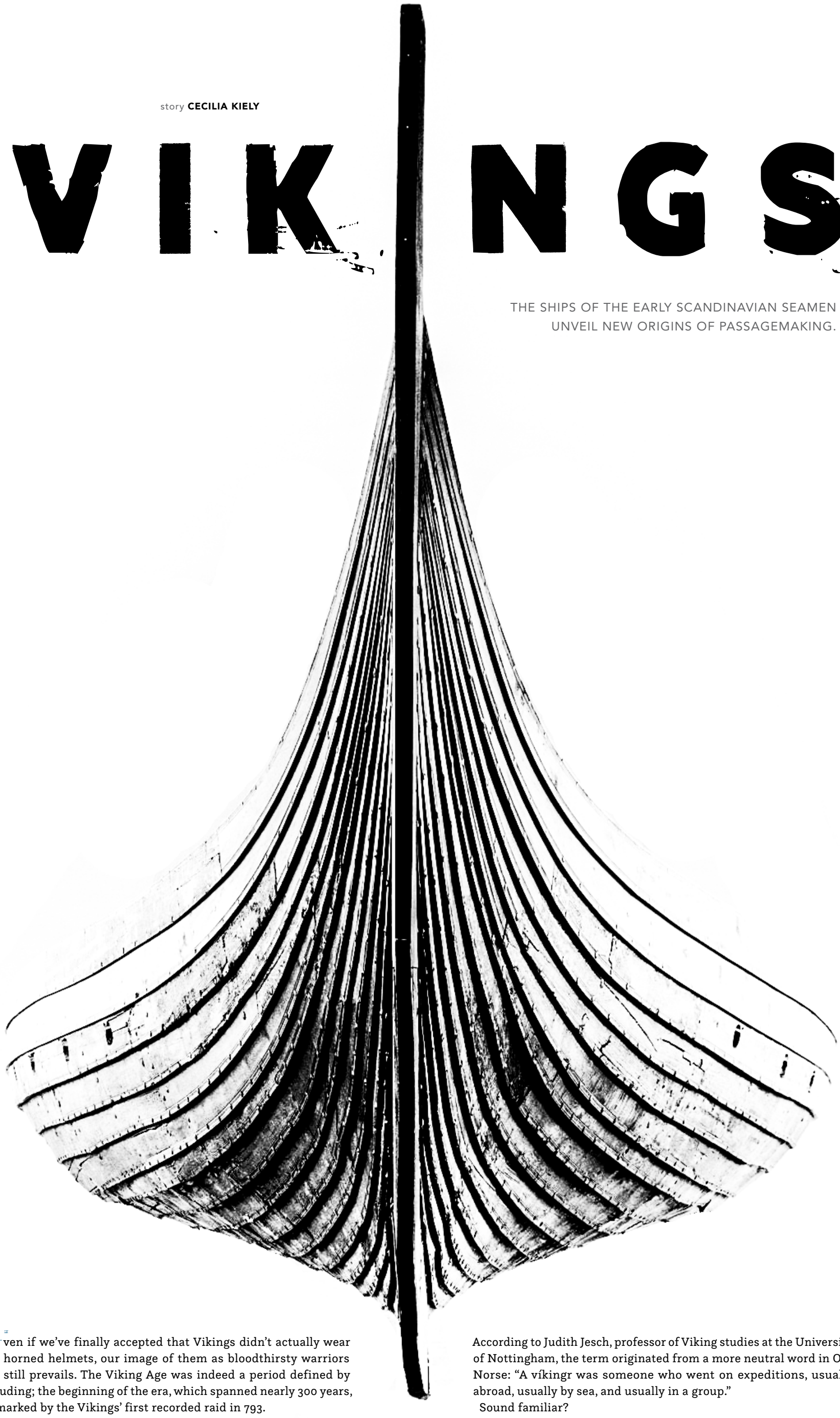
story **CECILIA KIELY**

VIKINGS

THE SHIPS OF THE EARLY SCANDINAVIAN SEAMEN UNVEIL NEW ORIGINS OF PASSAGEMAKING.



Even if we've finally accepted that Vikings didn't actually wear horned helmets, our image of them as bloodthirsty warriors still prevails. The Viking Age was indeed a period defined by marauding; the beginning of the era, which spanned nearly 300 years, was marked by the Vikings' first recorded raid in 793.

However, if we peel away the plundering-and-pillaging narrative, there are surprising similarities between these Scandinavian sailors and the (mostly) mild-mannered long-distance cruisers of today. Here's a look at what they have in common.

Weekend Warriors

There are many theories on the origin of the word viking, but most experts agree the term originally lacked the connotation of marauding. According to Judith Jesch, professor of Viking studies at the University of Nottingham, the term originated from a more neutral word in Old Norse: "A víkingr was someone who went on expeditions, usually abroad, usually by sea, and usually in a group."

Sound familiar?

There's also much evidence suggesting that Vikings were the original "weekend warriors." Most were only part-timers, going off on raids during the April-to-October season when they weren't working regular jobs, such as farming or blacksmithing. Most of us can relate to the idea of maximizing our time on the water before we have to return to work, even if we may measure the success of our cruising season in slightly different terms (number of destinations visited, perhaps, versus number of villages looted).

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Longship vs. Trawler

Think of a traditional passagemaking vessel: a recreational trawler, or maybe a spiffed up workboat retrofitted for comfortable cruising. It looks sturdy and stable, and likely has a cozy cabin in which to hunker down.

Now, think of a classic Viking longship. With no cabin to speak of, "cozy" is the last word that comes to mind. (This was centuries before the Danes became famous for hygge and all manner of candlelit contentment.) The symmetrical, slender longships appear barely related to the stout, full-displacement hull forms of the archetypal modern power cruiser.

And yet, there are quite a few similarities between the two types of vessels. These Viking ships actually cruised at speeds comparable to many full-displacement passagemaking boats today. Granted, the longships were powered by wind and human toil, but it's estimated that under oar power, a Viking ship could cruise at a steady 7 knots. And under sail, these ships may have reached 14 knots.

Other aspects of the Viking ships, such as their focus on economy of space and multipurpose stowage, likely resonate with long-distance cruisers. For example, the Vikings rowed while sitting on chests where they stowed their possessions. And the crewmembers themselves were multitaskers—with no room for specialists, the Vikings had to be sailors and soldiers.

Viking longships were not warships in the traditional sense. That is, the ships themselves were rarely used in combat. Occasionally, they were rafted together to serve as battle platforms, but mainly they were used to transport troops across long distances to battles fought largely on land. Given this strategy, the longships "were strong enough to cross the open ocean, but they were shallow enough that they could go way up river (sic) and truly surprise people in places where no one expected an ocean-going (sic) ship to appear," scholar William Short wrote in an article for the American Society of Mechanical Engineers.

Robert Beebe, author of the seminal passagemaking tome Voyaging Under Power, described his ideal cruising vessel in remarkably similar terms in a 1968 Sports Illustrated article: "I wanted a boat that could cruise not only the oceans, where harbors are thousands of miles apart, but the shallow canals of Europe."

Going with the Grain

Viking ships were revolutionary in many ways; most notably, they were "clinker built," made from overlapping planks fastened with iron nails. In other words, Vikings pioneered the lapstrake. While earlier northern European cultures used a similar method, the Vikings used it to create vessels capable of epic offshore passages in the unforgiving northern seas.

Sturdy and oceangoing, these clinker-built hulls also were

inherently lighter than carvel-style ones with edge-to-edge planking, requiring less internal framing and caulking. Minimizing weight was essential to maximizing rowing speed—and ransacking success rates. It also meant the longships could be carried up on shore and used as shelters.

Clinker-built hulls also did not require the precise cuts of a saw blade. In fact, the Vikings split planks along the natural grain of the wood using axes and wedges, so that the wood maintained its original strength and integrity. This took enormous skill, as the builder had to find trees curved in just the right way and then assemble the ship from the keel up using planks that ran the full length of the hull. Using animal hair and tar as caulking, they created a watertight hull that retained the natural give of the trees.

The flexibility of the hull enhanced the vessel's seakeeping ability, and the symmetrical bow and stern allowed the Viking ships to reverse directions quickly. This helped them not only to execute surprise attacks by maneuvering quickly close to shore, but also to avoid icebergs and other navigational hazards at sea.

Evolution of the Trawler

Now, none of that may sound like the ancestor of the trawler, or of any boat built to carry loads of fish, yet the longship was not the only type of Viking ship. It was one of several purpose-built hulls they produced, including some built for carrying goods along trade routes.

The Vikings learned that establishing regular trade could be more profitable than scattershot plundering. They adapted their basic hull design to create cargo ships that could be sailed by crews of five or six, with plenty of room for walrus tusks, honey, furs and other exports. As the Viking routes reached farther into the Middle East and Asia, they began importing silver, glass and silk.

Enter the knarr. With a wider and deeper hull, more freeboard and cargo decks, these merchant ships had limited rowing capabilities and sacrificed speed for stowage, paving the way (smoothing the sea?) for the development of hearty fishing vessels.

Echoes of the Vikings could be seen across fishing fleets that followed. For example, the Dutch herring buss, which appeared in the 15th century, showed elements of Viking design with its wide beam and rounded bilge. As Dutch fishermen developed a way to preserve herring at sea by gutting and salt curing them, fishing boats were able to increase their hauls and venture farther from home.

By the mid-1800s, the herring buss had made its way over to Scotland, where a similar design—the fifie, at up to 70 feet in length—replaced the small open boats of the previous century. Another Viking-inspired vessel was the dogger, an early sailing trawler that the Dutch developed, and that the British used, before the Brixham trawler was introduced in the 19th century. A need for greater passagemaking capability drove the new hull design. As the near-coastal fisheries of the British Isles had been overfished, the sail-powered Brixham trawlers added a gaff rig to increase sailing speed and reach more remote fishing grounds.

The advent of steam power brought the first motorized drifters around 1870, and subsequently the move from wooden hulls to steel.

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Like the knarr before them, these vessels had a low center of gravity for seakeeping. Built for extended fishing trips in the stormy North Sea, these hulls evolved not to optimize fishing methods, but instead to provide better long-range voyaging capability. Given this origin, it's not surprising that the trawler became the inspiration for recreational cruisers looking to make offshore passages.

The path might be a bit windy—and windy—but the lineage of the modern trawler can, indeed, be traced back to Viking shipbuilding traditions. Does this mean that today's passagemakers are present-day Vikings? Maybe not, but there's at least enough overlap between the two to build a lapstrake. ❄