

The Vikings:

ruthless killers or peaceful settlers?

Sarah Whitehouse and Penelope Harnett

Prow of the Oseberg ship,
on exhibition at the
Viking Ship Museum, Oslo.



The following article outlines how one Year 4 teacher approached the topic of the Vikings. The teaching of The Vikings allows for a range of historical concepts to be explored such as:

- Chronological understanding – how long did Viking influence last? Where does it appear on the timeline of Britain? What is the chronology of the Viking world beyond Britain?
- Change – pupils might assess the changes that the Vikings brought including their longer-term legacy. Which changes were short term and which lasted longer?
- Causation – why were the Vikings able to achieve what they did? What prevented them achieving more? What motivated them?
- Significance – what was the most important achievement of the Vikings? What do we most remember about the Vikings?
- Similarity and difference – between other societies which children have studied (e.g. Saxons, Romans), including aspects such as the roles of women and children, food, leisure and technology.
- Evidence – what are our main sources? How does the surviving evidence limit our knowledge?

There are of course many myths and misconceptions about the Vikings and these would need to be addressed during the teaching and discussion.

Myths and misconceptions

- Vikings were bloodthirsty but they had a settled domestic life as well and achieved a great deal because of their technical prowess, e.g. in navigation.
- The Vikings in Britain were not isolated. Vikings went to many other areas of the world trading as far as Newfoundland and Constantinople.
- Evidence from places such as Jorvik shows that they were also skilled craftspeople, e.g. Jewellery
- Vikings did not have horns on their helmets!



The Lewis chessmen
© The Trustees of the British Museum

Who were the Vikings? What sort of people were they?

A topic on the Vikings provides opportunities to think creatively about engaging all pupils in their learning. Before embarking on a topic like the Vikings a number of considerations may be addressed such as:

- How can we find out about the Vikings?
- How have historians interpreted the Viking age?
- What sources of evidence may be used?
- What stereotypes or misconceptions may children have?
- What skills, knowledge and values will be useful for children to experience?

This article describes how one teacher, Alice Wilkinson at Shadwell Primary School, London approached this topic with her Year 4 class and also makes suggestions for additional activities. The school has a mixed catchment area with a large Bangladeshi population. As she planned her topic Alice looked for opportunities to extend

her children's understanding of social diversity through looking at the different roles people had in societies in the past and the beliefs and values which were important for them.

Structuring the topic

The topic was planned for six weeks and included an overall question as well as smaller enquiry questions. This structure provided different building blocks to support the development of children's historical understanding.

Overall enquiry question:

Who were the Vikings: What sort of people were they?

Smaller enquiry questions

- 1 Who were the Vikings and when did they live?
- 2 Why did the Vikings come to Britain?
- 3 How can we find out about the Vikings?
- 4 What did Viking women do?
- 5 What did the Vikings trade?

1. Who were the Vikings and when did they live?

Alice introduced the topic by asking the children if they knew anything about the Vikings. Not all children had heard about them, but others

had seen pictures of them and knew that they came from further away. One or two of the children were aware of the Viking god Thor, and that they used axes during battles!

There was thus a need to provide the children with background information about the Vikings, where they came from and where they settled in the British Isles. A map from: www.bbc.co.uk/schools/primaryhistory/vikings/who_were_the_vikings/teachers_resources.shtml provided a useful starting point.

To help children to develop a narrative of events in British history as recommended by the National Curriculum, children could be asked to place the Vikings' arrivals in Britain on their class timeline and to estimate how many years had passed since the Roman conquest and the first Anglo-Saxon settlements. Working in pairs children could be encouraged to talk about what happened before the Vikings came and subsequent events, rehearsing what they already knew and acquiring new information.

In the Year 4 class, children summarised what they had learned about the Vikings in the form of a

poster. The poster below indicates some of the key facts which were included in one child's summary.

2. Why did the Vikings come to Britain?

A useful starting point for thinking about this question could be reflections on why people might want to come to Britain. This could provide opportunities for children to draw on their own experiences, as well as film clips and news items showing contemporary migrations (watching *Newsround* on children's television could also draw their attention to current political and economic motives for moving).

It is helpful to place migrations in a wider context and support children in understanding that many people have come to Britain for a variety of reasons. Information from the website: www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk/ is a useful resource to inform children about different people who have migrated to Britain and why they have come. It might also be possible to place the arrivals of these people on the class timeline so that children could see that migration has been a recurrent feature in British history over many centuries.

Children thought about some of the reasons why the Vikings chose

to come to Britain. They learned about the Vikings' desire for more land to farm, places to trade and the lure of treasure to be found in Anglo-Saxon monasteries. Children were asked to think about the Vikings' arrival in terms of invaders and settlers and discussed perceived differences. Questions included:

- Did all invaders want to remain in Britain? Did they return home?
- Were all invaders warlike? Were some peaceful peoples?
- When did invaders become settlers? How long did this take?

Comments from the children indicate that they were developing an awareness of different viewpoints relating to the Vikings' arrival and that not all people would necessarily share the same views.

People might welcome invaders because they don't like the rulers in their country and they might want a change.

Some people might not welcome settlers because there might not be enough land for them to stay.

They might not welcome settlers because they have different rituals and customs.

3. How can we find out about the Vikings?

It is useful to remind children whenever they study any historical event or aspect of the past to ask themselves how they know about these events. What sources of information tell us about life at the time? If this question is asked on a regular basis throughout the primary years, by Year 6, children will have acquired knowledge of a wide range of historical sources and should be able to begin to evaluate them.

An interesting way to stimulate children's interest is to explain to them how different Viking objects have been found and how our knowledge concerning the Vikings continues to expand. For example, children could be told

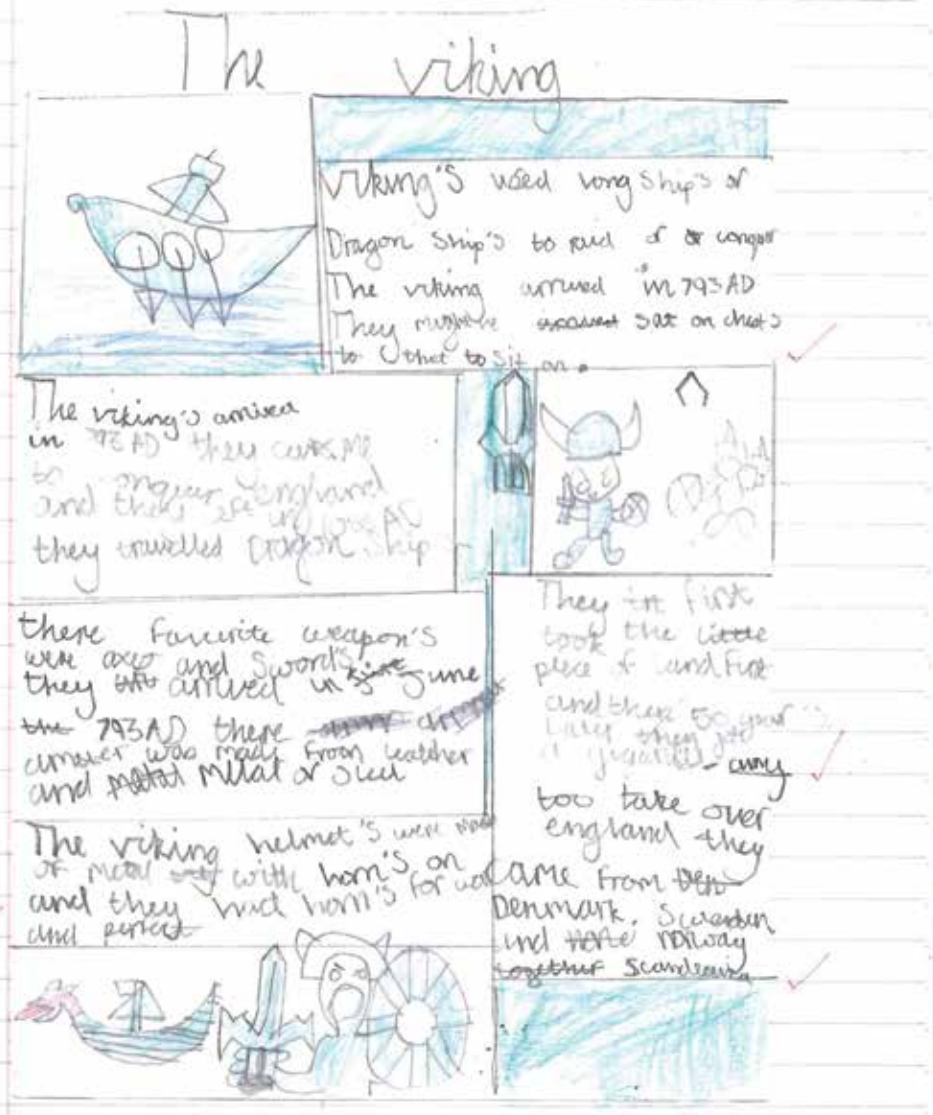
Figure 1: A child's enquiry sheet about the Vikings.

LI: I am learning how we can find out about the Vikings using different sources.

Remember to:

- Discuss what 'invasion' means.
- Ask questions about the Vikings.
- Use information from a website to make a poster.

AH



Remains of a Viking settlement from about AD 1000,
Brough of Birsay, Mainland, Orkney, Scotland.

Ian Dagnall / Alamy Stock Photo



about the discovery of a large haul of treasure by a metal detector enthusiast in 2014 (Donnelly, 2014, www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2790197/metal-detectorist-finds-britain-s-biggest-haul-viking-treasure-hundreds-artefacts-including-ancient-silver-cross.html).

Children in Alice's class were shown pictures of different Viking objects (e.g. coins, spinning whorls, jewellery, armour and weapons, etc.) and learned about Norse myths which illustrated Vikings' beliefs and values. Here the children were beginning to piece together different sources of information about the Vikings and gain an overall understanding of the Vikings.

Children learned that the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* was another source of information. Pictures from the British Library are useful to show what the chronicle looked like. The children might like to look at the chronicle's account of the Viking attack on Lindisfarne and try to translate the original Old English account into present-day English through identifying key words in the text (www.bl.uk/learning/langlit/timeline/index.html).

This account also raises questions about why it was written and its intended audience. A short video clip

from the BBC website : www.bbc.co.uk/education/clips/zw2xpv4 provides insights into the reliability of different sources of information. Children drew a variety of conclusions.

Monks were the only people that could write so only they wrote in the chronicles.

We can't trust everything in there because it was written from the Anglo Saxons' point of view.

The information was written down by Monks, sometimes they exaggerated!

Using a source in this way allows the children to consider the validity of the source, understand that it was written for a purpose and may not always contain the 'truth'.

4. What did Viking women do?

This session began by recapping with the children images which they associated with the Vikings. Linking with previous lessons, all the children described the Vikings as bloodthirsty warriors. Children were then questioned whether all Vikings were warriors and what other roles they might have had.

Figure 2: A child's view of Viking women.

LI: I understand the importance of different roles in the Viking era.

Success criteria:

- Reflect on what I know about Viking warriors.
- Understand the roles of Viking women.
- Discuss the importance of women to Viking invasion and settlement.

AH



Farming was very much part of the day-to-day life of women. Women were involved in spinning wool from the sheep to make the family's clothes, cooking meals and making bread and cheese. The BBC website: www.bbc.co.uk/schools/primaryhistory/vikings/family_life/ provides an overview of the role of men and women in Viking times and has some interesting photos of artefacts, including tools used in these tasks and reconstructions of women doing different jobs. When the class looked at this, they began to realise that life was very different for Vikings depending on role, status and gender.

Following the initial discussion, the children worked in pairs using different resources to find out about people's different roles. They were asked to link what they had found out with a particular source of information to explain what they knew. One child commented:

Viking women were important because they made food while the husband was fighting or away. Although they didn't always fight, they played a very important role. When they died they wore their best clothes and their best belongings. Their day to day responsibilities included taking care of children making food and farming.

Children could also revisit what they had researched about different roles through meeting for a 'gossip' in role with other children about their day, asking each other questions about what they had been doing. Through dramatic role-playing, children can extend their awareness of Viking people's different experiences; they are able to 'walk in the shoes' of

others and take on their perspectives (Aitken 2013:50). Moving gossip groups around would provide children with time to rehearse their role and make additions and alterations, subsequent to earlier conversations.

5. What did the Vikings trade?

Trade was an essential part of Viking life. Many trades were passed down from father to son, and in a similar way daughters learned from their mothers how to weave, make bread and make cheese. In pairs children could work with a given picture of original/replica artefacts: (e.g. fabric, shoe, jewellery, sword, shield, longboat, coins, cooking pot etc), describing what they could see, identifying their artefact and reporting back to others. Following discussion about what else they would like to find out about their artefact, children could research further from suitable websites and books.

Imagining that they were the person who had made the artefact, the following questions could guide their enquiries:

- What had they needed to make this artefact?
- What tools had they used?
- How had they made it?
- What happened to their artefact once it was made?

Children could be encouraged to share what they had found out. Writing a job advert for the person who had made their artefact would enable their understanding of different roles to be assessed.

Concluding lesson

A final lesson could link to the overall enquiry question through reminding the children about all the questions investigated during the topic, and asking them to create a living museum which answered the question Who were the Vikings? In groups children could



consider which Viking people they wanted to represent and how they would represent them in scenarios showing different aspects of their life. Groups could take on different people's roles (e.g. Viking warrior, trader, craftsperson, wife etc.) and act out different scenes. Once they were confident in their role-play, children could then try to freeze a moment in time which was important for their Viking characters. After watching each other's freeze-frames, children could try to decide which freeze-frames to place in their living museum to represent Viking life.

Year 4 children recognised that there was diversity within Viking society and concluded that: 'there was not one sort of Viking' and 'many Vikings were fierce fighters but not all, they all had an important role to play in Viking society'.

At the end of their enquiry children talked about the most interesting things which they had learned. One child mentioned that he had learned Viking warriors did not wear horned helmets. Alice explained how the Vikings had often been stereotyped as warriors with such helmets and in future she hoped that the children would challenge those people who still thought that about the Vikings!

With thanks to Alice Wilkinson and her Year 4 children at Shadwell Primary School, London.

Sarah Whitehouse is Senior Lecturer in primary history at the University of the West of England, Bristol.

Penelope Harnett is Professor Emerita of Education at the University of the West of England, Bristol.



Resources

Dorothy Heathcote's Mantle of the Expert Approach to Teaching and Learning: a Brief Introduction in Fraser, D., Aitken, V. and Whyte, B., (2013) *Connecting Curriculum, Linking Learning*. NZCER Press
www.mantleoftheexpert.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/03/MOTE-Chapter-3_Aitken_Pages-from-Connecting-Curriculum-Fraser-v3-220213.pdf

<http://jorvik-vikingcentre.co.uk/education/classroom-resources/>

www.bbc.co.uk/schools/primaryhistory/vikings/family_life/

www.dkfindout.com/uk/history/vikings/viking-crafts/

Resources from the HA

Scheme of Work: Anglo-Saxons and Vikings



Introducing children to the effects of Anglo-Saxon,

Viking and Scot settlement in Britain, including the tensions involved in settlement and how they contributed to the development of institutions, culture and ways of life that impact on us still.

www.history.org.uk/go/VikingsSchemeOfWork

Podcast: Reinterpreting the Vikings



Professor Roasmond McKitterick explores the extent of Viking Trade, politics and

their development of towns, Viking relationships with the Franks and the Normans, interpretations and more.

www.history.org.uk/go/VikingsPodcast

Podcast: The Vikings in Scotland



In this short podcast Dr Alex Woolf from the University of St Andrews discusses the impact of the arrival of the

Vikings on Scotland.

www.history.org.uk/go/VikingsScotland

Notes for the co-ordinator

This article shows how a useful enquiry can be made using a minimal number of resources. This can work extremely effectively and provide good contextual information on the Vikings, their arrival and settlement as well as their way of life in Britain.

The subject leader should be careful to avoid providing information about the Vikings that allows pupils to gain plenty of data without the conceptual development that underpins their understanding. While this would be covered by the suggestions in this article still it is always useful for the subject leader to check such data alongside any possible misconceptions that pupils may have previously acquired.

Concepts

- Chronological understanding – How long did Viking influence last? Where does it appear on the timeline of Britain? What is the chronology of the Viking world beyond Britain?
- Change – Pupils might assess the changes that the Vikings brought including their longer-term legacy. Which changes were short term and which lasted longer?
- Causation – Why were the Vikings able to achieve what they did? What prevented them achieving more? What motivated them?
- Significance – How did the Vikings compare with other settlers they have learnt about? What was the most important achievement of the Vikings? What do we most remember about the Vikings?
- Similarity and difference – e.g. with the Saxons, Romans or other societies they have studied particularly aspects such as women, children, food, leisure, technology;
- Evidence – What are our main sources? How does the surviving evidence limit our knowledge?

Myths and misconceptions

- Vikings were bloodthirsty but they had a settled domestic life as well and achieved a great deal because of their technical prowess, e.g. in navigation.
- The Vikings in Britain were not isolated. Vikings went to many other areas of the world, trading as far as Newfoundland and Constantinople.
- Evidence from places such as Jorvik shows that they were also skilled craftspeople, e.g. in jewellery-making.

Tim Lomas