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## Did Vikings Really Have Horns on Their Helmets?

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*After writing this article published above I came across an interesting web site which has more information on this topic. The home page of "The Straight Dope" indicates that they have been "Fighting Ignorance Since 1973 (It's Taking Longer Than We Thought)." In response to a question posed by "Thad in San Antonio," Straight Dope staffer "bibliophage" of the Straight Dope Science Advisory Board writes as follows:*

No self-respecting Viking warrior ever wore a horned helmet in battle—they weren't that dumb. As anyone who has done any slaughtering can tell you, horns provide nothing more than a good handhold to steady your work while you're slitting someone's throat. Nor did Viking warriors wear wings on their helmets, as they were commonly depicted doing before the horned image took over. Popular belief to the contrary isn't entirely baseless, though. Historical and archaeological evidence indicates that priests among the Norse and earlier Germanic peoples did wear headgear with horns (but not wings) in religious ceremonies. Furthermore, the ancient Celts wore helmets with wings (or other weird stuff), also for ceremonial purposes. The use of horned headdress in religious ceremonies wasn't limited to Germans and Celts—there are dozens of examples from

around the world dating back to the earliest civilizations.

Who started the idea that Vikings wore a pair of horns on their helmets in battle? Ancient Greek and Roman writers got the ball rolling. They described the inhabitants of northern Europe wearing all manner of outlandish things on their heads. For example, Plutarch described the *Cimbri*, the likely ancestors of at least some of the Vikings, wearing "helmets, made to resemble the heads of wild beasts," horns included. Diodorus Siculus had earlier described a similar habit of the Gauls, who were a Celtic rather than Germanic people. The Gauls, he writes, wore winged helmets or helmets with horns or antlers or whole animals attached. (The tradition continues apace; I've met Celts with all kinds of crazy stuff coming out of their heads, mostly but not entirely limited to the one day each year when green beer miraculously flows like water.)

Archaeological finds, all but one of which date from the ninth century B.C. to about the seventh century C.E., back them up on the horn thing, but only to a degree. The ancients implied that such helmets were used in battle, but a ceremonial use is more likely. The finds consist mostly of images from rock carvings, horn carvings, coins, engraved metal objects, etc. A few actual horned helmets have been found; most are Germanic helmets from Denmark, but one is a Celtic model dredged from the Thames. None of these ceremonial horned helmets match the stereotypical image of a metal helmet with ox horns attached. For example, two Bronze Age horned helmets unearthed at Viksø, Denmark sport long twisting horns made of metal. The Thames helmet to my mind suggests an ancient priest who got drunk enough to think it was a good idea to wear Madonna's cone bra on his head.



*Celtic horned helmet (150-50 BC: from the River Thames at Waterloo Bridge, London, England). The helmet is made from sheet bronze pieces held together with many carefully placed bronze rivets; decorated with the style of La Tène art used in Britain between 250 and 50 BC.*

Even the latest of these archaeological finds, with one exception, are a century or two shy of the Viking age proper, which is somewhat arbitrarily reckoned to have started in A.D. 793, the year of the Viking raid on Lindisfarne. The exception is the horn-wearing man depicted on the ninth-century Oseberg tapestry discovered in Norway a hundred years ago. It may represent a continuation of the pre-Viking ceremonial use of horned headdress by the Norse. That wouldn't be too surprising; Norse culture didn't radically change in 793. On the other hand, it could be a new custom imported from the east. Herodotus reported that the Thracians, the prototypical steppe barbarians to the ancient Greeks of his day, wore horned helmets. It's possible the Vikings encountered something of the same sort in their travels through Russia or elsewhere in the east.



*Detail from the Oseberg tapestry.*

The first image of horned helmets to be found was an engraved horn from Gallehus, Denmark, discovered in 1734. However, European artists had begun portraying ancient (pre-Viking) Germans wearing horned helmets as early as 1616, on the authority of the ancient writers. Since the ancients weren't clear on the ceremonial purpose of the helmets, they were often used in battle scenes. The use of horned helmets in German heraldry during the middle ages can probably be attributed to the same authors.

How did the priests' headdress get transferred to intrepid Viking warriors? Blame artists, not archaeologists or historians. The Viking got his horned and winged helmets during the Romantic period (late 1700s to mid-1800s). Romantic artists rejected the constraints of classicism and started to explore, among other themes, ancient Germanic and Celtic history and mythology. These artists weren't always careful about the details and sometimes depicted a hodgepodge of Germanic, Celtic, and classical motifs. (Would you believe a Viking

driving a chariot?) Romantic artists gave Vikings Celtic-style winged helmets before they got horned ones.

In the 1820s the Swedish artist Gustav Malmström was the first to give horns to Vikings, as opposed to pre-Viking Germans like the *Cimbri*. He did so in illustrations for an edition of *Frithiof's Saga* (1820-25). This Swedish poem by Esaias Tegnér was based on a poor excuse for an old Icelandic prose saga written at a time when the once great saga tradition was beginning its long sad descent into what E. V. Gordon called the "turgid monotony of the fourteenth-century tales of kings, queens, and knights in fantastic adventure." Tegnér's sappy reworking was unaccountably popular and influential around the world. The various English translations were largely responsible for popularizing the word Viking in English.



*Detail of illustration from 'The Song of Frithiof Retold in Modern Verse', showing a stylised Viking helmet.*

Where did Malmström get the idea for a horned helmet? By the time the poem came out, plenty of archaeological evidence indicated that horned headgear was used in ancient times, although it still wasn't clear that such helmets were purely ceremonial and may have disappeared before the Viking era. At any rate, Malmström's idea didn't catch on right away. While the illustrations for some English translations of the poem also featured horned helmets, the winged variety remained the norm for several more decades.

Horned helmets were given a boost by amateur archaeologist Axel Holmberg, who in the 1840s and '50s assigned to the Viking Age a rock carving that depicted men wearing what he claimed were iron helmets with attached ox horns. In fact the carving dated to the Bronze Age (no later than 500 BC), and only Holmberg could discern what material the horns were made of. His ideas didn't do much to popularize the idea among artists or the public, but quite a few archaeologists and historians were hornswoggled for a while. The professionals eventually came to their senses, but by

then horned helmets had become common on Viking heads in art.

Richard Wagner is often credited with popularizing the idea of horned helmets, although he never wrote an opera about Vikings. His operatic cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, the four parts of which were first produced between 1869 and 1876, depicted Germanic gods and heroes in the mythical past, not during the historical Viking era. Most opera fans neither knew nor cared that the Viking Age didn't start until A.D. 793, though, and some apparently assumed all barbarian warriors in northern Europe wore pointy headgear. Wagner had also used a horned helmet in the original production of *Tristan und Isolde* in 1865. This is even further from Vikings, because the story is a Celtic, not a Germanic, legend.

In Wagner's operas, horned helmets are now most closely associated with the Valkyries, but as originally staged the Valkyries wore helmets with wings. (The Valkyries didn't get horny until Wagner died.) The only major figure in the whole cycle who wore a horned helmet in the early productions was Hunding. Those who have somehow managed to stay awake through the entire four-hour production of *Die Walküre* may remember Hunding as the boor who objected to his wife sleeping with her brother. Wagner and his costume and set designer Carl Emil Doepler probably borrowed the idea not from the few scattered images of Vikings wearing horned helmets, but from the costumes in stage plays about ancient pre-Viking Germans.



Karl Emil Doepler's design for Siegfried's costume in Wagner's opera.



Fritz Feinhals (1869-1940) as Wotan in Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*

The horned helmet didn't immediately replace the winged helmet. The trend grew slowly until the early 1890s, when the one started horning in on the other's territory, especially in German and English illustrated children's books about Vikings. After that it was bully for horns while wings just fluttered. Winged helmets finally crashed about the time of the First World War and weren't seen much thereafter until reincarnated for Thor and Asterix, a comic rebirth if I ever saw one.

If Viking warriors didn't wear winged or horned helmets in battle, what did they wear? Many probably didn't wear helmets at all. Writing about seven centuries before the Viking era, the Roman historian Tacitus says most Germans didn't. But we needn't take his word for it. Contemporary Viking era artwork shows roughly half of Vikings in battle bareheaded, while the rest wear unremarkable dome-shaped or conical helmets. Few helmets have survived from the Viking age, probably because the rank-and-file wore leather helmets that didn't last. The few metal ones that have been discovered presumably belonged to the richest Vikings. Some are iron "spectacle" helmets, so called because they have bronze eye-and-nose guards that look a bit like a pair of glasses except that there's nothing at all nerdy about them. I'm willing to bet that anybody who called their wearers "four-eyes" was soon made to see the light—or stars.



Illustrations added by the editorial staff.