king, he is a mighty warrior and well respected by his men.



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