

COMPARING THE VIKINGS' STRATEGIES WITH IMPERIAL BRITISH STRATEGIES IN  
AFRICA

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## Divide and Ruin Strategy

This was a strategy that encompassed creating divisions among the victims and then ruining the interests of the victims so as to allow the Vikings and the British to have their way in their victims' territories. The divide and ruin strategy worked well for both the British imperialists and the Vikings. For the British imperialists, they created divisions from the onset of their arrival in Africa. According to Xypolia, the British imperialists knew that a failure to divide the local communities would result in the serious letdowns in their attempts to control their colonial territories<sup>1</sup>. This was the same mindset that the Vikings had before they invaded their enemies. While the British did not rely on killing and maiming the Africans to divide them, the Vikings primarily relied on mercilessly killing their victims immediately they stepped out of their water vessels. As such, those who saw the executions scampered for safety; thereby, giving the Vikings due advantage on their victims. Some Scandinavian history scholars have considered the Vikings as excessively aggressive in dividing and ruining their enemies. This means that the British were less aggressive compared to the Vikings in creating divisions among their victims. Although the levels of aggression between the British imperialists and the Vikings differed slightly, both sides were able to divide their enemies and ruin them in the long-run.

The British imperialists, according to the study that Xypolia conducted, applied the divide and rule policy<sup>2</sup>. This can be clustered as a convolution of the divide and ruin strategy. The divide and ruin strategy majorly entailed creating divisions among the local communities. Initially, when the British imperialists arrived in Africa, they found out that most of the local

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<sup>1</sup> Xypolia, Ilia, "Divide et Impera: Vertical and Horizontal Dimensions of British Imperialism," *Journal of Socialist Theory*, vol. 44, no. 3, (2016): 229.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 227

communities enjoyed strong cultural ties which united them at all times. Through such ties the local people were able to harmonize their activities in a way that it was hard for any outsider to divide them. On the contrary, Shillington mentions that other communities that had several clans but had no mechanism for uniting the clans suffered from inter-clans feuds<sup>3</sup>. For such communities, it was comparatively easier for an outsider to divide and defeat them. From Such a narrative, the British imperialists discovered that through creating divisions among the communities that enjoyed a strong sense of unity, it was possible to assail over them in the same that was it was possible to overcome the communities that suffered from clanism.

However, to achieve this, it was crucial to do create the divisions in such a way that the local communities could not suspect the intentions that the British imperialists had. On one hand the British imperialists used the local leaders to exert their influence without using any form of force. This was the vertical tactic. The British enticed the local leaders into making agreements with them to influence the local leaders to create hostilities among the local people. This way, the hand of the British imperialists in the divisions was virtually invisible. According to Xypolia, the vertical implementation of the guiding principle was a deliberate technique through which the British could assail and control their far-fetched interests<sup>4</sup>. For this reason, this technique placed them in a privileged position to rule Africa for long.

From another angle, Terence argues out that out the British imperialists' strategically harnessed the weaknesses of the native African communities to their advantage during

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<sup>3</sup> Shillington, Kevin, *History of Africa*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 122-134.

<sup>4</sup> Xypolia, Ilia, "Divide et Impera: Vertical and Horizontal Dimensions of British Imperialism," 223.

colonialism<sup>5</sup>. Notably, this was the horizontal technique. Here imperialism used force to gain undue advantage that arose from the emerging hostilities that the British had created earlier. In this light, any attempt to resist the imperialists was met with force. For that reason, the British administrators placed themselves in a privileged position to apply their combat skills to defeat the Africans and control them in spite of the numerical strength that the Africans had. Since the local communities fought as splinter groups the imperialists subdued them each time they attempted to establish a mutiny against the great European superpowers.

The Vikings, according to Logan, instilled a sense of fear among their victims as a way of separating them before killing them and taking some of them hostage<sup>6</sup>. Arguably, the Vikings had realized that fear was an effective tool for dividing their victims. Through instilling fear among their victims, the victims could not face the Viking invaders in a unified fashion. Notably, the Vikings fought as a single group of fighters who showed little mercy, if any, in the place they invaded. This acted as an effective mechanism for ruining their victims after the divisions they had created among their victims.

#### **Instituting Elaborate Counter-Measures**

Through planning counter-measures for quelling the resistance of their victims, the Vikings and British imperialists ascertained that their enemies found it an uphill task to defeat them. Both the British imperialists and the Vikings understood that going to any warfare in foreign territories would lead to their ultimate defeat. For that reason, they established different measures for safeguarding their combat supremacy around the clock. The countermeasures also

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<sup>5</sup> Ranger, Terence, "The invention of tradition revisited: the case of colonial Africa," *Occasional paper* 11 (2014): 35-42.

<sup>6</sup> Logan, F. Donald, *The Vikings in history*, (Routledge, 2013), 111.

acted as a benchmark through which the Vikings and the British developed other mechanisms for assailing over their victims.

An effective Viking counter-measure was the boar-style formation for protecting themselves whenever they encountered unanticipated attacks such as ambushes. In a case where an unexpected enemy ambushed them, the Vikings applied a boar-style formation using their wooden shields. Using this technique, the Vikings fighters formed a wedge shape in which they used their wooden shields to cover themselves in such a way that their attackers found it hard to spot any of them <sup>7</sup>. This enabled them to interlock themselves using a triangular pattern while advancing toward their enemies. Moreover, the use of wooden shield made their enemies arrows to stick on the shields; thereby, increasing the efficacy of their warfare tactics. Through the boar formation, the Vikings waited until their enemies had exhausted their best shots before repulsing them away.

For the British imperialists, they had stand-by armies in Britain that would act as reinforcements to the British soldiers in Africa in cases where the local communities were seemingly overwhelming the British imperialists. This was a critical measure of ensuring that the numerical strength of the indigenous communities did not work against the British imperialists. According to Shillington, a standby army ensured the British imperialists did not fall short of enough army men<sup>8</sup>. While the Vikings relied on the boar-style formation to protect themselves from the numerical advantage of their victims, the British relied on reinforcements from Britain to protect themselves from the numerical advantage of their victims in Africa. The bottom-line is, having counter-measures before attempting to assail over their enemies meant that both the

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<sup>7</sup> Brink, Stefan and Price, Neil. Ed, *The Viking World*, (New York: Routledge, 2012), 81-89.

<sup>8</sup> Shillington, Kevin, *History of Africa*, 225-322.

British and the Vikings were able to overcome their African and European territories respectively.

### **Sheer Force**

Force was crucial at the combat field. The strategy of sheer force worked well for both the Vikings and the British imperialists. While the British imperialists used this technique selectively, the Vikings explored it thoroughly. This is attributable to the differences in the Viking and British cultures. The British limited the application of absolute force to instances in which other options, such as diplomacy and the divide and rule structure, were not feasible. While some investigators of the Viking history argue out that the Vikings were excessively ruthless and lacked an inclination to religion based on their cultural values, others have argued that the Viking customs prepared them adequately in subduing their enemies.

The Vikings indiscriminately attacked areas they deemed as appropriate in sustaining their interests. The application of total force is apparent from the Viking attack on holy places that other invaders avoided. According to Logan, their attack on Lindisfarne, a holy island that only monks inhabited, shows how they applied sheer force to overcome even the victims who had little to no form of defense<sup>9</sup>. The Vikings applied the same amount of force on those who attempted to resist them as well. Bloody hand-to-hand combats were common with the Vikings due to the power it gave them to instill fear in their victims. The Vikings used this strategy exhaustively in most of the attacks they conducted in several parts of Europe<sup>10</sup>. This gave the

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<sup>9</sup> Logan, F. Donald, *The Vikings in history*, 89-91.

<sup>10</sup> Watts, Susanne, "From Raiders to Traders: The Viking-Arab Trade Exchange," *Saber and Scroll* 4 no.2 (2015): 101-178.

fame and authority at the same time. A mindset of absolute brutality played a pivotal role in the real battle-field, which influenced the Viking invaders to quickly overwhelm their victims due to their thirst for authority and battlefield supremacy.

For the British, their military force was apparent in most of their combats. The imperialists used this tactic selectively owing to the fear of possibly public outcries back in Europe in case they opted to massacre the Africans in the same way that the Vikings killed their victims. Also, the British culture and administrative procedures espoused the use of sheer force to extreme cases only. In the places where the local communities were apparently rebellious against the British imperialists, the colonial administrators out rightly applied sheer force to repress any cases of uprisings.

### **Advanced Training**

The Vikings and the British imperialists also planned and executed advanced pieces of training for their warriors and soldiers respectively. This ensured that the Vikings and the British imperialists had standby fighters and combatants who had the necessary competence for overcoming their enemies. This also prepared them accordingly for invasions whenever their rulers determined that it was high time they invaded new territories. Advanced training was imperative to inculcating a mindset of victory among the British and Viking combatants and warriors respectively. Notably, the common ground between the Vikings and the British is that their training sessions were rigorous in nature. Through such a frame of mind, the fighters were ready for combat any time they were called to action. This contrasts that of their enemies,

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especially in Africa, where the African warriors lacked rigorous training. Instead, training was largely based on rudimentary techniques.

The British imperialists trained young men about the intricacies of combat in the real battlefield using advanced military training sessions in Africa and back in Europe. Through training their fighters on using sophisticated artillery, the soldiers found it undemanding to overwhelm their African victims who merely relied on rudimentary weapons and untrained warriors. Shillington explains that the rigor in training hardened the British soldiers<sup>11</sup>. This means that advanced military training was a strategy that placed the imperialists in an advantaged position to prevail over all forms of revolt among some the native African who were unsympathetic of the British interests in their lands, resources, and culture.

The Vikings inculcated a warfare mindset in their children from a tender age. Anderson mentions that right from the adolescent years, boys were taught how to hold and throw spears and axes<sup>12</sup>. This meant that the training was sequential and improved with time-based on the Viking customs. Historical evidence has shown that the marked degree to which the Vikings trained their children on matters of combat at a tender age contributed immensely in sustaining a mindset of victory in their youngsters. Not only were the youngsters trained on the elemental techniques of warfare, but they also obtained advanced training during their adolescent. Notably, Craigie mentions that the Viking training was not formal<sup>13</sup>. Despite lacking formal training sessions for their future warriors, their informal trainings proved effective during their invasions. More importantly, the Vikings trained their future warriors about the significance that

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<sup>11</sup> Shillington, Kevin, *History of Africa*, 189.

<sup>12</sup> Anderson, R. Bjorn, *NORSE MYTHOLOGY; OR THE RELIGION OF OUR FOREFATHERS*, (Chicago: S. C. Griggs and Company, 2012), 234-258.

<sup>13</sup> Craigie, A. William, *THE ISLANDIC SAGAS*, (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1913), 109.

ruthlessness on their enemies had on the future of their homelands. Conversely, their informal trainings strongly discouraged brutal conduct among the members of the Vikings community at all times. Brutality to a fellow Viking was considered to have detrimental impacts on the success of the community.

### Conclusion

The evidence presented in this study shows that a deliberate planning and implementation of varied strategies enabled the Viking and the British were able to take over the places the raided. Although the British imperialists and Viking interests were dissimilar, it is true that their dominance remained in place for a long time. Exploring the techniques that these people applied in the areas that they developed vested interests is important in unifying the current literature that gives the accounts of the British imperialists and the Vikings as well as logically demystifying the reasons for their success. From an analytical dimension, the suppositions in this paper have pointed out that most of the scholars of the Scandinavian history concur that the influence that the Vikings had in shaping Europe's civilization is largely attributable their combat skills. Such skills played a substantial role in their efforts of subduing their victims in many of their invasions. Likewise, for the British imperialists, the arguments in this paper have shown that the Britons managed to overwhelm their victims in indigenous Africa due to a broad range of tactics that they applied, both selectively and exhaustively. As a result, they managed to protect their vested interests in Africa. This is the reason why most historians termed them as the dominant European power in Africa when powerful European nations scrambled for the resources in Africa, at the time. This paper has affirmed that it is only through employing effective techniques for gaining preeminence in Africa and Europe was the British imperialist and the Vikings able to assail their victims.

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