

Name _____

Date _____

Vikings

Raiding & Exploring During the Viking Age

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. For hundreds of years, the people in northern Europe mostly stayed where they were. These people were called Northmen or Norsemen. We also call them Vikings. They lived in what is now called Scandinavia, a region that includes Denmark, Sweden and Norway.

Notes

The Norse people struggled to survive the long, brutal winters. Some lived so far north that the sun barely rose during the winter at all. Many lived by the sea along fjords, where glaciers had left steep cliffs towering above the water. This was not great land for farming, but being so close to the sea, they built ships. Over time they perfected the art of shipbuilding. It was these ships that made the Vikings famous.

2. The Vikings built longships that were like nothing the world had seen before. They were long and sleek. They could move much faster than most other ships. They were strong enough to go out to sea and survive big waves and storms. But they could also float down rivers because they didn't sit very deep in the water.

Notes

While some longships probably had a large sail for crossing the seas, crews of skilled oarsmen also powered them. The warriors who rowed would put their shields along the side of the ship until they needed them on land. All in all, these were impressive ships that allowed the Vikings to go nearly anywhere they wanted.

3. The Vikings had their own religion that we now call Norse mythology. The Norse religion was polytheistic: there were many gods instead of just one. Odin was a one-eyed father god with a long white beard. Thor was the god of thunder and the sky who protected humans from evil. He has a war hammer that always comes back to him when he throws it. The word "Thursday" comes from Thor: it's Thor's day. In fact Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday are all named after Norse gods as well.

Notes

The Norse believed that warriors who died in battle would be lifted into heaven by Valkyries, winged warrior goddesses. Heaven, for these warriors, was called Valhalla, a giant hall where all the dead warriors would feast every night. But if you died in your bed of old age, you wouldn't go to heaven at all. The Vikings believed you'd go to a colorless underworld. With a religion so focused on rewarding battle heroes, it is no wonder Viking warriors were so fearless.

4. In 793, some Vikings set sail from their homeland in their longships, crossing the North Sea to get to England. They were coming for riches and goods, but they weren't coming to trade. They were coming to steal things and then leave. And they had the element of surprise.

Notes

They attacked a monastery, killing the monks who didn't flee. They pillaged the monastery, being sure to take the silver, which they preferred to gold. The Viking raiding party didn't stay around to wage war the way other European armies might have done. Instead, they got back in their ships and left. That was the first major Viking raid, a kind of hit-and-run surprise attack that they became known for.

5. News spread among other Vikings of how easy it was to raid European villages and monasteries. The Vikings began to build more and more longships and recruit warriors. Soon, the Vikings were raiding all over Europe. Villagers ran in fear when they saw the Viking ships on the horizon. Some cities, like Paris, thought they were safe because they were inland, far from the sea. But the Viking longships could sail down very shallow rivers. And if the river ever got too shallow, the Vikings would get out, pick up the ship and carry it to a deeper part of the river.

Notes

Many cartoons of Vikings or Viking costumes show helmets with two big horns. A real Viking would never put horns on his helmet. Why? Because that would just make it easier for his enemy to knock his helmet off in combat.

6. The Vikings didn't always just do hit-and-run raids. Sometimes they would stay for a while. In 865, the Great Viking Army conquered England. They were defeated, but they signed a treaty that allowed them to keep much of northern and eastern England.

Notes

The Vikings attacked northern France so often that the king of France let them keep the land. He made them sign a treaty where they promised to defend the rest of France from other Viking attacks. The Viking leader accepted. This part of France is known as Normandy, which is named after the Viking "Northmen."

7. The Vikings didn't always take land by force. When the land was unoccupied, they didn't have to. The Vikings island-hopped from Norway to reach Iceland, a volcanic island in the North Atlantic that no one had ever reached. They set up a colony there. Iceland became an important place for the development of Viking democracy. Each year everyone was invited to gather by a big rock where the laws were read and conflicts resolved. The Icelandic word for these gatherings is "things."

Notes

In the 900s, Erik the Red sailed farther west and discovered a huge island, almost entirely covered with glaciers and snow. He decided to live there. He named it Greenland, hoping that others would hear the name and decide to come live with him on the island. Not that many people did. To this day, Greenland has one of the smallest populations of any country.

8. Erik the Red's son, Leif Erikson, was also a Norse explorer. He left Greenland around the year 1000 and headed west. He landed in Northern Canada and was perhaps the first European explorer to reach America. Erikson saw vines with grapes on the land, so he named the area Vinland (or "vine land"). He and his crew set up a small settlement and spent the winter there. He then returned to Greenland, bringing along timber and grapes. They probably returned once more, but the settlement was eventually abandoned.

Notes

If Leif Erikson reached North America 500 years before Columbus did, why is Christopher Columbus the famous one? Columbus's voyage changed the world in a major way. It led to an age of European exploration and settlement in the Americas, which shaped those lands into what we see today. Leif Erikson's voyage didn't do any of that.

9. What historians call the Viking Age lasted from around 790 to around 1050. Eventually, the Vikings stopped raiding. Why? Over time, they became more a part of Europe. They began living in the European lands they conquered instead of sailing on new raids. They also switched from their Norse religion to Christianity. Sharing a religion with the rest of Europe made them less likely to raid and kill other Christians.

To this day, we have lots of Norse words in the English language. That's because of how much the Vikings conquered England. Nearly every word that starts with an "sk" sound in English comes from Old Norse. Skin, skirt, skip and scarf are just a few examples.