

The Vikings were lawless in a bad sense, and their expeditions by land and sea in quest of plunder were characterized by a bloodthirsty savagery of a vicious type. The women who accompanied these expeditions distinguished themselves by a fierce cruelty. They adopted a mode of life and a diet which suited few men, or even beasts of prey. The older the records the darker the picture. They ate nothing but raw cured meat and slept out of doors. The most atrocious cruelties were practiced by them, and they spared neither man, woman nor child. After awhile they applied a certain code of laws in which it was agreed that they should not plunder their own coasts or merchant-ships belonging to their countrymen, unless it was in a case of a family feud. They would start out in their piratical expeditions when the cuckoo was first heard and return as late as the autumnal storms. The Hebrides were a favorite cruising-ground. Their merciless ravages along the coasts of Scotland have been given by Skene* and need not be here repeated. Their irruption into Ireland has been frequently retold. In 794, when paganism must have been in its purity, they utterly laid waste the Western Isles of Scotland and plundered the church of Iona.* They were not finally expelled until the crushing defeat they suffered at the hands of the Scots, under Alexander III, at the battle of Largs, fought in 1263, when king Haco's broken army and fleet were forced to retire.

Recurring again to the sagas, we find the Volsungasaga—probably written in Iceland about the close of the thirteenth century—among many other things gives an extended account of king Atle and Gudrun, his wife, which is a story abounding in atrocities. Among other things the record tells that Gudrun cuts the throats of her own sons, then takes their skulls and fills them with wine mixed with their blood, and gives the same to Atle to drink. She also takes their hearts and covered the same with honey and gave it to her husband to eat. Not content with this atrocity she set fire to the hall and destroyed King Atle and his men. The records of history nowhere recite a crime so fearful as that practiced by the wife of King Atle. The sagas abound in stories of implacable hate, and thirst for revenge. A thirst for blood was an attribute of the people. A man was murdered in cold blood for a slight provocation. It was proper and fit to waylay or stab a foe in his bed, or burn him to death in his house. In the saga of Halfred it was related that Sokke, a Viking, burnt the house of Thorwald, a man living in Norway. The latter demanded to know why he was injured. Sokke replied that his intention was to burn him and his alive, and to annex his goods after Viking rules. According to the saga, this appears to have been a sufficient answer.

One of the principal amusements of this people was horse-

*Celtic, Scotland, Vol. I, pp. 302, 311, 327, 339, 347; also Chronicles of the Picts and Scots, pp. 8, 9, 330, 361, 363. *Ibid., Vol. I, p. 304.