Visit guide for teachers

The BP Exhibition

Vikings
life and legend

6 March – 22 June 2014

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About the exhibition

Scandinavia in the Viking Age was a network of maritime societies. The Viking ship was central to their culture and their achievements.

Seafaring skill allowed the Vikings to expand from their Scandinavian homelands from around AD 800 onwards and to create an unprecedented network of international contacts that connected four continents.

The Viking Age (AD 800–1050) was a period of major change for the Scandinavian homelands, the Viking settlements abroad and mainland Europe.

The Viking expansion was not driven wholly either by raiding or by trading. Instead both were major features of that expansion.

The Vikings’ relationship with other peoples and cultures led to an interchange of artistic, religious and political ideas which are reflected in the surviving objects.

Recent research and new archaeological discoveries are continuing to transform our understanding of who the Vikings were and how they lived and died.

By AD 1050, Christian kingdoms were established in Scandinavia and the Viking Age was over. However, the Vikings left an important legacy that is still apparent in the British Isles today.
Objects in the exhibition are grouped according to a number of key themes.

The layout of the exhibition is as follows:

**The Viking world**: an introduction to the Viking homelands and life
**Cultures in contact**: the Vikings as traders across four continents
**Communicating power**: using objects to show status and wealth
**The way of the warrior**: Viking raids and the change from groups of individual warriors to soldiers in a royal army
**Viking ships**: examples of Viking ships and how they were used
**Viking kingdoms**: the emergence of kings
**Viking belief**: Old Norse belief and the coming of Christianity
**Legacy of the Vikings in Britain**: the impact of Vikings on the British Isles

Objects for children
We have selected a number of objects and sets of objects which we think students will enjoy looking at. These are marked with the symbol on the left.

Content
Please be aware that the exhibition includes some material that you may wish to discuss with your students beforehand to prepare them for encountering these objects on the day of the visit. Further details are given below.

Dead bodies
The middle section of exhibition includes human remains. Please encourage students to behave with respect in this section. Response to human remains can range from exaggerated revulsion to prurient interest to emotional upset. We recommend talking with students about the remains in school, before they visit the exhibition. Discuss how the remains were recovered by archaeologists, how the remains and the objects discovered with them inform us about who the people were, and how they remind us that this distant historical period involving real people.
Using the exhibition

In advance
Decide on a focus for the visit and a follow-up activity and go through these with the students. Some examples of possible ‘big question’ focuses are given on page 6.
If you are using activity sheets, go through them with the students in advance. Use the ideas in Pre-visit preparation below (see page 7) and the exhibition image bank (see page 18) to provide general background and to familiarise students with some of the content of the exhibition.

On the day
Divide the class into small groups, with an adult assigned to each group. Give each adult a free exhibition guide, available at the exhibition entrance. Give each adult a copy of any activity sheets the students are using and a briefing sheet (see page 15). Explain what you want the students to do in the exhibition. Encourage adults to allow students to linger at objects which interest them, to discuss what they see and share things they find out as they go round. Remind students to behave calmly and politely. Photography is not allowed within the exhibition, but students may take photos of relevant objects in the Museum’s permanent galleries.

Afterwards
Discuss the students’ thoughts and responses to the exhibition. Use what the students have gathered in the exhibition for Post-visit activities (see page 8). Re-visit the exhibition image bank, if relevant.
Planning your visit

We recommend the following three guidelines in planning your students’ visit to the exhibition:

- provide a focus that students should keep in mind as they explore the exhibition and which you can follow up afterwards
- do some preparatory work in school to develop the focus of the visit and familiarise students with the content of the exhibition
- allow students some scope to explore to find objects that interest them

Curriculum links

The exhibition offers opportunities in the following curriculum areas and for cross-curricular work:

**History**
archaeology and how evidence is found, types of evidence, finding out about the lives of men, women and children in the past

**English**
the idea of sea voyages and the experience of the people involved offers great potential for a wide range of writing and oral work, including poetry and drama

**Science**
materials and their properties, organic and non-organic material, weathering

**Art and design**
sculpture, jewellery and decorative objects, patterns, animal and plant motifs

**PSHE and Citizenship**
responding to conflict, interacting with other cultures, cultural influence, preserving the past, excavating human bodies

Structuring the visit

It is often a good idea to have a general ‘big question’ for the students to keep in mind during their visit. Here are some possible examples:

- What was the most interesting object in the exhibition?
- What did I learn about the Vikings that I did not know before?
- What sources of evidence does the exhibition include?
- How useful did I find these for learning about Viking life?
- What have I learned about the Viking world from the objects in the exhibition?
- What else would I put in the exhibition to make it interesting/informative?

This guide includes a number of activity sheets which you can use or adapt to help focus the students as they go round the exhibition – see pages 10-14.

If you want students to do any drawing, we recommend that they draw one thing carefully rather than doing lots of drawings.

Encourage the students to enjoy looking at objects they find interesting as well as completing their focused work.
Pre-visit preparation

Here are a few suggestions of things to do before your visit to prepare students.

Use maps to identify the location of Scandinavia and the individual countries. Use some of the resources listed on pages 18-19 to help students begin to explore the Viking world.

Look through the exhibition image bank (see page 18) to introduce students to the kinds of objects they will see and to familiarise them with some objects they will subsequently see ‘for real’.

Choose one of the objects in the image bank and explore in detail what information a single item can provide about life in the Viking period.

Look at Viking objects in the Explore section of britishmuseum.org

Look at the Online tour about Vikings on Explore at

The British historian Bede wrote about the Vikings in his work *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, or *An Ecclesiastical History of the English People* which he completed around AD 731. An English translation is available from Penguin Classics (1990). Read and discuss some extracts from his work. What view of the Vikings do you get from Bede? Is this how we think about Vikings nowadays? What do you expect/hope to learn about the Vikings in the exhibition?

Read some extracts from the Laxdaela Saga – an epic story written around the year AD 1245. The saga recalls significant people and events as the unknown author looks back at the history of the people living in the Breiðafjörður area of Iceland from the late 9th century to the early 11th century. The most recent English translation is by Keneva Kunz, *The Saga of the People of Laxardal and Bolli Bollason’s Tale* (Penguin Classics, 2008).

The word ‘fawel’ (pronounced ‘fa-vel’) is used in modern Norwegian and Swedish to mean goodbye or farewell. The word may go back to Viking times. Research and try out some other Scandinavian words or phrases.

Research the English language words for the days of the week and find out how some are based on Viking names. Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday come from Tiw/Tyr, Woden/Odin, Thor and Frigg. Just to complete the week Saturday is from the Roman God Saturn, and Sunday and Monday represent the Sun and the Moon. Research the names of some other Norse gods and goddesses.

Watch the ‘Building a Viking ship’ animation created for the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of Natural History as part of their *Vikings: The North Atlantic Saga* exhibition.

[youtube.com/watch?v=78kpzwGmBxk&feature=related](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=78kpzwGmBxk&feature=related)

There will be a number of objects in the exhibition inscribed with Viking writing. The Vikings used a runic alphabet, known as the futhark, after the first six letters of the alphabet (‘th’ being a single letter). Alternative versions of the futhark were used at different times. There were also regional variations. Research the different runic alphabets. Select one and try writing out the names of some Norse gods and goddesses in runes.
Post-visit activities

Here are a few suggestions of things to do after your visit which follow-on from the students’ time in the exhibition.

The Vikings believed that the gods were able to change shape. In a circle, take it in turns to be one of the Norse gods and make up very short stories about shifting shape from a human to an animal – which animal will you become and what will you do as this animal?

Write a travelogue from the point of view of a Viking sailor travelling north, south, east and west. Write a diary from the point of view of somebody waiting back in the Viking homelands.

Viking instruments included drums, bone-whistles, wooden pan-pipes, harps, lyres and horns. Find some modern instruments similar to these and have a listen to the sounds available to Viking musicians. Improvise a piece of Viking music.

Find out about Norse kennings. Kennings are a way of naming something by creating a descriptive compound word in place of a single word noun, for example, in the Anglo-Saxon poem Beowulf the sea is variously known as the ‘whale-road’, ‘sail-road’ and ‘swan-road’). Kennings can also be possessive phrases, for example, a ship might be referred to as the ‘rolling wagon of the ocean’ or the ‘wave’s rider’. A kenning could combine these two different forms as in the kenning which refers to a ship as the ‘broad-hulled horse of the whale-land’. Make up your own kennings.

Look at images of Viking jewellery and craftwork. Create your own versions with modern materials, for example modeling materials, foil, wire.

According to Norse mythology the god Odin made the world. First he created Jotunheim, land of the Giants, icy and cold, then Midgard, a warm world for humans, with trees, lakes, rivers and plants, and finally Asgard, a citadel of shining gold and silver palaces and towers. What do you think these three realms looked like? Record your ideas using art, music, descriptive writing, the spoken word or 3D modeling. Compare the Norse creation myth with creation myths from other ancient cultures.

Revisit Bede’s thoughts on the Vikings. Did the exhibition offer evidence with supported or challenged Bede’s description of the Vikings? Imagine you were an 11th century historian. Based on the objects you saw in the exhibition, how would you describe the Vikings?

Create a Viking trading catalogue. What items would be for sale? How many silver coins would each item cost?

Research examples of Scandinavian loan words commonly used in the English language. For example, the word ‘bag’ comes from ‘baggin’ and ‘cake’ from ‘kaka’ while the words ‘egg’, ‘lad’, ‘race’, ‘same’ and ‘troll’ are all Scandinavian loan words.

Explore the legacy of the Vikings in Britain such as place names, personal names, dialect words, traditions, for example Tynwald - the Parliament of the Isles of Man and modern identity, for example Jorvik is York.
Exhibition activity sheets

There is one set of activity sheets.

Each sheet asks students to investigate an aspect of Viking life. There are individual sheets for looking at the Vikings as sailors, traders, warriors, rulers and believers.

Each of these themes is represented across the exhibition and there are areas of the exhibition which focus on a particular theme, such as the section on Viking belief near the end of the exhibition. Students can complete the sheets as they find an appropriate object. The group leader can decide whether each sheet is completed in one area or whether students add information to all the sheets as they move through the exhibition.

The activity sheets are designed to be printed/photocopied as separate sheets of A4.

Students can use the sheets to record their findings or simply as prompts for exploring the exhibition.

Use these in combination with the briefing sheet for adult helpers on page 15.
The Vikings as sailors

The Vikings were excellent ship builders and used their ships to sail across the sea and along rivers to trade, raid and settle.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Find an object:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>decorated with a ship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>used on a ship</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Write your ideas down if you want to. If you want to draw, choose just one object to draw carefully.

**Talk:**
There is a large Viking ship in the middle of the exhibition. What do you think it would have been like to sail across the sea in this ship?

**Don’t miss!**
Look out for objects with this symbol.
The Vikings as traders

The Vikings traded with many different people from around the world. As well as trading Viking objects with distant places, Viking merchants also brought objects from other places back home.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Find:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>something for weighing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>something to sell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>something to buy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>something to pay with</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Write your ideas down if you want to.
If you want to draw, choose just one object to draw carefully.

**Talk:**
Find some weighing scales used for buying and selling and turn your hands into a pair of scales.
Discuss what you would be buying or selling in one hand and how many pieces of silver would go in the other hand to strike a deal.

**Don’t miss!**
Look out for objects with this symbol.
The Vikings as rulers

Noble Viking families showed how wealthy and important they were by wearing beautiful jewellery or by having expensive, decorated weapons.

**Find:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>something to wear</th>
<th>something for a horse to wear</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>something to use at a feast</th>
<th>something to play a game</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Write your ideas down if you want to.  
If you want to draw, choose just one object to draw carefully.

**Talk:**

Find a group of beautiful objects.  
Discuss which one you think would make the most impressive gift.  
Which one would you like to receive as a gift?

**Don't miss!**

Look out for objects with this symbol.
# The Vikings as warriors

At first, groups of individual warriors carried raids to get rich. Later, warriors fought as soldiers in an army. Viking kings used their armies to invade other kingdoms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Find something used to:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>protect your body</td>
<td>fight your enemy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>protect your head</td>
<td>show you are fierce</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Write your ideas down if you want to.
If you want to draw, choose just one object to draw carefully.

**Talk:**
Find the Middleton cross and look at what the warrior is wearing. Imagine putting the different items on. Discuss what they might feel like to wear and how they would make you feel.

**Don’t miss!**
Look out for objects with this symbol.
The Vikings as believers

The Vikings believed in many gods and goddesses. The Vikings believed that gods could change shape and turn into animals. Later the Vikings began to follow the Christian faith.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Find:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a Norse god or goddess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a good luck charm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>an animal or bird</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a Christian cross</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Write your ideas down if you want to.
If you want to draw, choose just one object to draw carefully.

Talk:
Find one of the hammers associated with the storm god Thor.
If you were a Norse god, what would be your symbol? Why?

Don’t miss!
Look out for objects with this symbol.
Briefing sheet for adult helpers

Objects with this symbol have been picked out for children.

Please:
- help students find their way around the exhibition
- encourage students to share ideas and observations
- keep them focused on the work their teacher has set
- use the object labels to explain things to students
- draw students’ attention to things they may have missed

The exhibition is arranged into the following sections:

- **The Viking world**: an introduction to the Viking homelands and life
- **Cultures in contact**: the Vikings as traders across four continents
- **Communicating power**: using objects to show status and wealth
- **The way of the warrior**: Viking raids and the change from groups of individual warriors to soldiers in a royal army
- **Viking ships**: examples of Viking ships and how they were used
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- **Viking belief**: Old Norse belief and the coming of Christianity
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Key themes:
You may find it useful to encourage the students to think about a number of key themes of Viking life. As the students move around the exhibition they can consider how the objects, images and text in the exhibition helps us to understand the Vikings as:

- **sailors**
  What did Viking ships look like? How did the Vikings build their ships? Where did they sail? What did their ships help them to achieve?

- **traders**
  Who did the Vikings trade with? What equipment did they use to help them trade? What items did they trade?

- **warriors**
  What equipment did a Viking warrior need? What happened on a Viking raid? How were Viking warriors organized?

- **rulers**
  How did rich Vikings show they were wealthy? How did rulers make powerful friends?

- **believers**
  What different gods and goddesses did the early Vikings worship? How did the Vikings ensure good luck? What other faiths did the Vikings encounter? Which objects show that the Vikings became Christians?
Background information

Viking homelands

The Vikings are best known as pirates and raiders – the original meaning of the word ‘viking’ in Old Norse. Today, the term is used to refer to the many peoples of Scandinavia during the Viking Age (AD 800–1050) who lived in a number of small kingdoms. As local rulers increased in wealth and power the smaller kingdoms were gradually absorbed by their more powerful neighbours leading to the creation of the modern kingdoms of Denmark, Norway and Sweden. The Viking homelands were geographically, politically and ethnically diverse, ranging from the Arctic regions of northern Norway and mountains and fjords further south, to the Swedish lakes and the more fertile farmlands in Denmark and southern Scandinavia.

During the Viking Age, much of the homelands was covered with mountains and forests. Travel overland was difficult, so people voyaged by sea and river. The Vikings were shipbuilders and sailors able to travel far beyond Scandinavia.

Raiding was only one aspect of the Viking age and excavation of their settlements and cemeteries has shown that they were mainly farmers, fishers and hunters, and also skilled craftsmen. The literature of their sagas reveals a hierarchical society with a complex culture. It was ruled by kings or chiefs and divided into the free, who could carry arms and speak at local assemblies, and thralls, or slaves, who had no rights, although some were able to gain their freedom.

Viking world

At its height the Vikings’ network spanned four continents. They crossed the North Sea, to the west, to reach the British Isles and western Europe. They sailed south to the Mediterranean and North Africa. In the east, they came into contact with the Slavs and Balts around the Baltic Sea. During the AD 800s and 900s, the Vikings travelled further west across the Atlantic to the Faroe Islands, Iceland and Greenland, and eventually to North America. Vikings steered their ships along the great rivers of Russia and Ukraine to the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. These journeys led them to the Middle East and Central Asia where they came into contact with the Byzantine Empire, with its capital at Constantinople, modern-day Istanbul, and the Islamic Caliphate, with its capital at Baghdad.

Viking trade

Wealth was the main motivation behind the Viking expansion. Together with raiding and conquest, trade and economic exchange were driving forces behind the Vikings’ international network. Surviving objects demonstrate the influence (inward and outward) of the interaction between the Vikings and other cultures. At first, the Vikings used a system of barter with their neighbours, whereby goods with the same value were exchanged. Some items, such as beads, furs, grain or dried fish, were used as currency because they held their value and came in quantities that were easy to measure. Long distance trade however needed more sophisticated methods of payment. The Vikings’ journeys brought them into contact with societies that had established monetary economies and they eventually began to mint their own coinage.
Viking hierarchy

The Scandinavian aristocracy led a wealthy lifestyle that included wealthy ways of living, status objects and relations with foreign rulers. The Vikings demonstrated their wealth and status by wearing beautiful jewellery, or by owning expensively ornamented weapons. Powerful leaders rewarded loyal supporters with precious gifts and diplomatic gifts were exchanged between equals and with foreign rulers.

Viking warriors

Warriors made up only a small proportion of society. However, the concept of the warrior was central to Viking culture. Early Vikings fought in bands of individual warriors rather than organised armies. By the 10th-11th centuries Vikings fought as armies with standardised military equipment under the command of their king. The Viking Age began with small scale raiding around Britain, Ireland and Western Europe, and escalated to wars of conquest leading to permanent settlement.

The Vikings’ mobility and military strategies contributed to their success but, despite their fearsome reputation, they were no more effective on the battlefield than their opponents. Although many Viking victories are recorded, there are also many accounts of Viking defeats.

Viking belief systems

We can learn about Viking belief from objects, sites, the sagas and early poetry. In the pre-Christian Viking age, both men and women had roles as ‘holy people’. Viking leaders combined secular and sacred functions. The belief system appears to have had some shared core beliefs – gods such as Odin and Thor were worshipped across the Viking world – with regional variations in practice, and scope for individuals to follow whichever god or goddess suited them best. There was a widespread belief in shape-shifting – the ability for humans to take on animal forms, usually bears or wolves for men and sea creatures or birds for women.

Viking transition to Christianity was a slow process and was often linked to political relationships with other Christian rulers. Christian churches and monuments were built on existing pagan holy sites, there were changes in burial practice, and objects such as coins were used to promote Christianity.

Vikings in Britain

The Viking period in Britain began in AD 793 with a raid on the monastery of Lindisfarne by pirates from Scandinavia. In the following centuries their swift sailing ships enabled them to conduct raids to acquire wealth and later to invade in search of land to settle. York and Dublin became important Viking towns, issuing their own coinage, while in Scandinavia market and manufacturing settlements such as Ribe, Hedeby, Birka and Kaupang became centres of international trade.

The Viking Age ended in Britain in the 11th century though the Viking legacy continued in a number of ways. The most widespread legacy is linguistic. As well as everyday words, many surnames and place names are Scandinavian in origin, especially in areas of Viking settlement such as Yorkshire. There is also a visible legacy of carved stones and other archaeological remains in the British landscape.
Exhibition image bank

You can download an image bank at britishmuseum.org/vikings

The image bank includes a range of objects from across the different sections of the exhibition.

You will find information about the objects in the Notes section of each slide.

You can use the image bank to introduce students to the types of objects they will encounter in the exhibition and to support follow-up activities back in the classroom. Individual images can be printed out for use in small group work.
Further resources

British Museum website
Explore is an online database of over 5000 objects from the Museum’s collection. To investigate Viking objects click on Explore at britishmuseum.org

Follow the Viking online tour on Explore
britishmuseum.org/explore/online_tours/europe/the_vikings/the_vikings.aspx

Books for students
Williams, Tom Vikings for children, British Museum Press

Books for teachers
Pentz, Peter, Wemhoff, Matthias and Williams, Gareth (eds) The Viking World: Cultures in Contact (book of the exhibition) British Museum Press
Williams, Gareth Viking Ships (gift book) British Museum Press
Jesch, Judith Viking Poems of Love and War British Museum Press
Carroll, Jayne, Harrison, Stephen and Williams, Gareth Viking Britain and Ireland British Museum Press

Other websites
The website of the National Museum of Denmark
natmus.dk/en/
Information on the Viking Age can be found at
natmus.dk/en/historical-knowledge/denmark/prehistoric-period-until-1050-ad/the-viking-age/
The website of the Viking Ship Museum, home of Roskilde 6
vikingskibsmuseet.dk/en/
There are several published translations of Bede’s Latin history of the British People. A PDF copy can be found at
heroofcamelot.com/docs/Bede-Ecclesiastical-History.pdf
There is an animation showing how a Viking ship was built at
youtube.com/watch?v=78kpzwGmBxk&feature=related