

NUFFIELD PRIMARY HISTORY



ROMANS, ANGLO-SAXONS AND VIKINGS IN BRITAIN

WHO WERE THE VIKINGS?

TEACHERS' NOTES

Below we describe how we introduced a five-week Viking unit to a class of 9- and 10-year-old children. The teaching formed a twenty-minute starter to a two-and-a-quarter-hour lesson. We knew that the children would probably have prior knowledge about the Vikings, from television and visits to the Yorvik Viking Centre in nearby York. We wanted to discover the extent and nature of that knowledge: what concepts of the Vikings and their civilisation had the children formed in their minds? So we decided to begin the unit by asking the children to write down what they knew, then what they wanted to know, about the Vikings.

This approach will work for any topic, at any age.

In discussing, writing and pooling their statements the children are calling upon prior knowledge, clarifying ideas and concepts, and practising their speaking and listening skills. Following this up with question-posing is both motivating and liberating for the children – so much of school life is dominated by teacher questioning. Without questions there can be no history. Question-posing introduces children to the methods of historians, whose questions drive their investigations. The children invariably ask focused, relevant and excellent historical questions.

Sometimes we omit the statements and simply ask the children to pose questions (see, for example, Key Stage 1 children's questions about the Great Fire of London).

Year group/class

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

Teaching time

The first twenty minutes of a whole afternoon session.

Learning objectives

- To connect to the children's prior knowledge
- To form a springboard for teaching the unit by sharing and discussing this knowledge
- To enable children to pose their own historical questions, and to have their questions valued and pursued.

Key questions

What do you know about the Vikings?

What do you want to find out about them?

The teaching

Episode 1

Focus: Statements of prior knowledge and pooling of ideas

Several of the children had done the Vikings in Year 3. Others had seen programmes about them on television. Quite a few had visited the Jorvik Viking Centre in York, so most knew something about the Vikings.

So, to discover the nature of this prior knowledge, I asked the children to write down three things they knew about the Vikings. Working in pairs, they decided together which three things to record. We only allowed five minutes for this exercise.

Then I asked each pair, in turn, to choose one statement to pool. These we recorded on the board.

The statements revealed a good level of knowledge, both general and specific, with one notable exception. These are the statements we recorded.

They sailed in longboats.

Had many gods.

They wore helmets *with horns*.

They came from Denmark and Scandinavia.

They *didn't* have horns on their helmets.

They had carvings on the front of their longships.

They hung their shields along the sides of their ships.

They went to the toilet in a hole in the ground.

When people died they went to a place called Valhalla.

They were farmers.

They were fierce fighters.

Much discussion arose around the contradictory statements about horned helmets. We found that the class had three ageing books of Viking myths, all of which had pictures of Viking warriors with horned helmets on their covers! Hagar the Horrible and stagings of Wagner have much to answer for. I told the children that no Viking helmet with horn sockets has ever been found.

Episode 2

Focus: Raising questions about the Vikings.

Right, we know lots about the Vikings already. I asked: What else would you like to know about them? With the children again working in their pairs, we set them the task of formulating three questions they would like answered about the Vikings. For five minutes they discussed and wrote busily. Then each pair chose their best question to read out. These we again pooled, this time on a flipchart, so that the questions could be displayed during the teaching of the unit and reviewed at the end.

The pairs' questions:

How many men sailed in their ships?

Were their gods related to the giants?

How did they live?

Did they live in caves?

What food did they eat?

Which countries did they attack?

Which countries did they take over?

How did they speak – what language?

When were they around?

What sports did they play?

What other weapons did they use apart from spears?

What were their longboats like inside?

Were they as vicious as people make out?

These were good questions and Leila's, the last on the list, was a gem – a genuine historical question. It addressed directly what we were aiming to examine throughout the unit. The children were able to answer most of their questions during the second lesson, when they conducted group investigations into a range of aspects of Viking life.

However, for today we focused on how we find evidence to help answer such historical questions. We asked: How can we find out the answers to our questions? We can't get into a Tardis and go back in time. The children came up with: dig up things that have been left in the ground; read books; read diaries; go to museums.

Excellent: the first answer led us beautifully to archaeology as a key source of evidence about the Vikings. We proceeded to simulate the excavation of a Viking burial mound for the rest of the afternoon.

Nuffield Primary History project

General editor: Jacqui Dean

Author of this unit: Jacqui Dean

© in this format Nuffield Primary History 2005

downloaded from www.primaryhistory.org