

Viking Trekkies

History weaves its influence into pop culture via many avenues ...

One of the strangest is the Viking influence on Star Trek, especially The Next Generation.

Ever since that series found the airwaves, I've often wondered if one or more of its writers were descended from peoples who endured raids from the North and then used this show to exact their version of revenge.

I've always been interested in the influence that the Viking era had on western civilization, which is considerable. Here are but a few examples:

1. Vikings created the first governing legislature of 'common' citizens in history, calling their parliament a thing, which is also where the English language derived that word.
2. Viking law was the first in Europe, at least, to conduct trials with a jury of the accused's peers.
3. It was virtually 500 years before any other culture would design a ship that could travel as swiftly as a Viking dragonship (and let's not forget that those ships sailed to North America 500 years before Columbus did).
4. Four of the seven days of the week --- in the English language --- are named after Viking gods:
 - a. Tuesday, for Tyr - the god of truth,
 - b. Wednesday, for Odin - the 'Allfather' of Viking gods,
 - c. Thursday, for Thor - the 'thunder' god, and
 - d. Friday, for Frigg - Odin's first wife.

(Some scholars argue the latter is named for Frey, the god of fertility, but I'll stick with the Oxford Dictionary version, which gives the honor to Frigg.)

5. William the Conqueror was a Viking descendant; enough said.

Vikings dominated England for 300 years, so much of their language influenced English. The suffix '-by' is the Viking word for 'village,' hence city names such as Rugby and Grimsby, to name only two. The suffixes '-bury' and '-berry' are Anglicized spellings of the word 'berg' (pr: 'berry'), the Viking word for 'mountain,' hence names such as Shrewsbury, Queensbury and Shaftsbury refer to nearby landmarks.

Elsewhere, the Slavic peoples' name for Vikings was 'Rus,' meaning 'rowing men.' Viking dominance of the Slavic river systems was so prevalent that the region became known as 'Russia.' In France, King Charles the Simple was so fed up with Viking attacks on Paris that he ceded them land in exchange for a cessation of raids. The French word for Viking was 'Norman,' and the ceded region became known as Normandy. The Viking chieftain who accepted these terms was the famous Rolf the Walker (so named due to his height, as no horse was big enough to carry him); Rolf, incidentally, was the forebear of William the Conqueror.

Anyway, you get the idea. The Vikings may be gone, but their mark on our lives, even today, is indelible.

Still, it's mildly surprising to see the Viking stamp on one of the most popular science fiction series of the modern era. Not surprisingly, their 'presence' seems to be personified by the villains.

Take the Klingons. Until they became uneasy allies of the Federation, they were the scourge of that galactic quadrant which bordered 'ours.' Their interstellar warriors' ultimate honor was to die bravely and loudly in battle. Well, back in the day, that was every Viking's ultimate honor, too. Such bravery was seen as the only way to earn an eternity in Valhalla, Odin's castle of the 'chosen' slain, where only the most valiant would reside forevermore in Viking nirvana, which consists of fighting all day and partying all night. I cannot recall the episode, but it seems the

Klingons thought that was a great way to while away the afterlife, themselves.

Those guys were holdovers from the original Star Trek series and the Next Generation writers didn't have the license to make them much more sinister than that. So, they went farther into space to find two other Viking caricatures.

One was the Ferengi. The casual Trekkie might think them to be inspired by Shakespeare's stereotypical 'Shylock' in the Merchant of Venice, but the studied Viking historian notes a deeper connection of names. Vikings were known to be traders as much as fighters, and were very hard bargainers in every sense of the word. Ultimately, the King of Byzantium (which became Constantiople and is now known as Istanbul) capitalized on both of these traits and created a regiment of Viking mercenaries to become his own elite storm troopers, known as his Varangian Guard. The origin of this title was a Viking term that referred to a 'sharer of spoils,' and Varangians indeed became the best-paid troops of their time. Their ultimate goal was great wealth, and most of them got it in one way or another.

The last of the great Vikings, Harald Hardraada --- who also reigned as a great Norwegian king --- spent time as a Varangian. Legend said he stood seven feet tall, probably because his physical stature was such that he actually did tower over his adversaries. This claim was, no doubt, 'stretching' reality a bit, but he was much more typical in appearance for a Varangian than are the Trek race they inspired!

Comparisons between Varangians and Ferengi may be subtle, but there is no mistaking the connection. Nothing was subtle, though, about the Trek writers' next and most ominous incarnation of Viking stereotypes --- the Borg.

Even the name is Nordic. 'Borg' (actually pronounced 'bor-ee' in Old Norse) is the Viking word for 'fortress,' which conjures an accurate vision of their spacecraft.

Vikings fought as a collective. In one famous instance, during one of those annual sieges of Paris, the French king du jour wanted to negotiate a settlement. He was quoted as asking, "Who is your leader?" The response is one of the most famous in Viking lore: "We're all equals!"

Sound familiar, Trekkies?

Vikings were known for assimilation, too. However, theirs was the opposite of the Borg. Vikings who settled in foreign lands adapted to the local customs. William, for example, spoke French. Kiev was a Viking outpost and the first 'royal' family there was of Viking blood. Their offspring took Slavic names and spoke the local language. Yet, as I stated earlier, the Viking influence did remain. There was only one Viking empire --- King Knut's realm of Scandinavia and the British Isles lasted for 30 years --- but traces of Viking life and culture spanned all of Europe.

During the Viking era, almost every mass prayer in a European church was prefaced by 'Deliver us, O Lord, from the wrath of the Northmen.' While I do wonder if that's how Guinan (played by Whoopi Goldberg) and her planet prayed (they were among the Borg's conquests), it's clear that's how the Federation felt. Until the Enterprise found a way late in the series, resistance was futile.

That's clearly more than the Trek's writers could say. They couldn't and didn't resist taking their liberties with Viking lore. In spite of their efforts, though, the most noble of all Viking deeds remains entrenched in the Star Trek universe, given homage before every episode. Perhaps that's the ultimate irony, because in an era when other cultures feared to venture beyond view of their coastlines, the Vikings --- as evidenced by their voyages to the New World in 1000 AD --- boldly went where no man had gone before.

And they did it without a script.

Short note about the author

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