

Vikings Filed Their Teeth, Skeleton Study Shows

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for [National Geographic News](#)
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- 1 No one would accuse them of being dandies, but contrary to popular belief, the Vikings took great pride in their looks. One beautification technique of the ancient Norsemen was to file their teeth, a new study shows.

A Swedish anthropologist analyzed 557 Viking skeletons dating from A.D. 800 to 1050 and discovered that 24 of them bore deep, horizontal grooves across their upper front teeth. It's the first time that dental modification—a practice found in cultures around the world—has been seen in human skeletons from Europe. "[These] unique finds of deliberate dental modification ... reveal what we did not know before, that this custom is practiced around the world and also in Europe," said Caroline Arcini, an anthropologist at the National Heritage Board in Lund, Sweden. Arcini led the study, which was published in the *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*.



Acquisitive Habits

- 2 The Vikings lived in Scandinavia from around A.D. 750 to 1100. They are best known for their sea voyages and violent raids of churches and monasteries in Britain and France. The Norsemen also traveled to North America around A.D. 1000, some 500 years before Christopher Columbus set foot in the New World. In the 1960s archaeologists discovered and excavated the remains of a thousand-year-old Norse encampment at the northern tip of Newfoundland, Canada.

Researchers say the Vikings may have learned the practice of filing their teeth from a foreign culture. "Vikings are well known for their acquisitive habits, but until now we've thought of this in terms of gold, silver, and booty, not facial decoration," said William Fitzhugh, a Viking expert at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C. "However, African teeth modification was of a different sort, with teeth filed into points," Fitzhugh said.

Other people have suggested that the Vikings may have learned the practice on their travels to North America. "Maybe they adopted the idea of mutilating their teeth from people they met on their voyages," Arcini said. "The only place I know of [where people] have similar horizontal filing marks on their teeth ... is the area of the Great Lakes in America and the present states of Illinois, Arizona, and Georgia."

Social Identification

- 3 People in many cultures have been modifying their teeth for several thousand years. Some of the oldest cases of tooth modification come from Mexico, dating as far back as 1400 B.C. But the Viking discovery is the first historical example of ceremonial dental modification among Europeans. The skeletons Arcini analyzed were discovered at several Viking-era burial sites in Sweden and Denmark. The 24 skeletons she found with filed teeth all belonged to men. The marks were cut deep into the enamel and occurred often in pairs or triplets. Arcini adds that the marks appear to be ornamental rather than functional. "I can conclude that the filed furrows in the front teeth of 24 Viking men are deliberately made and not the result of using the teeth as a tool," Arcini said. She also noted that the marks are so well made that a person of great skill most likely filed them.

Why the Viking men had their teeth modified remains a mystery, but it's likely that the marks represented some kind of achievement. "I think the Vikings' filed furrows should be seen as a social identification," Arcini, the Swedish anthropologist, said.

"Maybe they were brave warriors who got a furrow each time they won a battle or tradesmen who traveled together." Fitzhugh, of the Smithsonian, says the reasons may have been partly aesthetic. "We do know that the Vikings took pride in their appearance, combed their hair, and ironed their clothes with hot rocks," Fitzhugh said. "[They] now seem to have taken pain to decorate their teeth." "When in-filled with pigment, these grooves would have made Viking warriors look even more terrifying to Christian monks and villagers," he added.

Say if the following statements are *true* or *false*. Support your answers with *evidence* from the story:

1. Previous studies had already shown that Europeans used to file their teeth.
2. Christopher Columbus wasn't the first person to travel to America.
3. Filed teeth could be a symbol of social status in the Viking culture.
4. The Vikings didn't really care much about their appearance.

Find words or expressions in the text that mean:

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| 1. men greatly concerned with smartness of dress and physical appearance (P.1) | 6. cemetery archaeological remains (P.3) |
| 2. discoveries (P.1) | 7. for decoration (P.3) |
| 3. assaults /attacks (P.2) | 8. have suffered (P.3) |
| 4. dug out (P.2) | |
| 5. base/settlement (P.2) | |