

examiningevidence

Viking lifestyles

Mention the word 'Viking' to most people and they will imagine hordes of bloodied warriors, wreaking havoc wherever they go and striking fear into the hearts of innocent villagers unlucky enough to be in their path.

This was certainly true on occasion, and there is no doubt they were fierce warriors. But there was another side to the Vikings. They were also accomplished craftspeople, fashioning not only items necessary for war (such as the helmet seen in Source 2.11 and the various weaponry they would have required in their raids) but also fine jewellery (see Source 2.12) and other luxury items.

Vikings were also skilled boat builders (see Source 2.14), which allowed them to travel far and discover foreign lands. Their encounters with other cultures ensured their development as skilled traders, exchanging many of their own well-made goods (such as leathers, furs and woollens) for foreign foods and luxurious items.



Source 2.11 A Viking helmet. Viking helmets did not have horns or wings, as is commonly depicted in movies, comics and art (see Source 2.41).

Armour

A helmet such as this was worn by a Viking warrior chieftain or wealthy noble. It is evidence that the Vikings knew how to work with iron. Poorer fighters wore leather caps, or hats rimmed with fur. Neither offered much protection against a savage chop from an axe or sword. A wealthy Viking might also wear a chain mail tunic; poorer warriors wore leather vests or padded jackets.



Source 2.13 The Runestone of Rök



Source 2.12 A silver armlet, featuring a spiral design common in Viking work

Jewellery

Jewellery was another way in which Vikings demonstrated their social standing and wealth. Sometimes the silver coins and candlesticks seized on raids were melted down to make jewellery such as this. This piece, among a great many others, is evidence of the artistic flair and skilled workmanship of many Viking silversmiths.

Runestones

The **Runestone** of Rök was carved with runes (the letters of the Norse alphabet) in the 9th century CE. It is the longest inscription of runes ever found. Many regard it as the earliest example of literature in Sweden. Scholars contest its precise translation. They also contest why it was created. Was it a tombstone for a dead son, or a 'call to arms' to avenge his death? Or was it to record bits of local myths and events? Some say its purpose may have been to honour the man who had it built. There is no clear answer. What is clear is that this runestone is evidence that the Vikings had a written language.



Source 2.14 A copy of a Viking ship, called the Oseberg, which was found in a burial mound in 1903

Ships

The *Oseberg* was nearly 22 metres long, and had 30 oar holes (15 on each side). It was built as a burial ship (rather than for sailing) about 1000 years ago. Yet, even as a ceremonial ship, its design shows evidence of the great skill of Viking boat builders. Note its low, curved hull made of evenly bent planks and its elaborately carved prow (front) and stern (back). The discovery of the *Oseberg* provided even more evidence of Viking burial practices: it held the remains of two women (one probably a noble's wife), two oxen and many horses.

Check your learning

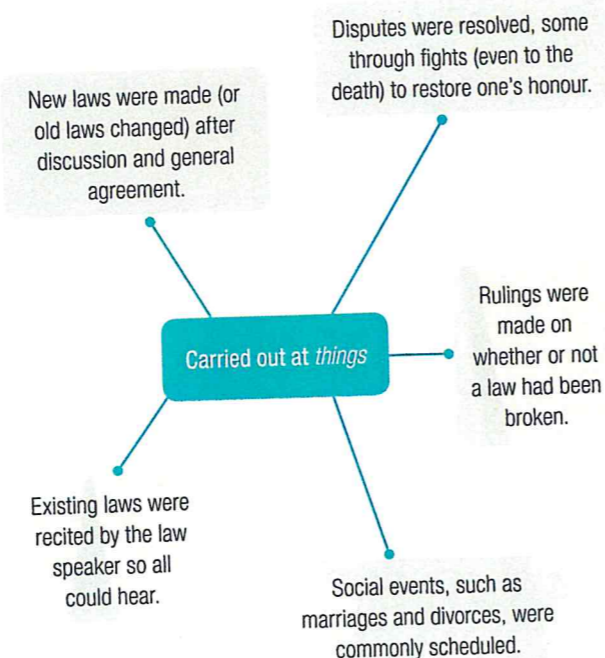
- 1 Explain how social divisions were evident among a band of raiding Vikings.
- 2 With a partner, study Source 2.11 carefully. Discuss how you think it was made.
- 3 Think about some of the silver bracelets made today. Rate the jewellery shown as Source 2.12 against modern jewellery in terms of its design and workmanship. What do you conclude?
- 4 Consider what you have found out about the *Oseberg*.
 - a Why do you think it was necessary to make a copy of the *Oseberg*?
 - b What evidence did the discovery of this ship provide about *each* of the following: Viking shipbuilding skills, Viking burial practices?
- 5 Look at Source 2.13.
 - a What are runes?
 - b Why is the Runestone of Rök significant?
 - c Explain why its discovery has been contentious.

Viking laws

By about the mid 11th century, the areas we know as Denmark, Sweden and Norway today were each ruled by one king. Before this time, political assemblies known as *things* played an important role in the governing of Viking communities. The *thing* was held once a year in each community. All 'free men and women' could attend and speak. Its main purposes were to make and change laws, and to judge when they had been broken.

Until the 12th century, Viking laws were not written down. Instead, they were preserved in the memory of a law speaker. He recited them loudly at each *thing*.

The Vikings respected their law. This is partly because an individual's reputation was important to them. It was also partly because some punishments were very harsh. If, for example, an individual was found guilty of breaking the law by the *thing*, and did not pay the required fine to the person harmed, the punishment was death. Another harsh punishment was to be made a full outlaw. This meant being banished (sent away) for life, with a large bounty (reward) on one's head.



Source 2.15 Some typical activities at *things*

change and continuity: the Althing

Iceland was the only Viking community to have a national *thing*: the **Althing**. It was the first parliament in the world. It met for the first time on the Plains of Thingvellir in 930 CE. Like *things*, it was held once a year, in June. People from different communities travelled long distances to get there, setting up temporary camps. Its format was similar to that of *things*, even if the reality was that it was dominated by a small number of powerful families.

Its focal point was the Lögberg (Rock of the Law). Here the law speaker stood to proclaim the laws. Today, it is a grassy mound, changed over time by natural forces. The Icelandic flag flies there now to mark the spot.

Since that first meeting there have been changes to the *Althing*; it was even abandoned for a time. But even now, 1000 years later, it continues to be the name of Iceland's Parliament. Icelanders continue to gather at the Lögberg on 17 June each year to commemorate the *Althing* decision (in 1944) to create the Republic of Iceland.



Source 2.16 The Oxara River, with the plains of Thingvellir beyond. This area, rich in natural resources, including fresh water, was an ideal location for a large gathering of people.

Viking economy

Traditionally, the Viking economy was based on agriculture. But good farming land was in limited supply, as much of the landscape of Scandinavia is mountainous or thickly forested, and winters can be harsh. Trade helped to meet people's needs (such as for grain), particularly as the population grew.

Viking merchants plied their trade in boats across seas and down rivers. Stashes of foreign coins found in Sweden are evidence that Swedish Vikings (known as the Rus) were trading in today's Russia and central Asia. In fact, they reached as far east as Constantinople and Jerusalem, in order to meet up with traders who had travelled the **Silk Road**. (Some Rus were later paid to set up an elite squad, known as the Varangian Guard, to protect the **Byzantine** emperor.) Viking merchants sometimes carried their boats between rivers or rolled them on logs. Once they reached their destination, they might travel on horseback or camel, dragging goods in carts.

Trade

Items the Vikings carried for trade included timber, leather shoes and bags, smoked fish, amber, fur, **artefacts** carved from walrus tusks and whale bones, jewellery and slaves (particularly once their raids started). These were exchanged for goods such as wheat, iron, silverware, wine, spices, silks, salt, weapons and glassware. At first, the trade was conducted through **barter**; later, it was for coins. Many towns the Vikings later colonised—such as York (England), Kiev (Ukraine) and Dublin (Ireland)—became busy centres of trade.

Viking men, who on average were taller than other Europeans, groomed, bathed and washed their clothes regularly. The abbot John of Wallingford noted this in his writings, stating that when Vikings moved into **Anglo-Saxon** territory the women there found them more appealing than the grubbier, smellier Anglo-Saxon men.

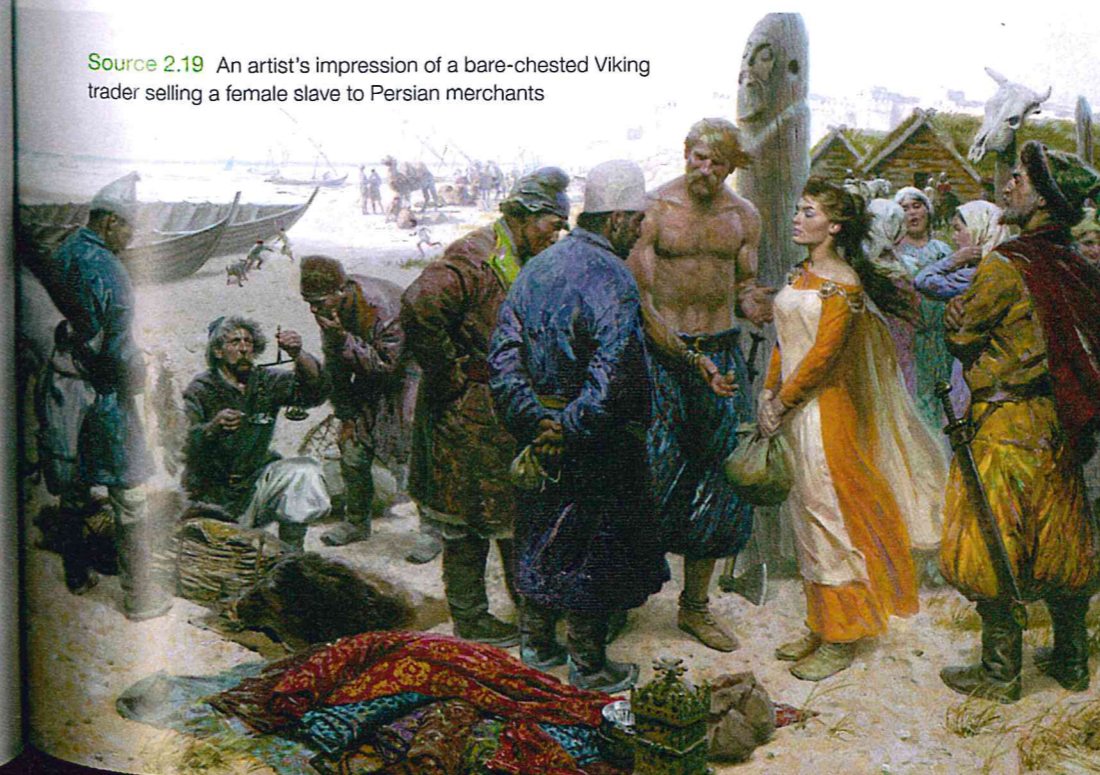


Source 2.17 Major Viking trade routes

Source 2.18

I have never before seen such perfect bodies; they were tall like palm trees blond, with a few of them red ... eve one of them brings with him an axe, a sword and a knife. They never leave these things ...

Translated extract about the Rus from the writings of the 10th-century Arab traveller Ibn Fadl



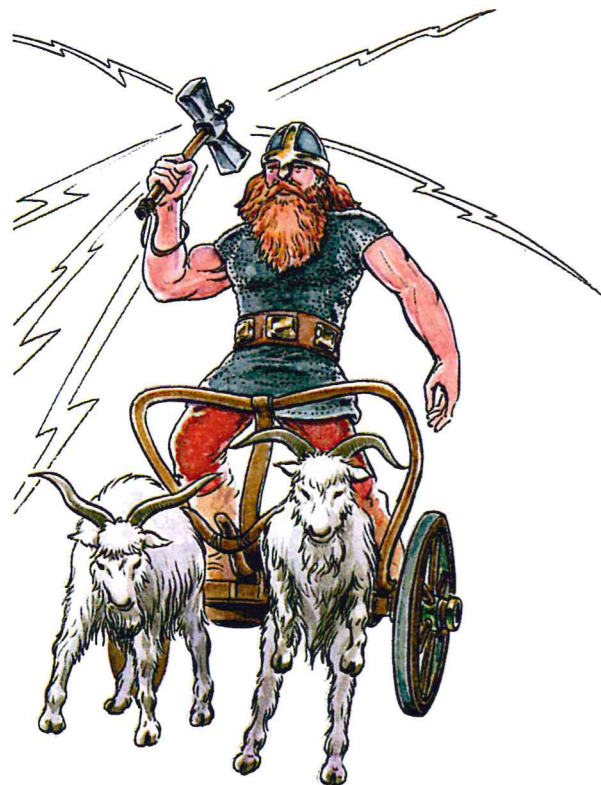
Source 2.19 An artist's impression of a bare-chested Viking trader selling a female slave to Persian merchants

Check your learning

- 1 What were the *thing* and the *Althing*? Give examples of how each affected Viking society.
- 2 List three goods the Vikings typically exported and three their merchants imported.
- 3 Use Source 2.17 and an atlas to list five modern countries with which the Vikings traded.
- 4 Find out what amber is. Write a paragraph on your findings.
- 5 Based on information in this section (including sources), suggest why the Byzantine emperor might have chosen to pay the Rus Vikings to be his personal bodyguards.



Source 2.20 Odin traded an eye for wisdom. His spear never missed. He watched over the cosmos (helped by his sharp eyes of two ravens), while travelling on an eight-legged horse, Sleipnir.



Source 2.21 Thunder was the sound of Thor's chariot rumbling across the sky, pulled by two goats. Lightning was the path his hammer took when he tossed it. His belt gave him the strength of ten.

Viking beliefs and mythology

Compared with many other civilisations, we know very little about the beliefs and religious practices of traditional Vikings. We do know that the Vikings had their own religion, and they worshipped many different gods, but these old beliefs died out after Vikings became Christians.

The traditional stories Vikings told about gods, giants and monsters are known as Viking mythology. Many of these stories tell of the creation of the world, and were recorded in a collection of stories known as the *Viking sagas*. In traditional Viking mythology, there were 'nine worlds'. Each is connected to the other by the 'world tree' known as *Yggdrasil* (see Source 2.23).

When people died, their bodies were cremated (burned) and the remains were buried. Often, people were buried with a few items that were important to them during their life. It was believed that they could take these items into the next world. Some Viking chieftains were given ship-burials, with treasure and weapons. Often, their favourite dogs and horses were buried with them. Sometimes, chieftains were even buried with human sacrifices.

Like the ancient Greeks, the Vikings didn't really have a positive or negative view of the afterlife. Many believed that the dead travelled to a place called *Hel*, which lay underground. *Hel* is the origin of the modern word 'hell'. *Hel* was thought of as a cold and damp place where the spirits of the dead continued to live in a dreamlike form, a kind of eternal sleep.

Vikings who were extremely brave, or lived exceptional lives, were believed to travel to *Asgard* after they died. *Asgard* was the home of the gods, where people would spend the afterlife feasting and living in large halls.

Vikings believed that a warrior killed in battle went to *Valhalla*, a splendid hall in *Asgard*, where dead heroes feasted at long tables. Odin sent his warrior-maidens, the Valkyries, riding through the skies to bring these warriors to *Valhalla* (or 'Hall of the slain').

Viking gods

Many of the Viking gods were responsible for different areas of daily life. There were gods that watched over the successful harvest of crops, others that looked over love, health, family and fertility. Of course, there were also gods that looked over success in battle and wars.

Source 2.22 Some important Viking gods

Viking god	Role/relationships
Odin (also known as Woden)	King of the gods in Viking mythology. He was the god of magic, poetry and war. His wife, Frigg, was the goddess of women and the home.
Freya	Goddess of beauty and love. She rode a chariot drawn by two cats.
Freyr	God of fertility, peace and harvests. He was the twin brother of Freya.
Thor	God of storms and thunder. The Vikings believed he rode a chariot across the skies creating the sound of thunder. Thor also caused lightning with his magic hammer.

Source 2.23 In Viking mythology there are 'nine worlds' each connected by the 'world tree' known as *Yggdrasil*.

Asgard

Home of the Norse gods, full of halls and palaces. The most splendid was *Valhalla*, the hall of slain battle heroes. They were taken there by beautiful women on horseback: the Valkyries, Odin's messengers.

Alfheim

Home of the Light Elves, where the god Freyr lived

Vanaheim

Home of the Vanir gods, an older group of gods who, for a time, battled the gods of *Asgard*

Midgard

The Earth, the world of humans; a rainbow 'bridge' linked it to *Asgard*

Svartalheim

Home of the Dark Elves, who live underground

Nidavellir

Home of the Dwarfs, who also live underground, and were talented craftspeople

Jotunheimr

Home of the rock giants, who threatened both humans and the *Asgard* gods; their king was Thrym, a frost giant

Muspelheim

Home of the fire giants. Its ruler, Sutr, will set *Yggdrasil* on fire at Ragnarok and kill Freyr.

Hel

The cold, misty underworld, where everyone except heroes went after death. For people who broke laws, it was a place of punishment.

continuity and change: days of the week

The days of the week in English have their roots in older European cultures. Sunday, as you may already know, is named for the Sun, and Monday for our Moon. Saturday is frequently the same in many cultures as well—Saturn's day—which points to its roots in ancient Roman culture.

The days Tuesday to Friday, however, have different names depending on the culture of the region and the language in use. (In France, for example, Tuesday is called *mardi*, which means 'Mars' day', and was named for Mars, the Roman god of war.)

In English culture, many of the names of the days of the week have their roots in Norse and Old English culture (see Source 2.24). Tuesday, for example, is named for the god of war Tiwes, and his day was *Tiwesdæg*—our Tuesday. Similarly, Wednesday was named for Odin (or Wodin), which gave us *Wodnesdæg* (and now you know why Wednesday is spelled the way it is!). Thursday was named for the god Thor, and Friday was named for Freya, Odin's wife.

Source 2.24 The names of the days of the week have roots in Viking culture

English	Norse	Meaning
Sunday	Sunnandæg	Sun's day
Monday	Monandæg	Moon's day
Tuesday	Tiwesdæg	Tiw's day
Wednesday	Wodnesdæg	Wodin's day
Thursday	Þunresdæg	Thor's day
Friday	Frigedæg	Freya's day
Saturday	Sæterdæg	Saturn's day

Check your learning

- 1 Write down three points that interest you about Odin and three points that interest you about Thor.
- 2 Why might Viking people have been reassured by the sound of thunder?
- 3 How do Norse Viking myths compare with any other creation stories that you have studied?

perspectives: brutal barbarians ... or not?

The Vikings were a more complex people than you might have read about in comics, or seen in films. Certainly, primary text sources indicate that they could be fierce and merciless warriors. (It has to be remembered that these accounts were recorded mostly by Christian monks, who were typical victims of Viking attacks.) Other accounts describe coarse behaviour and unhygienic habits.

But other primary sources demonstrate that they were also skilled silversmiths, poets, wood and ivory carvers, jewellery makers, weavers and musicians—not qualities normally associated with 'brutal barbarians'. As with any historical analysis, the 'reality' of who the Vikings were as a people lies among a range of different perspectives revealed through available sources. Consider the sources on this page, for instance. What different perspectives do they provide about the Vikings?

Source 2.25 Perspective on a Viking named Svein Asleifarson, who lived on one of the Orkney Islands around the time of the Viking raids. Note the matter-of-fact tone of the account.

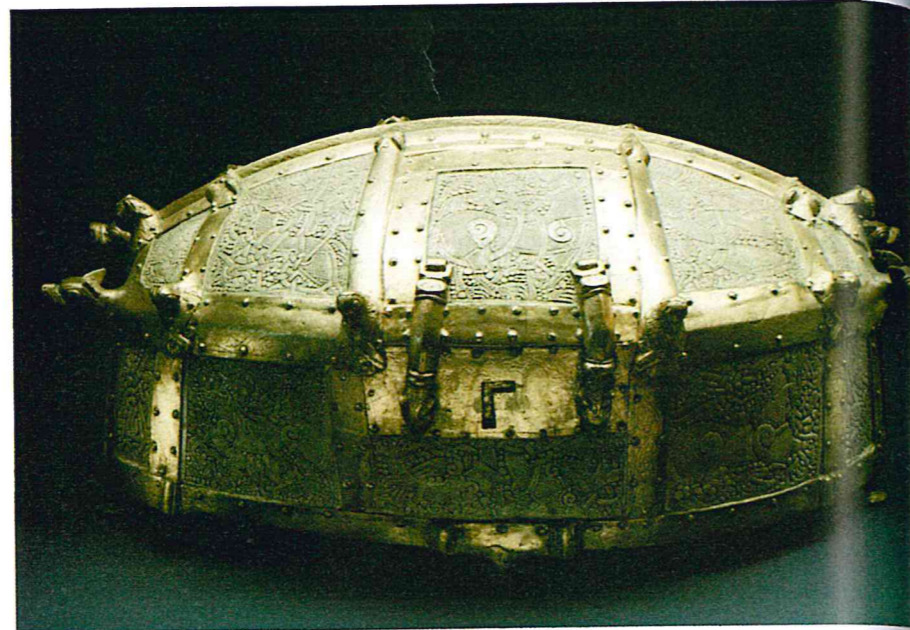
Winter he would spend at home on Gairsay, where he entertained some 80 men at his own expense ... In the spring he had ... a great deal of seed to sow ... Then when that job was done he would go off plundering in the Hebrides and in Ireland ... then back home just after mid summer, where he stayed until the cornfields had been reaped and the grain was safely in. After that he would go off raiding again, and never came back till the first month of winter was ended.

Translated extract from the *Orkneyinga Saga*, an Icelandic saga written in the 1100s

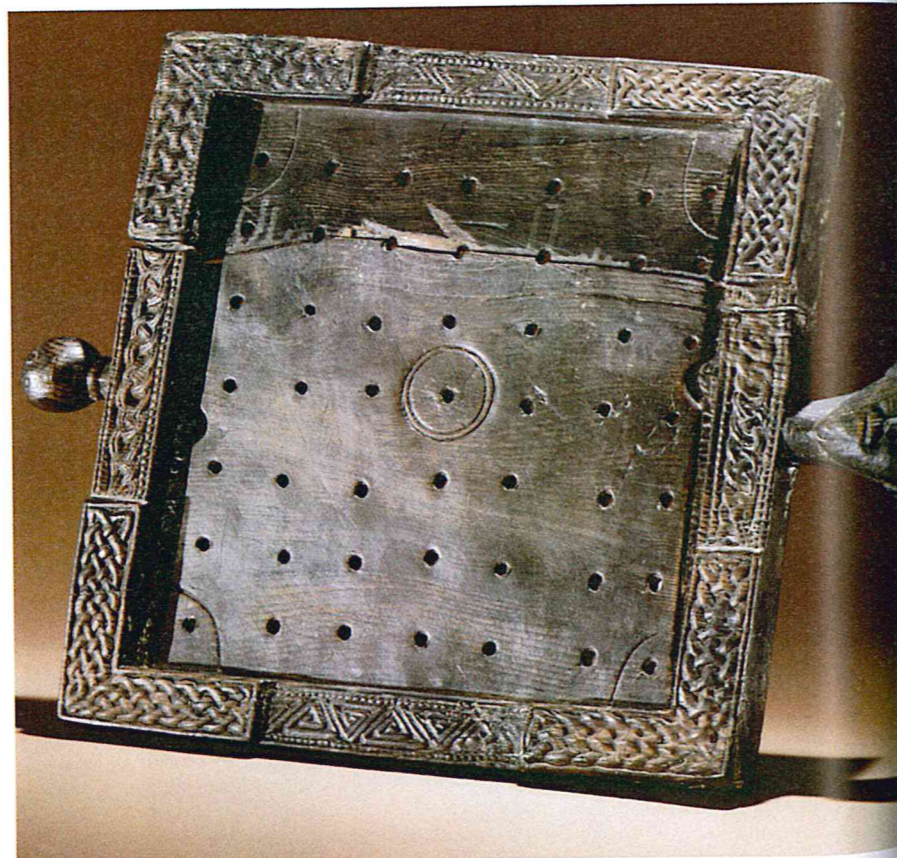
Source 2.26

[The Vikings] ... came to the church of Lindisfarne [in north-eastern England], laid everything to waste with grievous plundering, trampled the holy places with polluted steps, dug up the altars and seized all the treasures of the holy church. They killed some of the brothers [monks], took some away with them in chains, many they drove out naked and loaded with insults, some they drowned in the sea ...

Translated extract from *Historia Regum* by the 12th-century English monk Simeon of Durham. It was said to be a careful copy of a lost version of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*



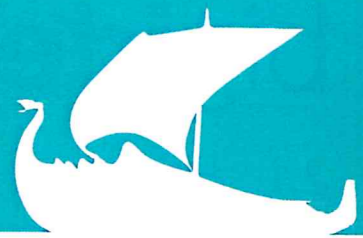
Source 2.27 An exact copy of a carefully carved metal container made by a Viking artisan. The heads of birds and animals decorate the lid.



Source 2.28 A wooden playing board thought to have been used by the Vikings to play the strategic game *hneftafl* (a bit like chess; it involved protecting the king)

freshideas

Think, pair, share



Being the fastest in the class to answer a question is not always a good thing. You may speak before you think. Unless the question is very simple, it is better to take the time to consider your answer. There will often be a number of issues that you need to consider.

Here's one way to practise this thinking behaviour:

- 1 Pair off with another classmate.
- 2 Each jot down thoughts about the question you are given on a piece of paper. Brainstorm as many thoughts as you can, even if only loosely relevant.

- 3 After about a minute (your teacher will decide), spend a few minutes discussing the points you have noted with your partner. This will help you to sort out what's important among your thoughts, and what's not. Take turns to speak. Listen to what your partner has to say, and then he/she will listen to you. There will probably be some things you agree on, and others you don't. Identify any major points of agreement and disagreement.

- 4 With this discussion in mind, decide on a response to the question you can both 'live' with. (This may be a

view that strongly agrees or disagrees with the statement because you each feel the same way. Or it may be one that partly agrees or disagrees, with qualifications. This is more likely if you have different viewpoints.) Identify which points helped to sway your agreed response the most.

- 5 When asked, one of you will share your response with the rest of the class.

Try this thinking approach for the following question: 'Living in a Viking society in Scandinavia during the Viking Age would have been a very harsh and miserable existence for most people.'



Source 2.29 An artist's impression of a Viking fleet at sea

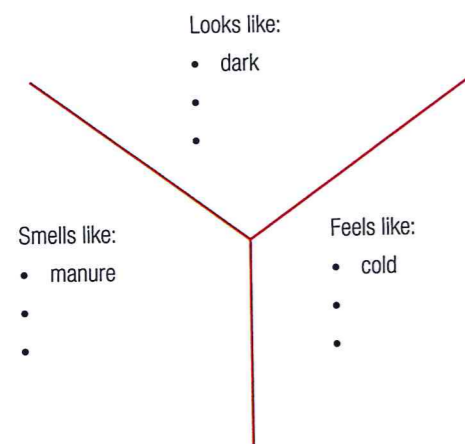
2.1 How was Viking society organised?

Remember

- 1 Explain the difference between a *thrall*, *jarl* and *karl* in Viking society.
- 2 Viking children did not go to school as you do.
 - a What did their education involve?
 - b Who might teach a privileged few (in reading the runes, for instance)?
- 3 What were *things*? What could you compare these to today?
- 4 Why were Viking women usually so independent?

Understand

- 5 Refer to Source 2.6. With a partner, create and role-play a conversation between either Olaf the Tall and Ingvar the Old, or Hrodgeir the Lucky and Gudrun, his wife. Your script will clearly distinguish between their different social roles.
- 6 Copy a larger version of the following Y chart in your workbook. Complete it with as many entries as you can think of. Use this information to sum up your opinion on what it would be like to live in a Viking longhouse. One entry has been added in each segment to get you started.



- 7 Explain why the *Althing* is an example of continuity and change.
- 8 Breaking an oath (or a promise) was a very bad thing to do in Viking society. What does this suggest about their values?

- 9 Explain how people's beliefs would have influenced the way Viking people reacted to *each* of the following: a thunderstorm, a very good harvest, a rainbow.



Apply

- 10 In small groups, use Sources 2.2, 2.7 and 2.9 to build a model of a longhouse interior. Present it to the class, sharing the task of explaining its key features.

Analyse

- 11 Source 2.30 below is an extract from a translation of the *Saga of Grettir the Strong*. Grettir was an outlaw. Read the extract and then answer the following questions:
 - a What was the punishment for those outlawed in Viking society?
 - b What did Grettir do to survive?
 - c What did he fear most? Given Viking beliefs, can you suggest why?
 - d What had Grim been promised for killing Grettir?
 - e Why might this have been a strong motivation for Grim?
 - f What was the outcome of Grim's attempt to murder Grettir?
 - g What did Grettir learn from this experience?
 - h Explain why such incidents would have added to the hardships of an outlaw's life.

Source 2.30

Grettir went up to the Arnarvatn Heath and built himself a hut ... he got himself a net and a boat and went out fishing to support himself. It was a weary time for him in the mountains because of his fear of the dark ...

There was an outlaw from the North named Grim. This man was bribed by those of Hrutafjord to kill Grettir. They promised him pardon and money if he succeeded. He went to visit Grettir ... [who] took him in. Grim ... watched Grettir closely, but it seemed no easy matter to attack him, for Grettir was suspicious ...

One morning Grim came home from fishing ... Grettir lay still ... [Grim] ... took [the sword hanging above Grettir's head] and raised it to strike ... Grettir sprang up ... and killed him. He learned from this what it was to take in a forest-man.

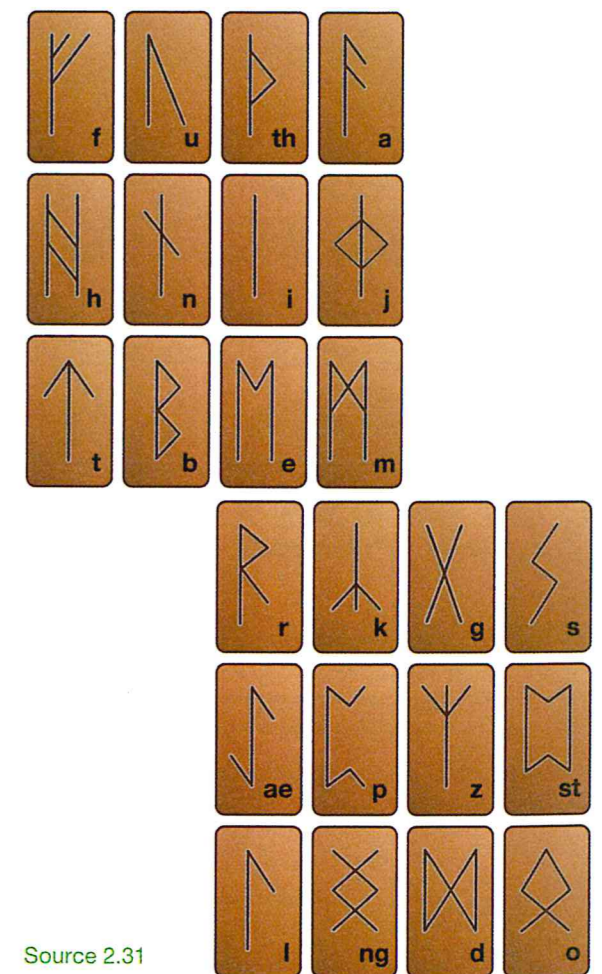
From *Saga of Grettir the Strong*, Section LV

Evaluate

- 12 Decide on what you consider are the five things (in order of importance) you think a time traveller from 21st-century Australia would need to know and do to blend into the traditional Viking society during the Viking Age (assume they could speak the language). Justify the point you selected as most important.

Create

- 13 Source 2.31 matches rune characters with letters in our alphabet. Use this to create a tombstone message. Ask a partner to translate it.



Source 2.31