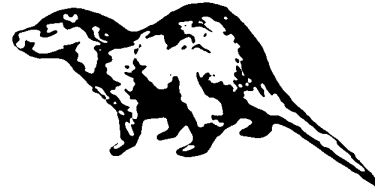


NUFFIELD PRIMARY HISTORY



EGIL'S SAGA AND VIKING POETRY

TEACHERS' NOTES

The Vikings tend to be regarded stereotypically as 'vicious Vikings', raping, burning and pillaging their way around Europe. We wanted the children to understand what made the Vikings tick.

So, the overall key question underpinning the half-term unit was:
Who were the Vikings?

We had five afternoons to explore that question.

We taught this lesson, dealing with sagas and poetry, in Week 4. This was after the class had 'excavated' a Viking burial mound, conducted group investigations of aspects of Viking life, and discovered what place names could tell us about Viking settlement patterns.

Age, ability, classroom organisation

Year 5/6, mixed age, ability and gender. Thirty-one in the class.

Teaching time

Two hours fifteen minutes.

Key questions

- What did the Vikings value?
- What can we discover from sagas and poetry?

Learning objectives

- To introduce the class to another facet of Viking culture – their literature, in the form of sagas and poetry.
- For the children to appreciate the value the Vikings placed on poetry, on fame and reputation, on prowess in battle, and on material rewards.

- Literacy: To introduce the children to the beauties and intricacies of Viking poetry (metaphors, kennings) and to provide a model for their own writing using this genre.

Resources

- Egil's Saga (Penguin paperback)
- 16 enlarged photocopies of Egil's praise poem to King Eirik Bloodaxe, (one per pair of pupils)
- 16 A4 sheets, each with one stanza of the poem stuck in the middle
- Glossary containing hard words and their meanings

The teaching

Episode 1

Focus: Storytelling, to create a context, convey information and pose the challenge.

We told the story of Egil coming to York, stopping at the point where he went off to think of a head-saving strategy overnight. How was he to stop King Eirik Bloodaxe putting him to death in the morning?

Told the children they were Egil, and that they were being granted only 15 minutes to come up with a good plan to save their skins. The children asked some clarifying questions, such as: 'Had King Eirik and Egil ever been friends in the past, although they were deadly enemies now?'

Episode 2

Focus: Role-play, to give the children opportunity to enter a past situation, and to demonstrate their understanding of the Viking world.

In threes, the children went off to plan what to say or do in the morning when they had to come before King Eirik and Queen Gunnhild.

We cleared the classroom, pushing all the desks against the wall (except for one which acted as the King's high table). We lined this 'king's hall' with chairs down each wall. Tony and I played the King and Queen, the children sat on the chairs down the sides of the room.

In turn, each trio of children came up and presented their cases for being allowed to keep their heads. I played the bitter, vengeful Queen, Tony the implacable King, asking them hard questions and reacting greedily when riches were offered.

The Egils' skin-saving tactics were plausible and often brilliant, such as the girls who tried a fake conversion – they came forward bearing a cross and intoning Christian prayers for forgiveness – and the boys who first offered single combat, and when this was scornfully turned down by King Eirik, offered instead to kill King Athelstan of England and make Eirik king of all of England in his place, instead of merely king over North-East England. Several groups composed poems either asking for

forgiveness or praising Eirik (the latter is what Egil actually did), while others tried bribery with land and/or riches.

At the end we told the Egils that we would have let them all off, they had been such good advocates for themselves.

Episode 3

Focus: Document work, reading Egil's praise poem. Discussing the genre. Identifying what the Vikings valued.

We filled in for the children what had happened in the saga.

We distributed 16 copies of the praise poem and read it aloud (they followed on their copies).

Then divided the class into pairs, and gave each pair of children one verse of Egil's praise poem to read in detail.

We asked them first to try to get the meaning of their verse, as the Vikings often used difficult metaphoric images.

So, looked at examples of imagery, their use of metaphor and kennings. We discussed a couple of metaphors from the poem, with good contributions from the children. Can we think of our own?

Asked children to list key words or phrases from the poem showing what the Vikings thought praiseworthy – what they valued.

Episode 4

Focus: Writing a Viking poem.

We asked the children to draw what was happening in their verse, then to write a Viking praise poem themselves, to:

Egil's loyal friend and kinsman Arinbjorn, who put his case to Eirik and stood by him; OR

Queen Gunnhild; OR

King Eirik, in thanks for sparing Egil's life.

Most of the children asked if they could skip the drawing and start writing their poems immediately. They finished them the following day, and a fine collection they made.

Nuffield Primary History project

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