

How to Train Your Dragon: Pre-reading

Social & Historical Context

When we study English at secondary level, it is often useful to find out about the social and historical contexts that surround what we are reading. We look at the key events in history and society that took place during the time a text was written or set. We then question how this context may have influenced the presentation of: events, characters and ideas.

'How to Train Your Dragon,' was published in 2003 but it is set on the fictional island of Berk during the age of the Vikings. Before we start reading the novel, let's explore some context. Read the contextual information and complete the activities below.

Who were the Vikings?

The Vikings, also called Norsemen, came from all around Scandinavia (where Norway, Sweden and Denmark are today). They sent armies to Britain about the year 700 AD to take over some of the land, and they lived here until around 1050. Even though the Vikings didn't stay in Britain, they left a strong mark on society – we've even kept some of the same names of towns. They had a large settlement around York and the Midlands, and you can see some of the artefacts from Viking settlements today.



The word 'Viking' means 'a pirate raid' in the Norse language, which is what the Vikings spoke. Some of the names of our towns and villages have a little bit of Norse language in them. Do you recognise any names with endings like these: '-by' (as in Corby or Whitby, means 'farm' or 'town') and '-thorpe' (as in Scunthorpe) means 'village.' The Viking alphabet, 'Futhark', was made up of 24 characters called runes. Each one stood for entire words or gods, as well as sounds. There was a large Viking community around York called Jorvik. Archaeologists have found out a lot about the Vikings thanks to the artefacts they found there. The Vikings kept long benches in their homes that they'd use to sit on during the day, and then to sleep on at night. Only rich people had beds. The Normans (from France) who defeated the Anglo-Saxons in the Battle of Hastings were actually descendants

of Vikings! Vikings were intrepid explorers and settled around more places than just Britain – they went to Ireland, Iceland, Greenland, France and Spain too.

Why did the Vikings invade?

The Vikings wanted new land because the places where they came from in Scandinavia – Norway, Sweden and Denmark – weren't very easy to live in. It was hard to grow crops, which meant there wasn't a lot of food as the population got bigger. Britain and Europe had plenty of good farmland, so the Vikings tried to claim some of that land for themselves. Even though the Anglo-Saxons were pretty well established in England, the Vikings would turn up every now and then to raid towns and take a bit of land. Sometimes, instead of fighting the Vikings, the Anglo-Saxons decided it was better to pay them money so they'd stay away. This payment was called Danegeld.

The first Viking attack on England was in 787 on the Isle of Portland. The Vikings went home straight afterwards, but they came back to England in 793 and raided a monastery at Lindisfarne. Monasteries made easy targets because the monks who lived there didn't have any weapons, and they did have money and food.

Religion

The Vikings believed in many different gods, and they thought making sacrifices to the gods kept them all happy. They told stories about the gods, called Norse mythology. Some of the gods included:

- Thor, the god of thunder
- Idun, the goddess of spring
- Odin, the king of gods and the god of war

The Vikings believed that if a warrior died while fighting in battle, he'd go to Valhalla, which is where Odin was. Other heroes who had died would also be there. Odin would send his warrior maidens, called Valkyries, across the sky to ferry dead warriors to Valhalla.

Viking Warriors

Viking warriors were very good fighters. They'd wear helmets and carry shields to defend themselves, and they'd also have one of these weapons:

- spear – a leaf shape or spike at the end of a wooden shaft
- sword – these were expensive to make and usually double-edged, and warriors would decorate the hilts
- battle axe – an axe with a long handle, and cheaper to make than a sword

Boats that the Vikings built are called longships – they are long, narrow boats that can be used in both deep and shallow water, making them perfect for travelling over the ocean and carrying lots of warriors onto the shore. Longships were symmetrical, meaning they looked the same at the front as they did at the back. They'd often have dragon heads carved at

either end. Vikings sailed all the way across the Atlantic Ocean to Newfoundland in North America in their longships!

Vikings at Home

Viking homes were long too – they were called longhouses! They were rectangular, made from wood and were usually just one big room without any inside walls. There would be one big fire pit in the centre for cooking and keeping the house warm. The roof was covered in thatch, and there was a hole in the middle for smoke from the fire to go through. Benches around the house would be used both to sit on and to sleep on. Only wealthy Vikings slept in beds.

Most clothes that the Vikings had were made from wool, but they also had some clothes made from linen. They used dyes made from plants and minerals to make red, green, brown, yellow and blue, so their clothes were very colourful. Viking men wore a long shirt, trousers with a drawstring tie and a coat with a belt around the waist. Viking women wore long dresses with a tunic over the top that was held up by two brooches pinned at the shoulders. Both men and women wore woollen socks and leather shoes.

Questions

- 1) What was another name for the Vikings?
- 2) Where did the Vikings come from?
- 3) What does the word 'Viking' mean in Norse?
- 4) Why did Vikings invade different countries?
- 5) What is a monastery? Why were monasteries easy targets for the Vikings?
- 6) Did the Vikings believe in just one god?
- 7) Who was the Viking god of thunder?
- 8) Where did the Vikings believe warriors went when they died?
- 9) What was a Viking boat called?
- 10) What was a Viking home called?
- 11) What were homes made of?
- 12) What were most Viking clothes made of?

Stretch & Challenge:

Create your own information leaflet or poster about the Vikings. You could even carry out your own research to expand your knowledge.