

## 11.4 The Transition to All-Steel Swords

### 11.4.1 Viking Swords

#### What are Viking Swords?

The first thing to note is that there is no such thing as a "Viking sword". In fact, I'm strongly tempted to proclaim that there is also no such thing as a Viking. There is, however, a kind of consensus that people who lived in Scandinavia between 800 - 1050, roughly in areas now known as Denmark, Sweden and Norway, are called **Vikings**. The origin of that name is not clear. One interpretation is that the Old Norse word "vikingr" signifies "one who came from the "vik"=fjord creek, inlet, small bay". Since the guys who came from there typically murdered, plundered, raped and took slaves, the word "Viking" became a synonym for "freebooter, sea-rover, pirate". But that is far from certain, and the meaning of "Viking" is much debated among present-day scholars.

Whatever and whoever the Vikings were, they were given far more to wielding a sword than a pen. They certainly had swords, used them, and quite a few were buried with them. That's why we do have swords that once belonged to a Viking, and you can call such a sword a "**Viking's sword**", of course. However, the term "Viking sword" denotes something quite different; spelling details do count here. It is perceived as addressing a particular kind of sword, a special class, related to and made by Vikings. While we do have a lot of Viking's swords, they are not necessarily Viking swords. Nice little (s)word play here. Indeed, historians held and hold the view that most swords of the Viking *era* were produced in a region along the Southern part of the river Rhine in the heart of the Frankish / Ottonian / German empire, and that the Vikings, like everybody else, purchased or stole these swords.

We do not know much about Viking's swords from the Vikings themselves. They didn't write much since most of them were illiterate. In this they weren't much different from everybody else at this time. The big difference is that before about 1000 AD they weren't Christians and thus did not have abbeys and monasteries, full of monks and such that could and would write a lot.

A Viking intellectual who felt inclined to write something typically restricted himself to one or two sentences expressed in **runes**. Runes are a rather primitive script, more or less just a vague remembrance of the glory of Latin writings. All the [tall tales from Northern Europe](#) relating to Vikings are from later times.

In contrast, we know quite a bit about the **Frankish empire** (and its successors) from extensive contemporary writings that survived until today. That is not to say that these writings are fully reliable. There might be quite a bit of mythology involved, take the [Roland saga](#) as example. Not to mention that the religious people forged documents as a matter of course <sup>2)</sup>. With careful interpretation we do get first-hand information, though. What we do not have are many Frankish swords.

Nevertheless, in serious history the general view emerged that superior iron and steel weapons, in particular swords, were a monopoly of the Frankish empire, exported all over Europe and parts of Asia.

#### Special Module

#### Vikings

#### Special Module

#### Francia

● Swords made elsewhere could not measure up to the Frankish swords. That is particularly true for the famed "+VLFBERH+T" swords.

This view has been (partially) contested more recently; I'll get to that. Meanwhile I'll give you two special modules about the Vikings and Franks plus more background to Viking's swords.

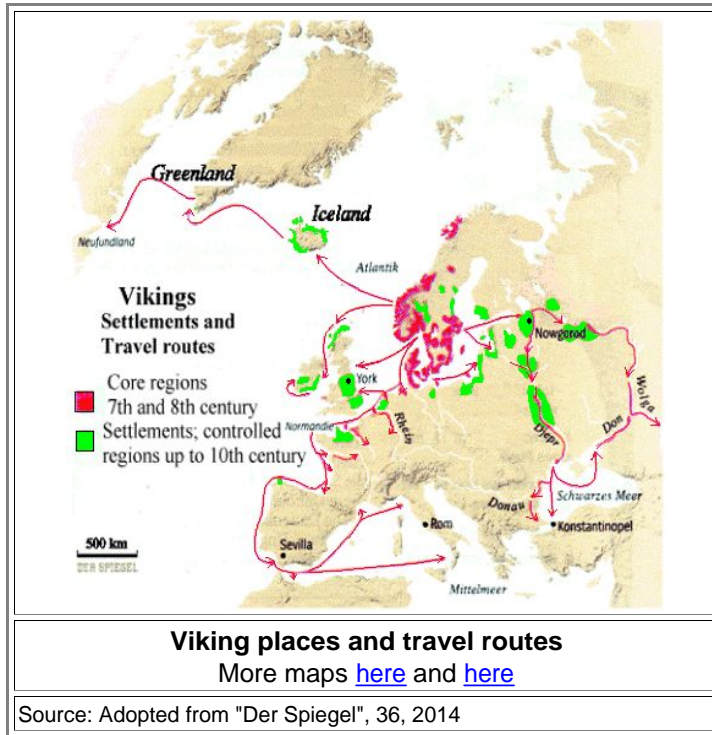
▶ As ever so often, the badies are better remembered than the goodies. As times pass on, they might even get a bit glorified, witness "pirates" in general and [Attila the Hun](#) in particular. To quote the present (2014) Queen of Denmark, Margrethe II: "[Up to this very day, the interest in the fascinating and glamorous Vikings has never abated](#)". Well - yes. Just like dinosaurs. You like 'em much better as soon as they are definitely extinct.

● The Vikings are often portrayed as ruthless robbers and conquerors, only bent on murder, rape, robbery and destruction. Alternatively, they are described as mostly peaceful and innovative farmers and traders, given to long and profitable business travels. Just their young ones got muddled up in some deplorable excesses now and then; sowing some wild oats and so on. The truth is probably not quite in the middle in this case. The more advanced and literate contemporary cultures have nothing good whatsoever to say about them. Of course those writers were biased. You tend to overlook the amiable properties of the guys who burnt down your town, raped your women, and took all able bodied and not yet killed people away as slaves.

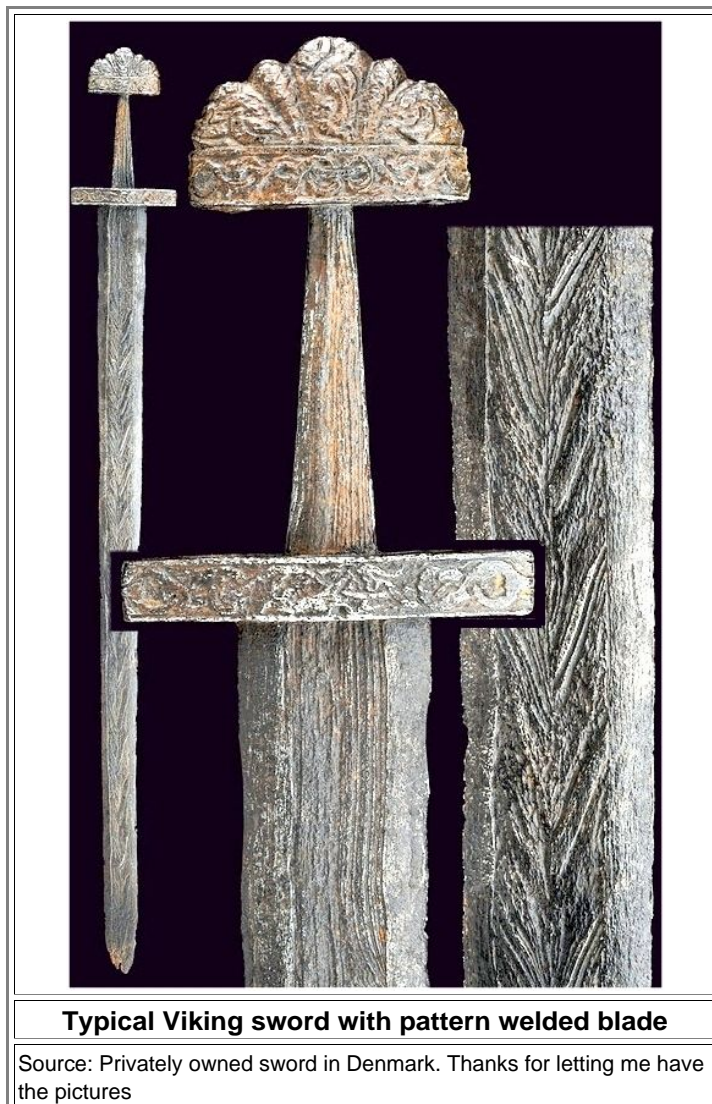
While it is true that Vikings were also large-scale traders, one of their most profitable trade goods were slaves. Slaves did not leave behind much written material for obvious reasons but we can be fairly sure that they weren't all that fascinated by their glamorous tormentors who didn't smell so good - imagine 80 men spending 2 weeks in a small boat without a rest room <sup>1)</sup>. Or, maybe, it's better you don't.

The map below gives an idea about Viking home lands and settlements, their way around Europe along rivers and

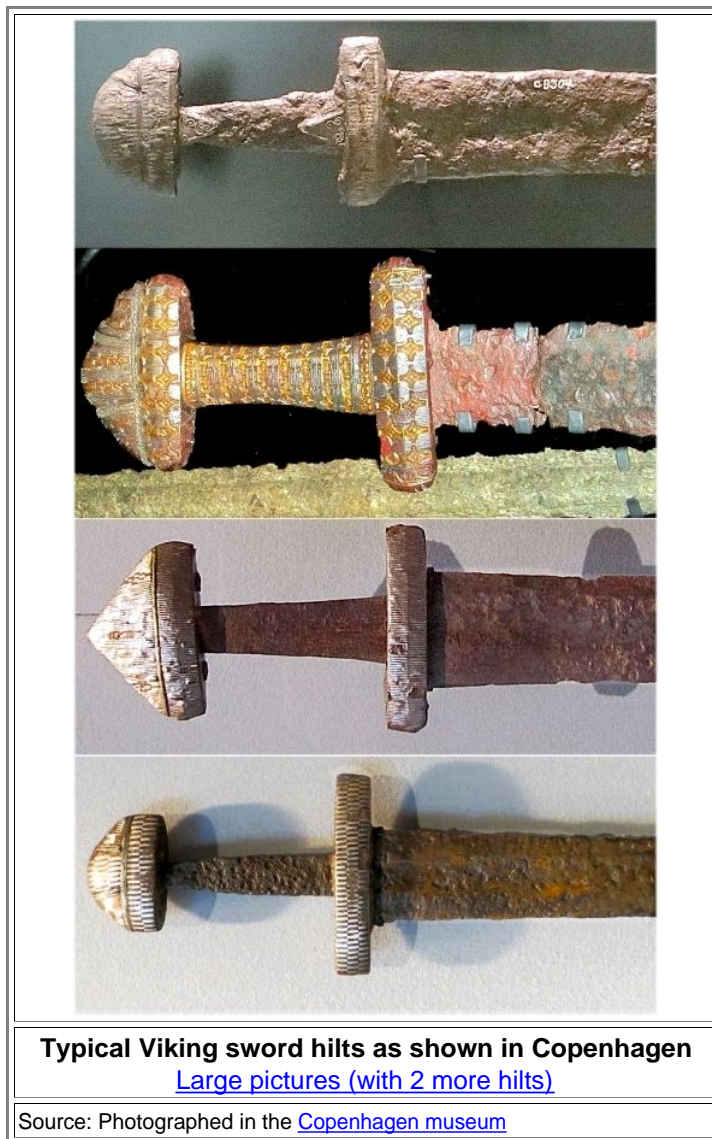
sea shores, and their dash across the open sea to Iceland, Greenland and America. The [special module](#) gives some more details about the Vikings.



Here we are not so much interested in the Viking culture, to use that word loosely, but in their swords. Below are pictures of typical "Viking swords":



There is no shortage of Viking's swords and pictures thereof. It is a safe bet that any (historically inclined) museum in Northern Europe has some Viking's swords. Here are examples from the [National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen](#):



● A lot more pictures can be found in the the following links:

- [Regular size pictures](#)
- [Large pictures](#)

▀ The blade of typical Viking swords was broad, double edged with both edges being sharp, and tapered in both ways:

- **Profile tapering**, meaning the sword gets narrower closer to the tip.
- **Distal tapering**, meaning its thickness decreases from the base to the tip.

The sword was a dedicated cutting weapon, well balanced and responsive, made for use by only one hand since the other one held a shield. Blade lengths from 60 cm to 90 cm have been found; 70 cm - 80cm might be most typical. In later times blades became as long as 100 cm. The total weight of a sword was between 1 kg - 2 kg; a bit on the heavy side. The pommel, even so it's hollow, may have served as a [counter weight](#), in contrast to the pommels on earlier swords.

These swords were optimized weapons despite their fancy hilts. "[Many modern replica blades are not made with any distal taper, resulting in a blade that, when wielded, will feel unresponsive and heavy](#)" asserts Wikipedia, and I tend to believe that. Details of the sword geometry do count.

Interestingly, museums in locations far outside the Viking sphere of influence also have "Viking swords". [Here](#) is an example. Why is that? Because, as mentioned before, there is no such thing as **Viking swords** but just Viking *era* swords or Viking's swords. Vikings simply used the same kind of sword as everybody else in Northern Europe (and beyond), and they did not invent it. While Vikings smelted iron and Viking smiths made lots of iron things including quite likely swords, only Frankish smiths made the top-of-the-line swords.

All the fancy swords possessed by Viking chieftains are likely of Frankish origin. The not so fancy ones that were made locally emulated the Frankish type. That is not only true for swords but for many things: The Vikings liked the Frankish stuff and copied it to a large extent (if they didn't rob it).

● How do I know this? Do I have any proofs for these claims as far as they concern swords?

Good question.

The answer is: No, I do not have direct and irrefutable proof for the sword bit. For the rest, yes, it is easy to prove - but we are not interested in copied jewelry, for example.

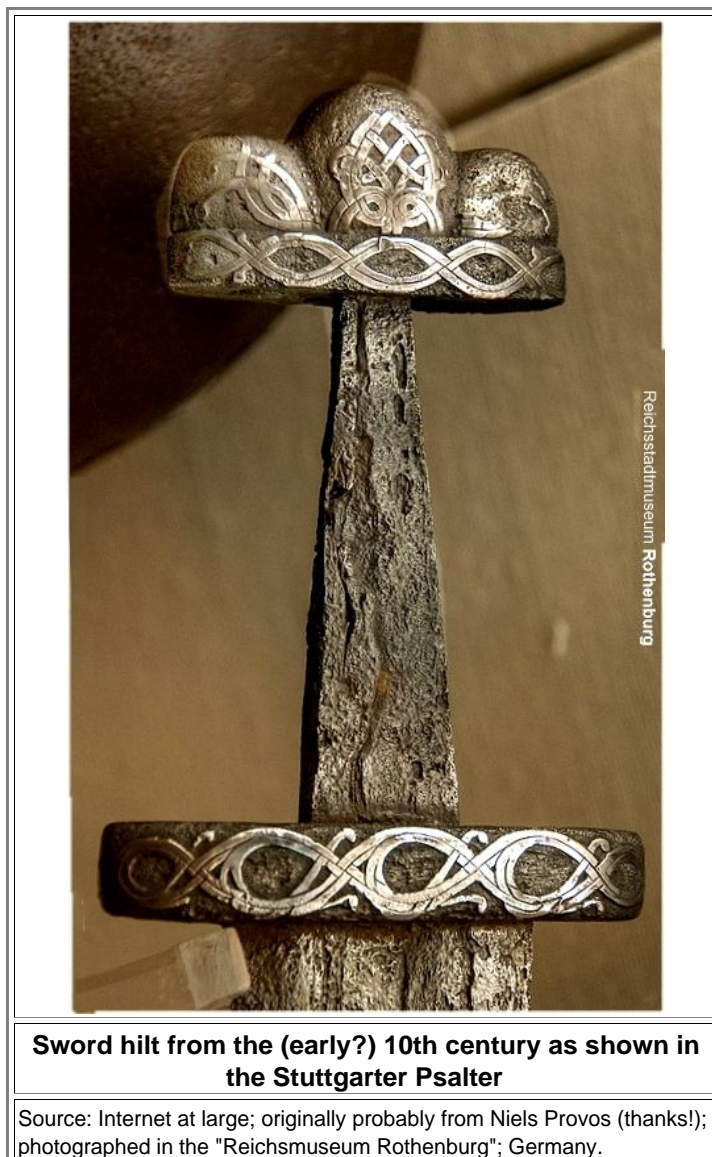
I could provide references to any number of learned papers that, based on circumstantial evidence, come to the conclusion that Viking's swords were of Frankish origin - but nobody so far could provide straight-forward simple facts for that. Unfortunately for us, the Franks or Carolingians ceased to deposit **grave goods** at the beginning of the eighth century west of the Rhine, and at the end of that century everywhere. That means we have almost no finds from the core region where the superior swords were supposedly made after 800. We have indirect evidence, however, and in what follows I will give you now some ideas about that. More details can be found in the module about the [Frankish Empire](#).

▶ As a first piece of minor evidence, look at the hilts shown in the "[Stuttgarter psalter](#)" from 825 AD. The people in these pictures are definitely not Vikings. Now look at their swords:



● Those hilts would be addressed as "Viking", and the general shape of the blades (look at the [large picture](#)) also fits the picture.

▶ Among the many swords exhibited in Rothenburg / Germany are a few that look a lot like the ones shown in the Psalter. They are labelled "Viking swords" but who knows where they came from - the Vikings never made it to Rothenburg in South Germany<sup>3)</sup>. Here is one:



● More evidence for the Frankish origin of Viking's swords can be found [here](#).

The message is: beware of "Viking sword" labels. Serious literature typically does *not* discuss Viking swords but Viking *era* swords, i.e. swords made and used in Europe between about 800 - 1050. They are classified by their hilts and the general shape of their blades but *not* by the metallurgy or the forging technology of the blade. So far I have only looked at the *hilts* of Viking's swords. We do like good-looking hilts on interesting blades, of course, just as we like good-looking frames around interesting pictures. We do not really care for hilts, however, we care for the blades to the extent that they tell us something about the progress of iron and steel technology. The big question thus is:

## What about the blades of Viking era swords?

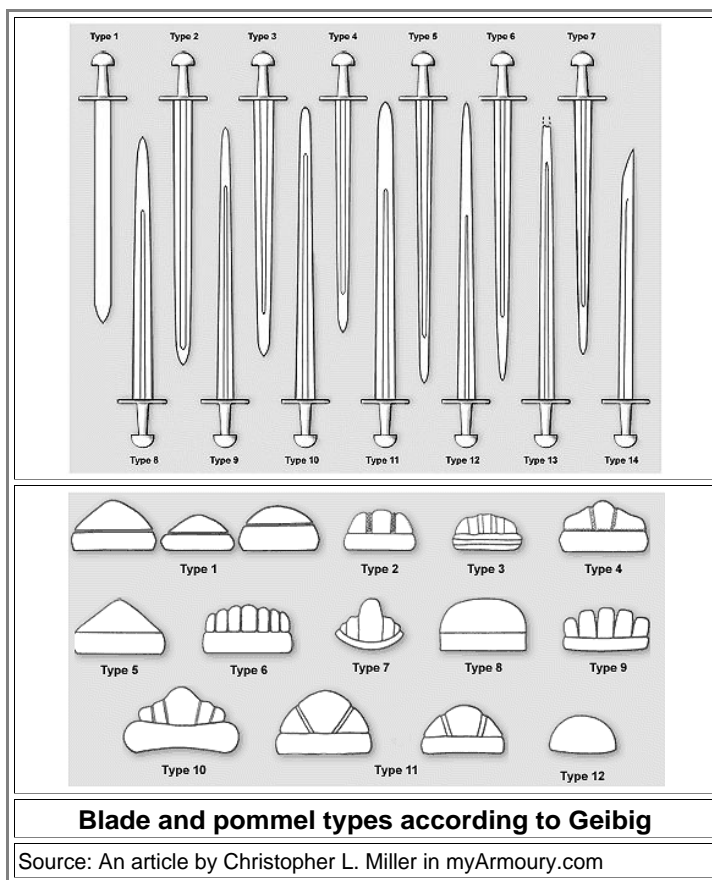
### Viking Sword Classification

Before I tackle this issue, I need to address the issue of **sword classifying systems**. A lot of swords aficionados are very keen on classification systems and while there are good reasons for that, these systems are not really of much interest to us here.

We have already encountered the [system of Behmer](#) in the context of migration period swords, and found it very useful for putting hilts into an approximate temporal and spatial context (when and where).

Behmer's system covers swords from about 300 - 800. For the Viking era and early middle age, you turn to the systems of:

- **Ian Petersen**, as described in his 1919 book "De Norske Vikingsverd" (The Norwegian Viking swords). Petersen sorts sword types mostly by the hilt characteristics, like Behmer.
- [Ewart Oakeshott](#) in his 1960 "The Archaeology of Weapons. Oakeshott improves on Petersen's system and takes into account also the blade morphology, covering mainly the time after the middle of the 11th century.
- **Alfred Geibig** supplied the newest and most elaborate **system** in his 1991 book "Entwicklung des Schwertes im Mittelalter" (The Development of the Sword in the Middle Ages). He categorizes a lot of of blade and pommel dimensions of swords from the dawn of the 8th century through the close of the 12th. Here are some pictures of 15 blade types and 12 pommel types (there are more):



- Geibig gives the relation between blade and pommel types, all kinds of numbers for properties, and a lot more. So if you find some old sword from the time horizon in question, you can compare it to Geibig's systematic and identify blade and pommel type. That will tell you a lot about your sword: At what approximate time was it used in which general region? Is it a run-of-the mill sword, with many closely related brethren in museums and collections, or a rare breed?

What you do *not* learn is anything about its metallurgy and how it was made. But that is what we are interested in and that is the reason why I don't go deeper into the various systems.

Now let's turn to the actual topic - in the next sub-chapter.

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- 1) Ahmad ibn Fadlan was a 10th-century Arab traveler who made it to the king of the Wolga Bulgars and thus also Wolga Vikings. He writes:  
"They are the filthiest of all Allah's creatures: they do not purify themselves after excreting or urinating or wash themselves when in a state of ritual impurity after coitus and do not even wash their hands after food".
  - 2) "Taken as a whole, medieval monks and clerics were probably the most prolific forgers of all time. For centuries they controlled access to official documents, placing them in a perfect position to alter or forge those documents, should they so desire. And judging by the volume of their output, they evidently did so desire. What's more, their superiors could be counted on to overlook, or even approve, any textual inventions that benefitted the Church" says the "museum of hoaxes" and every scientist involved in (church) history agrees.
  - 3) [Alfred Geibig](#) meanwhile told me that this sword comes from the "Baumann collection". It goes back to the late 10th century and originated most likely in the Kazan-Wolga region (Russia). It is not quite as old as the Stuttgart psalter but dates to 900+.