

NUFFIELD PRIMARY HISTORY



VIKING BURIAL MOUND

Teachers' notes

The Vikings tend to be regarded stereotypically as 'vicious Vikings', raping, burning and pillaging their way around Europe. I wanted the children, using authentic sources from the past, to begin to understand the full variety and richness of Viking life and culture. So, the overall key question underpinning the whole topic was: Who were the Vikings?

We had five afternoons to explore that question.

This lesson was the first, with its own specific key question: What can a case study tell us about the Vikings? The case study we chose was the excavation of a Viking burial mound at Ballateare in the Isle of Man.

The lesson embodies the Nuffield Primary History guiding principles for the study and teaching of history. History is a process of enquiry; it is all about questions, about searching for evidence, about speculating and debating, and about developing possible explanations. We can often do this best if we turn to the domain of archaeology, where the need for speculation is clearest. In this simulation of an excavation, the children investigated a past event and imaginatively reconstructed what had happened, on the basis of the evidence uncovered.

Year group/class and teaching time

Year 5/6, mixed age, ability and gender, mainly Year 5 children; 31 in the class.

A whole afternoon, approximately two-and-a-quarter hours.

Learning objectives

For the children to:

- gain in-depth understanding of Viking beliefs and customs relating to death and burial
- be actively involved in pursuing an historical investigation, through questioning archaeological and written sources of evidence
- exercise thinking skills through reasoning about the evidence, debating possibilities, forming and justifying hypotheses, and arriving at sound conclusions
- understand that there are several possible interpretations of evidence.

Key questions

What can a case study tell us about the Vikings?

What is the meaning of this burial mound?

Resources

The lesson is based on a real archaeological dig done by Professor Gerhard Bersu in 1946. Most of the resources come from the account of the excavation (**A** below) and from Foote and Wilson's classic account of the Vikings (**B** below).

A Bersu, G and Wilson, David M (1966) *Three Viking Graves in the Isle of Man*, Society for Medieval Archaeology, monograph series no. 1

B Foote, P G and Wilson, D M (1970) *The Viking Achievement*, Sidgwick & Jackson.

Resources supplied:

Resource 1 Burial mound instructions. This sheet describes the site and sets the scene for the investigation, putting the children into role as archaeologists.

Resource 2 Mound outline showing the levels. As you reveal them, the children fill in this blank cross-section with the details of what is found.

Resource 3 List of finds detailing what is found in each layer of the mound (Levels 1 – 11).

Resource 4 Blank table for the children to record what they uncover at each level.

Resource 5 Mound during excavation picture.

Resource 6 Blank grid of Level 12, one for each group of children. Onto it the groups will stick the finds uncovered, square by square.

Resource 7 Grid with outline of objects in Level 12. You will need to have several photocopies (one per group of children). Cut up the grid squares and put the squares into envelopes labelled 1A, 1B, 1C and so on. The children will stick these onto their blank grids.

Resource 8 Descriptions of the objects found.

Resource 9 Set of pictures of the objects found

Resource 10 Plan of the grave pit, to give out to the children after they have read the descriptions, examined the pictures and labelled the objects found in Level 12.

Resource 11 Map showing Viking burials on the Isle of Man.

Resource 12 Glossary.

Resource 13 Muslim account of a Viking burial in Russia, by Ibn Fadlan. Quoted in Foote, P G and Wilson, D M (1970) *The Viking Achievement*, Sidgwick & Jackson, pp. 407-411. See also <http://www.geocities.com/sessrumnirkindred/risala.html>

Resource 14 PowerPoint slide show showing what is buried in the mound, level by level.

The teaching

We began the lesson with a 20-minute starter that keyed into the children's prior knowledge and also allowed them to pose their own questions about the Vikings. See 'Vikings: who were they?' on the Nuffield Primary History website.

After we had pooled the children's questions, we asked the class how we might go about finding out the answers. They came up with:

Dig up things left in the ground

Read books

Read diaries

Go to museums.

Their first answer led us beautifully to archaeology as a key source of evidence about the Vikings.

Episode 1

Focus: Simulation - choosing an archaeological method.

I told the class we were going to be archaeologists and dig up a site to see what it could tell us about the Vikings.

We gave out the sheet 'Burial mound' (Resource 1) and read it aloud with the class. We asked them to close their eyes and visualise the scene.

Next we handed out the outline of the mound (Resource 2), one per pair of children. The class had no data projector, so I put a transparency of the mound outline on the overhead projector. If you have a data projector, you can use the PowerPoint (Resource 14) for the dig.

As archaeologists, the first thing we need to consider is: How should we excavate the mound - what method is best? As this mound was excavated in 1946, we cannot use modern methods such as infra-red imaging. There are basically three options to choose from.

1 Start at the top and go down level by level, clearing each one as we go.

2 Tunnel in from the side.

3 Slice the mound in quarters, like a cake, clearing one quarter (quadrant) at a time.

We gave the class, in their pairs, three minutes to discuss the options and decide which they wanted to choose. Then we took a vote.

Option 1 won hands down, followed by 2. Option 3 received no votes.

Sadly I had to tell them that 3 was the option chosen by the real archaeologists who had dug up the mound, though they had also cleared each quadrant level by level, so their choice was partly correct.

Episode 2

Focus: Simulating the excavation.

We started digging; done on a two-dimensional diagram, it works like Option 1, so the children in effect had their choice. At each level, I read from the table of finds (Resource 3) what was there, and drew the finds onto the transparency of the mound (you could use the PowerPoint instead of the overhead projector here).

The children simultaneously recorded the finds: one child in each pair drew on their mound outline, while the other made a written record using the blank table (Resource 4). I stopped at Level 12, telling the children that here, at the bottom of the pit, there were so many objects that we were going to look at them in detail. We had been recording in cross-section: now we would change to a bird's-eye view, using a grid to record what was in each section of Level 12.

First, we showed the class the picture of the mound during excavation (Resource 5); this helped them to understand the quadrant method. They were now buzzing with speculation about what the skeleton and burnt animal bones might mean. They couldn't wait to see what was buried at the bottom of the pit.

Episode 3

Focus: Completing the Level 12 jigsaw, piece by piece.

We moved the children into ten groups of three, and gave each group a blank grid (Resource 6). Using the co-ordinates, the groups took turns to choose a square to dig up. We had beforehand made ten photocopies of the grave goods with the grid superimposed (Resource 7), cut them up and put the cut-up squares into envelopes labelled 1A, 1B and so on. As each grid reference was chosen, we opened the matching envelope and handed out to each group a square showing the grave goods found in that section, e.g. the spear heads in 2A. The groups glued the squares onto their blank grids. Some children had trouble getting the orientation of the square right, but in the end they all had a plan of Level 12, with the outline drawings of what it contained.

Episode 4

Focus: Speculating about the finds; examining them in detail to carry the investigation forward; formulating hypotheses.

The dig was complete, but what exactly had we found? What sense could we make of the objects in the mound from our meagre outline drawings?

The children volunteered their ideas. Leila was sure it was a warrior's grave, because there were weapons in Level 12. Anna, though, wanted to know why there was a body up at the top of the mound, while the weapons were at the bottom. Rob thought the animal bones might have been left over from the funeral feast. Good thinking all round.

It was time for more information. We told the class: Our team of archaeologists have recorded all the finds. We have also sent them for

cleaning and examination. Pictures and descriptions of the objects have been sent back to us, so we can now look in more detail at each item and read and analyse the descriptions that have arrived. We gave each group pictures of the objects found (Resource 9), together with brief descriptions of the objects (Resource 8) and a glossary (Resource 12).

The children now had to make sense of what they had dug up. We asked them to:

- identify and label the grave goods they'd stuck onto their Level 12 grid
- discuss with their group why all the objects might have been put into the mound
- formulate some ideas about what had happened on the day of the burial.

The children spent the next 20 minutes sorting out and reading information about their finds, and labelling their grids. As each group finished, we gave them the plan of the grave pit (Resource 10) so they could check their labelling. All the while the groups discussed ideas about the mound and its contents. Finally, the children were ready to pool their ideas. We asked them to justify all hypotheses advanced. Without prompting, they came up with the following terrific ideas:

It's the burial of a warrior (Asked to justify this claim) - because he's been buried with weapons of war and they're placed as he would have worn them.

It's a man who has murdered the woman near the top of the mound; he has then been murdered in turn, and the murder weapons have been put into the grave with him.

The woman skeleton could be his wife.

Yes, they've buried all his things with him, and her too.

She might have been alive when she was buried, because she's got her arms stretching up, and the soil would be falling on her.

She's been killed, her head's been bashed in with a heavy implement, it says here.

His skeleton has rotted and hers hasn't because she's near the top, and he's at the bottom, and it's wetter lower down in the ground, so his body has rotted away (a logical, thoughtful hypothesis, but in this case wrong. The reason the woman's skeleton didn't rot away was because the carbon in the burnt animal bones above her preserved her bones).

The man in the grave is a farmer and they've buried his animals with him.

Have they sacrificed the animals, because they're burnt?

At this point there was a sense that we had come as far as we could in squeezing meaning from the mound objects. We agreed that we now

needed more information to help us find out whether our ideas were realistic. Unfortunately, we have no written Viking descriptions of burials – only a few runic inscriptions.

I was now able to announce with a flourish that there was one account of a Viking burial. It was written by Ibn Fadlan, an Arab Muslim trader who witnessed a Viking burial in Russia in 922 AD and wrote down what he saw.

Episode 5

Focus: Listening to a written account; synthesising the different sources of evidence.

I read aloud Ibn Fadlan's account, uncensored (Resource 13). The children were riveted. There was complete silence during the reading.

(You may wish to cut out the sex and violence; however, the uncensored account can provide a useful resource for PSCHE. That this account is safely in the past makes it easier to discuss than a current event, yet it embodies the dilemma of how to judge customs and rituals so different from our own.)

In this lesson, we focused on the historical investigation. We asked: Can Ibn Fadlan's account help us make sense of our Isle of Man burial? What can it help us explain? What is similar, and what doesn't fit our burial at all? Remember that our burial is in the west of the Viking world, while Ibn Fadlan was in the east – how similar would their customs be? Also, Ibn Fadlan was a foreigner; did he understand what he witnessed?

Their ideas tumbled out:

Woman sacrificed - could be wife or slave.

He could have been a chief - no, not so rich, as no jewellery or coins in the grave. He's more a farmer.

They (Russian Vikings) also killed his animals, just like our burial.

Put up a post with his name on - our dig has a post hole, so maybe it had a post in it. It's also like we do - put up a cross on our graves.

Did they put turves from further away because that was where his farm was, and they put bits of his farm in his burial mound?

(This was a particularly good inference, and accords with what the real archaeologists, Bersu and Wilson, think is the explanation.)

Yes, they believed you had to take things you needed for the next life; that's why they killed the woman and put his animals and farm turves there.

In Russia they dressed him carefully - our man was also placed carefully, and there were cloth bits in the grave, so he was probably dressed as well.

I was delighted at the thinking and reasoning the children demonstrated as they made connections between the two burials.

Episode 6

Focus: Finishing the investigation; reviewing the learning.

We looked at the map of the Isle of Man showing the location of other Viking graves found there (Resource 11). I invited comments.

They're all near the coast.

Me: Why?

To be near water.

They were sailors, so to be near the sea.

Perhaps to be able to look out to see if enemies were sailing to attack them.

Next, we told the class that the Vikings frequently 'killed' a dead man's weapons, either to prevent grave robbery, or to prevent him from coming back to haunt the living. The children immediately made the connection between 'killed' weapons and our burial.

- The sword was broken in four pieces, so it might have been 'killed'
- and the shield had dents in it -
- yes, but that could have been from fighting.

Finally, we pulled together what we had learnt about the Vikings from our small case study: we had found out that the Vikings were farmers, warriors, craftworkers, sailors and traders. This set the scene for the next lesson, where the children discovered more about the richness of Viking life as they investigated the Vikings as traders, explorers, warriors, craftworkers and home makers.

As the bell went, Anna asked: 'What would they have done if one of the slaves didn't volunteer to die with her master?' An excellent question, which I couldn't answer - we have no direct evidence to draw on.

The next day, the children each wrote an archaeologist's report of the burial.

Learning outcomes

The children:

- gained in-depth understanding of Viking customs relating to death and burial

- employed the skills of the historian by pursuing an historical investigation, questioning archaeological and written sources of evidence
- exercised thinking skills through reasoning about the evidence, debating possibilities and interpretations, forming and justifying hypotheses, and synthesising their ideas to arrive at sound conclusions.

Reflection

This was a lively and rewarding lesson, with the children excited, challenged and intrigued by the investigation throughout. Every child participated enthusiastically in the lesson.

The teaching and learning were driven by the key questions, which focused, shaped and drove the inquiry through:

- questioning the mound's contents
- teasing out their meaning
- hypothesising about their relationships
- then comparing and evaluating all the evidence to build up a complex, plausible picture of Viking beliefs and practices.

During this process the children were exercising sophisticated thinking skills as they actively constructed meaning from the clues in the sources.

Nuffield Primary History project

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