

Unit 1 The European world – option

The Vikings

In the late 8th century CE, Norse people (those from the North) began an era of raids and violence. For the next 200 years, these sea voyagers were feared by people beyond their Scandinavian homelands as fierce plunderers who made lightning raids in warships. Monasteries and towns were ransacked, and countless people were killed or taken prisoner. This behaviour earned Norse people the title *Vikingr*, most probably meaning ‘pirate’ in early Scandinavian languages.

By around 1000 CE, however, Vikings began settling in many of the places they had formerly raided. Some Viking leaders were given areas of land by foreign rulers in exchange for promises to stop the raids. Around this time, most Vikings stopped worshipping Norse gods and became Christians.



Source 1 A Viking helmet

chapter 9

9A

How was Viking society organised?

- 1 Viking men spent much of their time away from home, raiding towns and villages in foreign lands. How do you think this might have affected women’s roles within Viking society?

9B

What developments led to Viking expansion?

- 1 Before the 8th century the Vikings only ventured outside their homelands in order to trade. From the late 8th century onwards, however, they changed from honest traders into violent raiders. What do you think may have motivated the Vikings to change in this way?

9C

How did Viking conquests change societies?

- 1 Christian monks, who were often the target of Viking raids, created many of the historical records about Vikings. How might this influence our view of the Vikings?
- 2 What other historical sources might offer information about how Viking conquests changed the societies they conquered?



# 9.1 The Vikings: a timeline



The remains of the monastery at Lindisfarne, in north-east England

An artist's impression of Viking raiders arriving in longships on the French coast



A modern statue of the explorer Leif Ericson, in Greenland

**c. 1001**  
Leif Ericson, son of Erik the Red, sails east from Greenland to reach Labrador in North America. A small settlement is set up there, but is abandoned by 1015

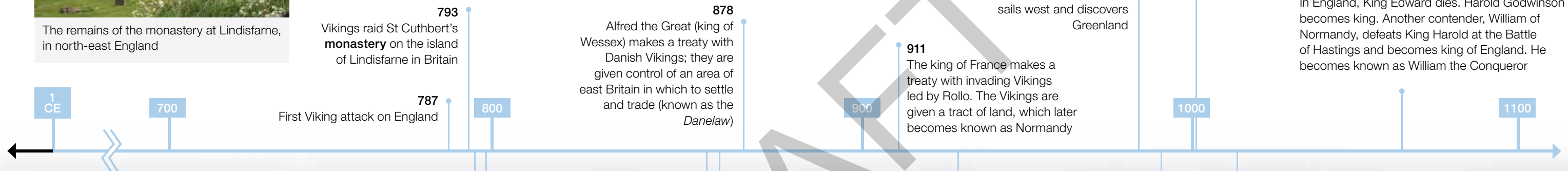
**c. 985**  
Erik the Red is banished from Iceland for three years for murder; he sails west and discovers Greenland

**911**  
The king of France makes a treaty with invading Vikings led by Rollo. The Vikings are given a tract of land, which later becomes known as Normandy



The Bayeux Tapestry, a medieval embroidery, shows the events leading up to and including the victory of the Normans over the English at the Battle of Hastings

**1066**  
In England, King Edward dies. Harold Godwinson becomes king. Another contender, William of Normandy, defeats King Harold at the Battle of Hastings and becomes king of England. He becomes known as William the Conqueror



**Source 1** A timeline of some key events and developments in the history of the Vikings

## Check your learning 9.1

### Remember and understand

- 1 In what year was the monastery on the island of Lindisfarne in England attacked by Vikings?
- 2 What was the *Danelaw* and in what year was it created?

### Apply and analyse

- 3 Using the timeline, calculate the number of years that passed between when the first *Danegeld* payment was made and the first (Danish) Viking became a king of England.

### Evaluate and create

- 4 Conduct some Internet research to find out the dates of some other significant Viking raids. Add these events to a new timeline in your notebook.



# 9.2 Social classes and roles in Viking society

Many factors influenced the organisation of Viking society and lifestyle. Social classes determined who controlled wealth and power in society, and who did the hard work. Social roles also determined what people did from day to day. Most men worked as farmers (when they were not away on raids), but many were also merchants, shipbuilders, weavers and blacksmiths, to name just a few. The main role of Viking women was to look after children and manage the home.

Viking society and lifestyle were also influenced by a set of laws, an economic system and a set of beliefs and values.

## Social classes

In the early history of the Vikings, their society was made up of a number of independent tribal communities. Often, the title *konungr* (king) was given to the chief of each community. This title did not carry the same meaning that king has for us today though. There were many different kings. Some ruled over small regions (rather than whole nations), while others ruled over people (rather than land).

Within each tribal community, there were three social classes (see Source 1). In order to rule, each king depended on the support of the most important members of the community – the *jarls*.

Source 1 Social classes in Viking society

Social class	Description
Jarls	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• They were powerful noblemen (the heads of influential families, often joined through marriage).</li><li>• They were wealthy and generally wore fine clothes and intricate jewellery.</li><li>• They often lived in large, well-appointed longhouses.</li><li>• The king depended on their support in order to rule.</li></ul>
Karls	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• They were farmers, merchants and craftsmen (such as silversmiths and shipbuilders).</li><li>• They made up the majority of Viking communities.</li><li>• They were ‘free’ people who were loyal to the king or a <i>jarl</i> and paid taxes to them directly.</li><li>• Many <i>karls</i> took part in raids.</li></ul>
Thralls	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• This class consisted of slaves, prisoners of war and criminals – the poorest of the poor.</li><li>• They performed most of the hard work (e.g. farm labour, cutting wood and stone).</li><li>• They had no rights under the law, but most were treated well.</li></ul>



Source 2 A reconstruction of a typical Viking village in Denmark

## Social roles

Despite some clear differences between them, Viking social classes were much less rigid than most other medieval societies in Europe at the time. It was possible to move between these classes, especially if a person came into a lot of money. The largest single group in Viking society was the *karls* – a kind of middle class. These men performed a number of roles in society – mainly those of farmers, merchants and craftsmen. Many also took part in raids whenever required – often leaving their wives and families to fend for themselves.

### Women and children

Viking women who were left behind when their men went raiding or trading had to manage on their own. This might mean taking on farm chores, tending to and butchering animals, and overseeing slaves. As a

result, Viking women were very independent. This was unusual compared with many other societies in Europe at this time. Women could, for example, choose husbands for themselves, decide to divorce their husbands, or buy land.

A woman’s main role (whether her husband was at home or not) was to look after children and manage the home. Common tasks for all but the wealthiest (who might have the help of slaves) included spinning and weaving, collecting firewood and preparing food stores for the winter. Daughters helped their mothers in the home, just as sons helped their fathers on the farm or in workshops.

What little education there was took place in the home, as there were no schools. For boys, learning to stay fit, ice skate, wrestle, use swords and ride horses was more important, especially during the Viking Age (late 8th to mid 11th centuries), when such skills were necessary for taking part in raids.



## Some social roles of the *karls*

Some of the different social roles performed by *karls* in Viking society are introduced in Sources 3 to 6.

### Source 3 A Viking merchant

I'm Hrodgeir the Lucky – a merchant. I've spent my life trading, as my father did. I have sailed many times across what you call the Mediterranean Sea and the Baltic Sea, and down many rivers in Europe. My ships carry out goods to trade, such as jewellery, combs made from deer antlers, decorated swords, furs, and sometimes slaves. What I bring back includes wheat, salt, silver and gold, and spices.



### Source 4 A Viking merchant's wife

I'm Gudrun, Hrodgeir's wife. I'm often on my own while Hrodgeir travels and works, as you would expect. When not looking after the children, cooking or chopping wood, I'm spinning and weaving wool. Sometimes Hrodgeir brings me back a piece of silk. I use it to make my underwear. I also make dresses, aprons, jackets and hats, sometimes decorated with animal fur.



### Source 5 A Viking craftsman

I'm Ingvar the Old, a shipbuilder – have been all my life. My sons help me when they are not away plundering. We use iron axes and adzes (another wood-shaping tool) to make keels from single tree trunks. We use freshly cut green wood to make the oak planks of the hull, and curved branches or roots to carve curved sections. A carved figurehead on the prow (front) and stern (back), often of a dragon, is the finishing touch.



### Source 6 A Viking raider/farmer

I'm Olaf the Tall. When I'm not raiding foreign lands, I'm a farmer. You can see me here in both of my roles. On the left, I hold my prized sword and shield. I also have an iron-headed axe. I want these weapons buried with me when I die. We Vikings don't wear uniforms when we fight. I have a **chain-mail** tunic and iron helmet only because I am wealthy. On the right, you see me in my fields ready to harvest my crop of rye. I am holding my trusty sickle.



## Check your learning 9.2

### Remember and understand

- 1 Explain why Viking women were typically very independent.
- 2 To which social class did captured prisoners of war belong? Why?

### Apply and analyse

- 3 Draw a labelled diagram to explain how Viking society was organised.

### Evaluate and create

- 4 Use information collected on the Internet to design a 'very best' outfit for either a Viking man or woman.
- 5 Select any three characters profiled on these pages. With two classmates, write a short dialogue they might have upon meeting in the marketplace. Your dialogue should reflect their different social classes and roles. Your teacher may ask you to perform it for the class.



## 9.3 Viking home life and work

Vikings led mostly rural lives, living in small villages made up of a few family groups. Their homes were made of wood and simply furnished. Most Vikings were farmers and craftspeople.

### Homes

Viking villages were often located near water – on a coastline or beside a river – making it easier to load and unload ships. Among the cluster of **longhouses** were barns to house animals and smoke fish, workshops of village craftsmen, perhaps a sauna, and an open area where markets were held.

The home (or hall) of the king or most important *jarl* was always the biggest and most elaborately decorated longhouse. Noisy feasts were held here after successful raids, with men getting drunk for days on ale or mead (a drink made from honey). Entertainment might include music (using animal

horns and a type of fiddle), dancing and poetry recitals.

Longhouses were rectangular buildings with rounded ends and thatched roofs. They were generally 15 to 25 metres long and five metres wide. There was a dirt floor and no windows. The only opening, other than the doors, was a small hole in the roof. In the centre, underneath the roof opening, was a fireplace. It provided warmth, light and a means to cook, but also made the longhouse very smoky. A big metal pot or cauldron typically hung above it, sometimes hooked over a wooden beam from the roof.

Longhouses were dark, smelly places. Smells of smoke, sweat, sour milk and cooking mingled together and hung around the longhouse. There was also often a stink of animal manure from the animal pen that was built at the end of the longhouse. Toilets were holes in the ground outside.

**Source 1** Longhouses like this one were home to the Vikings. Sometimes earth was piled along the walls and over the roof to insulate longhouses. Viewed from the front, longhouses would look like a grassy hill with a door built into it.



**Source 2** The interior of a reconstructed longhouse

### Furniture

The longhouses of most Vikings did not contain much furniture. Often there was no more than a roughly made table and some benches. Low platforms, built along the sides, doubled as beds and places to sit. These benches were typically covered in animal skins, furs or cloth bags filled with down (duck or goose feathers). In fact, the word 'doona' comes from the Norse word *dunn* – meaning feather down.

### Food and diet

The foods Vikings ate were very simple and reflected their traditions of fishing and farming. Meat (from the cattle, sheep, pigs and hens they kept) and fish formed the basis of most meals. Meat and fish were smoked, dried and salted during the summer months and kept in storage so that there was enough to last through the long winter months. The Vikings also harvested grains (like wheat, barley and rye) to make into bread, and vegetables (like onions, leeks, peas and cabbage) for use in stews. They also collected fruits and berries from nearby forests and hunted wild boar, seabirds, hare and elk for meat.



**Source 3** The simple and typical diet of Vikings



## Work

The Vikings were not only fierce warriors, but also accomplished farmers and craftspeople. For the majority of Vikings, farming was their primary occupation. The whole family would take part in the various seasonal jobs involved in running the farm. Crops would be grown during the summer, harvested in autumn and stored for the long winter.

Viking craftspeople were essential to everyday life. The less skilled metalworkers produced farming tools while the most skilled would specialise in making the finest weapons, such as swords.

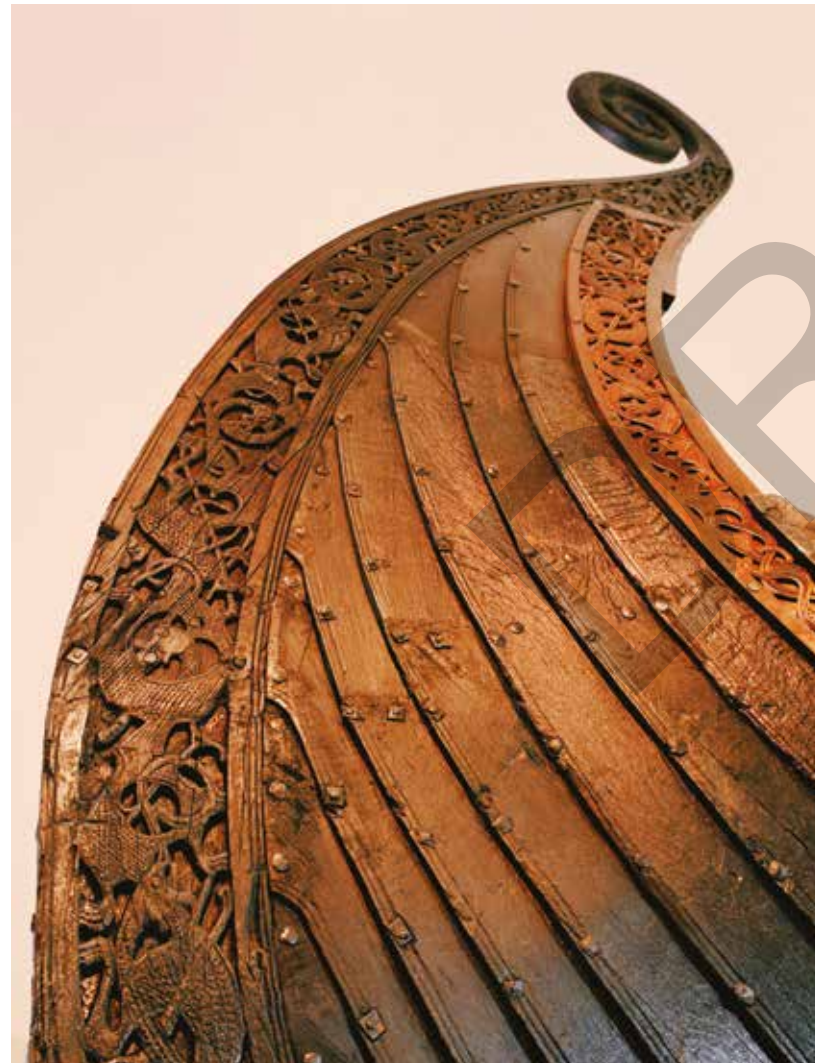
As well as making weapons for battle, metalworkers also made armour, such as the helmet shown in Source 4. Helmets like these were worn by Viking warrior chieftains or wealthy jarls (nobles). Poorer fighters wore leather caps, or hats lined with fur. Wealthy Viking warriors also wore chain-mail tunics, while poorer warriors wore leather vests or padded jackets.

Viking craftspeople also made fine jewellery and other luxury items. Jewellery was another way in which Vikings demonstrated their social standing and wealth.

Gold and silver jewellery was worn by those with the most wealth and power in the village. Those of less importance wore bronze or pewter jewellery. Sometimes the silver coins and candlesticks seized on raids were melted down to make jewellery such as the silver bracelet shown in Source 4. This piece, and many others that have been found, is evidence of the artistic flair and skilled workmanship of many Viking silversmiths. The distinctive Viking style is shown here with plaited strands ending in animal-like creatures. Jewellery tended to be highly decorative and used symbols taken from Viking mythology and religion.



**Source 4** Viking metal workers were skilled craftsmen, able to produce items ranging from farming tools and weapons through to the finest decorative jewellery. This helmet and bracelet show the detail and skill obvious in many Viking artefacts.



**Source 5** Viking craftsmen were also skilled at working with wood. Not only were they expert ship builders but also experienced wood carvers. This ship prow (front) shows the detail of their work.



**Source 6** The Viking ship Oseberg, built in 820 CE, discovered in Norway in 1903

Vikings were also skilled carpenters and shipbuilders. Source 6 shows the Viking longship discovered in Norway called the *Oseberg* ship. It is nearly 22 metres long and has 30 oar holes (15 on each side). Note its low, curved hull made of evenly bent planks and its elaborately carved prow (front) and stern (back). Its design shows evidence of the great skill of Viking shipbuilders. Ships like these enabled the Vikings to travel great distances over the seas and discover foreign lands. Their encounters with other cultures also helped them to become skilled traders, exchanging many of their own well-made goods (such as leathers, jewellery, furs and woollens) for foreign foods and luxurious items.

### Check your learning 9.3

#### Remember and understand

- 1 Why were Viking villages often located near coastlines or rivers?
- 2 Why were Viking longhouses smelly?
- 3 What connection does the doona on your bed have to a Viking longhouse?

#### Apply and analyse

- 4 Explain how social classes might have been obvious among a band of raiding Vikings.
- 5 Think about some of the silver bracelets made today. Rate the metal bracelet shown in Source 4 against modern jewellery in terms of its design and craftsmanship. What do you conclude?

#### Evaluate and create

- 6 Make a labelled sketch showing a modification you would make to the longhouse shown in Source 2 to make its interior more suitable as the hall of a Viking ruler.



# 9.4 Viking laws and economy

When people today think of Vikings, many of them imagine hoards of lawless warriors. However, the Vikings had a system of strict laws that guided behaviour in their communities. Also, the Vikings were not always plunderers – they traded with many other societies in Europe and beyond.

## Laws

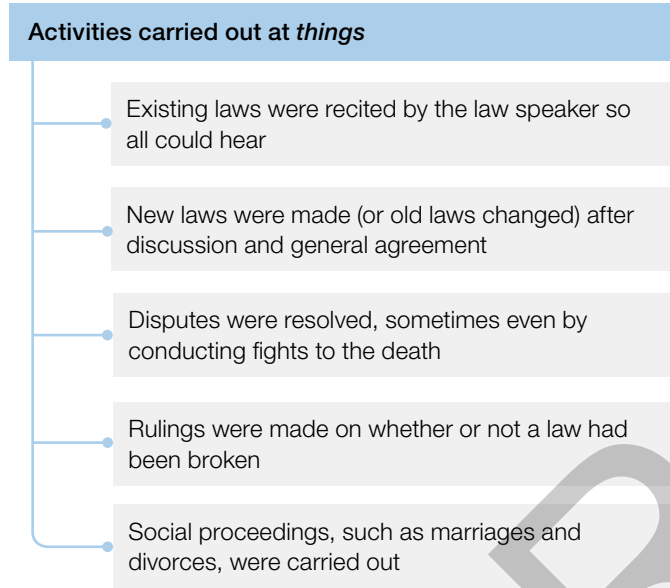
In the early history of the Vikings, different areas were ruled by tribal communities. Each community had what was known as a *thing* (a political assembly), which acted like a parliament and court in one. *Things* were held once a year in every Viking community. Their main purpose was to make and change laws, and to judge when they had been broken. Only those people who owned land could attend and speak.

Until the 12th century, Viking laws were not written down. Instead, they were preserved in the memory of a law speaker. It was his job to remember all laws and recite them loudly at each *thing*.

The Vikings respected their laws. This is partly because the reputation of each individual was important to them, but also because some punishments were very harsh. For example, if an

individual was found guilty of breaking a law at 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 1 Some typical activities conducted at *things*



## Economy

In early times, the Viking economy was based mainly on agriculture. However, as Viking societies grew larger, good farming land became difficult to find. Much of the landscape of Scandinavia is mountainous or thickly forested, and winters can be harsh. This made clearing and cultivating the land impossible in many cases. As a result, trade helped to meet the needs of the growing population.

## Trade

Viking merchants traded in ships across seas and down rivers. Stashes of foreign coins found in Sweden are evidence that the Vikings were trading in parts of modern-day 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**.

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, trade was conducted through a process of **bartering** (exchanging goods for other goods of similar value). Later, goods were bought and sold with coins. Many towns the Vikings later colonised – such as York (England), Kiev (Ukraine) and Dublin (Ireland) – became busy centres of trade.



Source 3 An artist's impression of a bare-chested Viking trader selling a female slave to Persian merchants



Source 4

Source: Oxford University Press

## keyconcept: Continuity and change

### The *Althing*

Iceland was the only Viking community to have a national *thing*, known as 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 other *things*, it was held once a year. People from different communities travelled long distances to get there, setting up temporary camps. The focal point of the *Althing* was the Law Rock (*Lögberg*). Here the law speaker stood to proclaim the laws. Today, it is a grassy mound, changed over time by natural forces.

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.

For more information on the key concept of continuity and change, refer to page XX of 'The history toolkit'.



Source 2 The Icelandic flag flying near the site of the Law Rock, where the first *Althing* was held in 930 CE

## Check your learning 9.4

### Remember and understand

- 1 What were *things*? Give two examples of how *things* influenced the lives of Vikings.
- 2 List three goods that Viking traders exported and three goods they imported.

### Apply and analyse

- 3 Use Source 4 and an atlas to list five modern-day countries that Vikings traded with.

### Evaluate and create

- 4 Write a paragraph explaining why the *Althing* is an example of continuity and change in the history of Iceland.



# 9.5 Viking beliefs and mythology

Compared with many other civilisations, we know very little about the traditional beliefs and religious practices of Vikings. We do know that the Vikings had their own religion, and worshipped many different gods early in their history, but these old beliefs died out once they started to convert to Christianity.

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 was connected to the other by the branches of the ‘world tree’ known as *Yggdrasil* (see Source 1).

When people died, their bodies were cremated (burned) and the remains were buried along 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 killed and buried with them. Sometimes, chieftains were even buried with human sacrifices.

Like the ancient Greeks, the Vikings did not really have a positive or negative view of the afterlife. Many believed that the dead travelled to a place called *Helheim*, which lay underground. *Helheim* was ruled by the goddess Hel – half beautiful woman and half rotting corpse. Hel is the origin of the modern word ‘hell’. *Helheim* 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 killed in battle were believed to travel to *Asgard* after they died. A beautiful hall, there known as *Valhalla* (‘Hall of the Slain’), was where warriors would spend the afterlife feasting.

**Source 1** In Viking mythology there were ‘nine worlds’ each connected by a world tree know as *Yggdrasil*.



## Viking gods

According to Viking beliefs, gods were responsible for different areas of daily life. There were gods that watched over harvests, love, family and fertility. Others watched over success in battle and wars.

**Source 2** Some important Viking gods

Viking god	Role/relationships
Odin (also known as Wodin)	King of the gods in Viking mythology. He was the god of magic, poetry and war. His wife, Frigga, 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.
Loki	A shape-changing trickster god, Loki was both friend and foe of the gods. He was father of Hel, as well as the monsters Jormungand and Fenris.

### keyconcept: Continuity and change

## Days of the week

In English, many of the names of the days of the week have their roots in Norse and Old English culture (see Source 5). Tuesday, for example, is named after the god of war, Tiwes. His day was *Tiwesdæg*, which became Tuesday. Similarly, Wednesday was named after Odin (or Wodin). His day was *Wodnesdæg*, which became Wednesday. Thursday was named after the god Thor, and Friday was named after Freya (Odin’s wife).

**Source 5** English and Norse words for the days of the week

English	Norse	Meaning
Sunday	<i>Sunnandæg</i>	Sun’s day
Monday	<i>Monandæg</i>	Moon’s day
Tuesday	<i>Tiwesdæg</i>	Tiwes’ day
Wednesday	<i>Wodnesdæg</i>	Wodin’s day
Thursday	<i>Þunresdæg</i>	Thor’s day
Friday	<i>Frígedæg</i>	Freya’s day
Saturday	<i>Sæterdæg</i>	Saturn’s day

For more information on the key concept of continuity and change, refer to page XX of ‘The history toolkit’.

**Source 3** According to Viking mythology, 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 men.



**Source 4** In Viking mythology, Odin watched over the universe while travelling on an eight-legged horse, Sleipnir. He was protected by two wolves, Geri and Freki. His two ravens, Huginn and Muninn, flew all over the world to bring him information.

## Check your learning 9.5

### Remember and understand

- 1 In traditional Viking mythology, how many worlds were there and how were they believed to be connected?
- 2 What did Vikings believe happened to warriors after they died?

### Apply and analyse

- 3 Write down three points that interest you about Odin and three points that interest you about Thor.
- 4 Why might Viking people have been reassured by the sound of thunder?

### Evaluate and create

- 5 How do Viking myths compare with any other creation stories that you have studied? In particular, can you identify any similarities or differences between these creation stories and those of Indigenous Australians?



9A rich task

# Brutal barbarians ... or not?

When most people hear the word ‘Vikings’, they immediately imagine hordes of bloodied warriors terrorising innocent villagers and plundering monasteries. Although this was true, there was also another side to the Vikings. In addition to being ‘brutal barbarians’, they were also skilled craftspeople, poets, wood and ivory carvers, weavers and musicians.

As with any historical inquiry, the reality of who the Vikings were lies hidden among a range of different primary sources.

Source 1

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 [islands off the coast of Scotland] and in Ireland ... then back home just after mid summer, where he stayed until the cornfields had been reaped [harvested] 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.

A translated extract from the *Orkneyinga Saga*, an Icelandic saga written in the 1100s. It provides a perspective on a Viking named Svein Asleifarson, who lived on one of the Orkney Islands (off the coast of Scotland)

**Source 4** A wooden game board thought to have been used by the Vikings to play a strategic game similar to chess, known as *hnefatafl*.



**Source 2** An exact copy of a carefully carved metal container made by a Viking craftsman. The heads of birds and animals decorate the lid.

Source 3

[The Vikings] ... came to the church of Lindisfarne [in north-east 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 ...

A translated extract from *Historia Regum*, written by an English monk, Simeon of Durham, in the 12th century.



skilldrill: Historical sources as evidence

Analysing primary sources

The primary sources that historians use to understand the Viking way of life tell different stories. It is the job of historians to examine these sources and come to a conclusion about their usefulness and reliability. It is important to identify who created each source and the reason why it was created. That way you can identify any potential **bias**. What did the person creating the source want his or her audience to think?

	Source 1	Source 2	Source 3	Source 4
Who wrote or created the source?				
How might the source’s creator be biased?				
Why was the source created?				
Was the source intended to be used by non-Vikings? Why or why not?				
What does the source suggest about the Vikings?				
What evidence does the source provide that the Vikings were brutal barbarians?				
What evidence does the source provide that the Vikings were civilised and cultured people?				
Do you think the source is true and reliable? Why or why not?				

Apply the skill

- 1 Examine Sources 1 to 4 carefully and complete a copy of the table below in your notebook.
- 2 Once you have completed the table, use the information you have gathered to write a short paragraph under the heading ‘The Vikings: brutal barbarians or cultured artists?’

Extend your understanding

Imagine you are a writer and poet living in England during a period of Viking raids. You have been asked by one of the king’s officials to write a book about the Vikings. You will be paid generously for your work. The king has ordered that your book should be designed to convince your countrymen that the Vikings are brutal barbarians. In order to do this it will be an advantage to present a biased (or one-sided) view of the Vikings.

- 1 Of all four primary sources in this section, which two would you choose to put in your book? Why?

- 2 Write the caption that you would put underneath each source to explain what it shows. Remember, your aim is to make your readers believe that all Vikings are brutal barbarians.
- 3 Now that you have some experience at presenting a biased point of view, name at least two hints or clues you should look for in primary sources to identify bias.
- 4 Is the fact that you were paid money to write your book proof that your point of view is biased? Why or why not?



# 9.6 Viking raids

Viking society changed significantly in the late 8th century. Up until this time, the Vikings were known as honest traders outside their homeland. After this time, however, the Vikings became feared as they pushed outwards from their homeland to expand their territory. For the next 200 years, they terrorised villages, towns and monasteries in surrounding lands with a series of brutal raids.

Raids were often planned and timed to take victims by surprise. Many were launched just before dawn as unsuspecting villagers slept. The raids were carried out quickly – hence the description ‘lightning raids’. Part of the terror for victims was that Viking communities also continued to trade normally during this time. If Viking longships were spotted off the coast, those on shore often could not tell whether the Vikings were coming to trade peacefully or attack.

## Possible reasons for Viking raids

Historians still argue today about what motivated the Vikings to change from honest traders into violent raiders. Several reasons have been put forward to explain this.

### Necessity

Resorting to raids may have been necessary for the survival of some Viking communities in a harsh land with an unforgiving climate. There was only limited coastal farming land in the Viking homeland (see Source 1). As the population grew, the pressure on such land would have increased. Also, winter is long and can be severe in Scandinavia, especially in areas further north. Summer brings long hours of daylight but is quite short, so the growing season for crops is short too.

### Local knowledge

The knowledge the Vikings had built up through years of trade with neighbouring countries is another possible explanation for beginning their raids. A combination of local experience and reports passed on by Viking merchants helped them piece together an accurate picture of the surrounding regions – in particular the riches that were held in the towns and monasteries there. By the 8th century, their shipbuilding abilities and navigational skills were highly advanced, making such raids a viable alternative to trade. Other scholars have suggested that the Vikings were also taking advantage of what they saw as weak and divided rule in surrounding regions at the time.

### Desire for wealth and glory

Historians also argue that the change in Viking behaviour was linked to the desire for quick and easy wealth. Important Vikings such as kings or influential *jarls* could use the stolen riches to reward their men and build their support base in the community. This would then strengthen their influence and power at home.

Some argue that the desire for glory and adventure was also a factor. For example, a man’s reputation was very important to a Viking. To lose honour or respect was a disgrace. Raids may have been the way for some dishonoured Vikings to redeem themselves, returning as warriors who had fought bravely. Viking warriors also believed that they would go straight to *Valhalla* if they died fighting bravely in battle.

### Revenge

Another possible reason why Vikings may have started to carry out raids on nearby lands was a desire for revenge. Charlemagne (c. 742–814), king of the Franks and later the Holy Roman Emperor, fought for about 40 years to bring most of western and central Europe under his control. As part of his military efforts, he ordered those he regarded as **pagans** (including many Vikings) to become Christians. Any who refused were killed. Early Viking raids on Europe took place during the later years of Charlemagne’s reign, and the raiders may have been motivated by a desire to get back at Christians, as well as by greed.



**Source 2** Medieval churches and monasteries were attractive targets for plundering Vikings. The Lindisfarne Gospels, an 8th-century manuscript bound in silver and jewels, is an example of why Vikings would have searched far and wide for such easy pickings. The original binding was lost during the raid on the Lindisfarne monastery in 793. This replacement was made in 1852.



**Source 1** A common landscape in many parts of Scandinavia. Note the relatively small area of coastal flatland suitable for farming.

## Check your learning 9.6

### Remember and understand

- 1 What major change happened in the Viking society in the late 8th century?
- 2 Why might tales merchants told of churches and monasteries have tempted some Viking tribal rulers to raid such places?
- 3 How would such wealth benefit Viking rulers?

### Apply and analyse

- 4 Imagine you are a Viking farmer who works the land in the coastal region shown in Source 1. The population of your village is growing. Why might you be tempted to leave your homeland?

### Evaluate and create

- 5 Draw a concept map that explains how and why you think societies that came in contact with the Vikings might have changed. Compare your finished concept map with that of a partner.
- 6 Why do some historians take the view that early Viking raids on Europe were revenge missions? What evidence would you look for to help to confirm this view?



## 9.7 Viking skills and achievements

The Vikings were highly skilled craftspeople. They built seagoing ships and made their own weapons and armour. These skills increased their success in trade and, later, in the search for and conquest of new lands.

### Shipbuilding

The Vikings were expert shipbuilders with easy access to the timber of Scandinavia's forests. They built trade ships, ferries, rowing boats, fishing vessels and ceremonial longships such as the *Oseberg* (see Source 6 on page XX).

By the end of the 8th century, Vikings had been sailing as merchants for some time. They were skilled

at navigating, using the sun and stars, weather patterns, bird-flight trails and coastal features as guides. In other words, they were well placed to be either sea traders or sea pirates. Their strong navigational and shipbuilding skills gave them all the expertise they needed to make and sail efficient warships. These included the **longships** they used for lightning raids. The Vikings called them *drakkar* – meaning 'dragon'.

### Longships

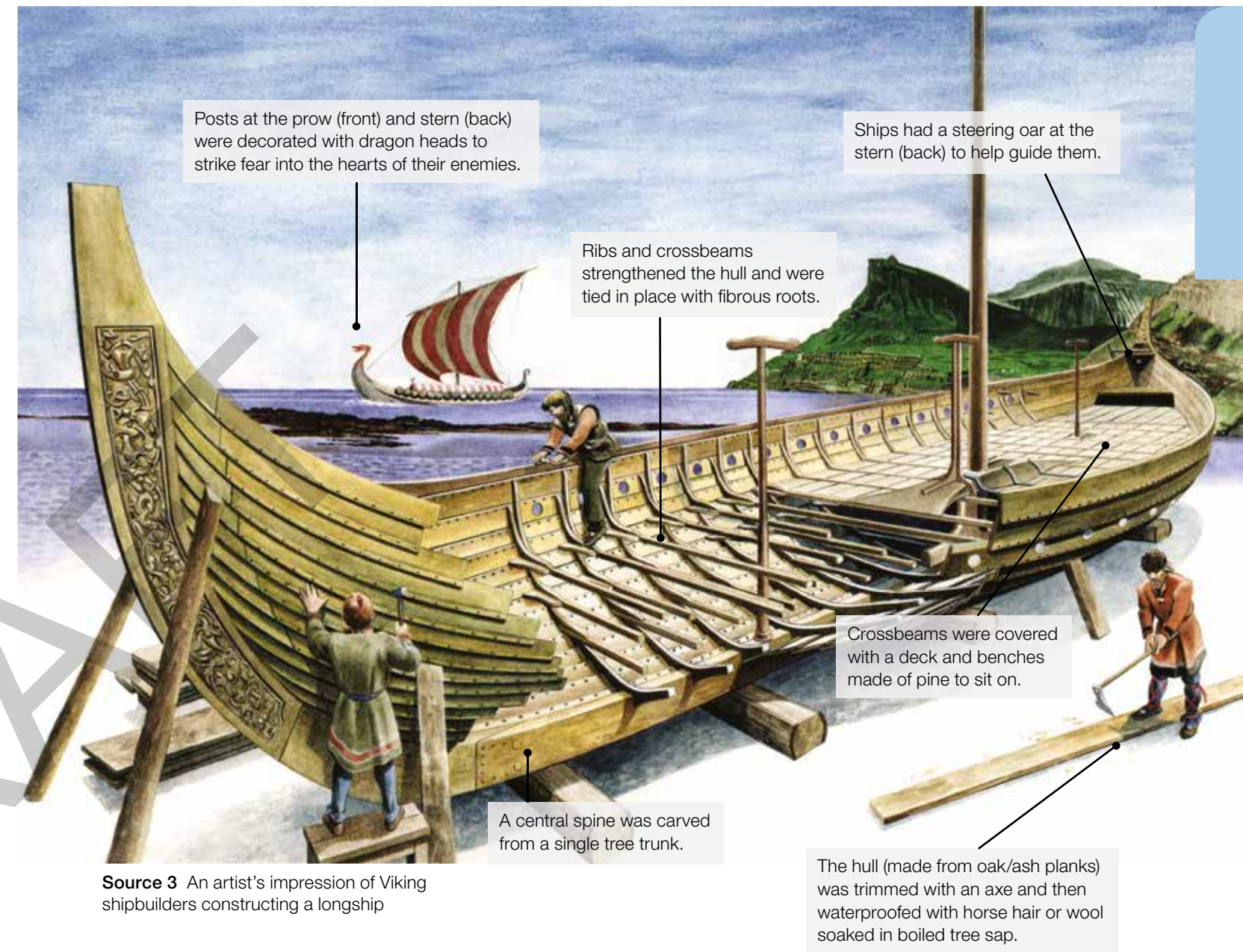
Longships were up to twice as long as trade ships (up to about 37 metres in length). With a thinner, lighter hull, they could carry 100 warriors (68 of whom were oarsmen; 34 on each side). Being so light, the



**Source 1** A Norwegian shipbuilder carving a stern post (back) using the same methods his Viking ancestors did more than a thousand years ago



**Source 2** A dragon head on the prow (front) of a replica Viking longship in Norway



**Source 3** An artist's impression of Viking shipbuilders constructing a longship

longships were easily able to be carried overland when necessary. The longships were wide and shallow, helping them to stay upright in rough seas and to be taken into shallow water. Because longships could be sailed very close to shore, Viking raiders were able to wade in very quickly for a surprise attack.

The huge square sails (made from pieces of woollen or linen fabric, stitched together) were commonly dyed blood red and coated in animal fat to make them more water resistant. In strong winds, the sail provided for a fast sea or ocean crossing. The longships were also equipped with oars. If there was no wind then the sail could be lowered and the men could row the longship instead. Rowing was also necessary to navigate rivers.

The blood red sail together with the dragon heads at the prow (front) and stern (back) helped to heighten the terror for raid victims. Vikings also believed that these dragon heads would frighten away any evil spirits or monsters during sea crossings.



Weapons and armour

Weapons were very important to the Vikings. For a start, they were essential for hunting animals for food. They were also traditional symbols of a man's wealth and power. For example, the swords of rich men often featured hilts (handles) decorated with silver, copper or bronze (see Source 5). Swords were the most valued weapons. The Viking sagas tell of some weapons (particularly swords) being so highly valued by their owners that they were given 'pet' names (see Source 4). A man's sword was usually buried with him when he died.

By the start of the Viking Age, the Vikings were highly skilled metalworkers. As a result, Viking warriors were heavily armed. As time passed and raids became more a part of Viking culture and tradition, weapon makers were kept busy forging arrows, spears and axe heads from iron. They also became skilled at sharpening the steel edges of swords until they were razor sharp.

Wealthy Vikings could afford metal armour, including helmets with nose bridges and **chain mail** (see Source 6). By the time William the Conqueror (whose ancestors were Vikings) fought in the Battle

of Hastings in 1066, chain mail was worn by most soldiers.

Most other Vikings fought with a shield and either a spear or an axe. Spears were up to a few metres long and made from wood with an iron spearhead at the end. Axes had a thick, rounded blade, were light to use and extremely effective. These blades were strong enough to cut through armour. The shields were generally made of wood and reinforced with either leather or iron. They were the main form of defence for the Viking warriors.

Source 4 A selection of 'pet' names used to describe weapons recorded in Viking sagas

Weapon	'Pet' name	Translation
Sword	<i>Fótbítr</i>	Foot biter
Sword	<i>Gunnlogi</i>	Battle flame
Sword	<i>Leggbítr</i>	Leg biter
Sword	<i>Saetarspillar</i>	Peace breaker
Axe	<i>Himintelgja</i>	Heaven scraper
Axe	<i>Rimmugýgr</i>	Battle hag
Coat of chain mail	<i>Full-trúi</i>	Old faithful



Source 5 Two Viking swords and a spearhead



Source 6 Reproductions of authentic Viking armour, including helmets, on show at a battle re-enactment in Iceland

keyconcept: Evidence

Horned helmets

Many people today think that the helmets of Viking warriors had large horns on either side – mainly because Vikings are often shown this way in popular culture. Movies, comics, books, games and even the mascots of popular sporting teams perpetuate this image, even though there is no evidence to support this at all. Think about it – horns on helmets would have made them easier to grab or knock off, leaving Viking warriors defenceless against blows to the head from swords or axes.

For more information on the key concept of evidence, refer to page XX of 'The history toolkit'.



Source 7 Vikings are often shown in popular culture wearing horned helmets – like these characters from the 2010 animated film *How to Train Your Dragon* – even though this is historically incorrect.

Check your learning 9.7

Remember and understand

- 1 Explain why the Vikings' skills as shipbuilders and sailors made it easy for them to be effective sea pirates.
- 2 How did some Vikings display their wealth and social position through their weapons and armour?
- 3 What Norse word did the Vikings use to describe their longships? What is the meaning of this word in English?

Apply and analyse

- 4 Why is shipbuilding considered by many historians to be one of the most significant Viking achievements?

Evaluate and create

- 5 Use Source 4 as inspiration to create Norse names for the items displayed in Source 5.
- 6 Conduct some Internet research into the Battle of Hastings in 1066. In particular, look for information about (and images of) the Bayeux Tapestry – a medieval embroidery that retells the events leading up to the battle. Start at the beginning of the tapestry and click through, scene by scene. Locate the section where William the Conqueror's warriors are loading up their ships to invade England. Study it carefully. How do they transport the chain-mail tunics?



9B rich task

# Viking *berserkers*

During the Viking Age, lightning raids led by fierce Viking warriors were feared by people across western Europe. The most terrifying of all Viking warriors were the *berserkers* – members of a wild, uncontrollable gang similar to modern-day ‘shock troops’. *Berserkers* were the most savage of all Viking warriors and fought in a frenzy, clad in the skins of bears or wolves. The word *berserker* means ‘bear coats’. Berserkers seemed not to fear death, injury or pain. Today, one legacy of the Vikings is the English word ‘berserk’, which is used to describe a violent rage.

Source 1

When Hardbeen [a *berserker*] heard this, a demonical frenzy suddenly took him; he furiously bit and devoured the edges of his shield; he kept gulping down fiery coals; he snatched live embers in his mouth and let them pass down into his entrails; he rushed through the perils of crackling fires; and at last, when he had raved through every sort of madness, he turned his sword with raging hand against the hearts of six of his champions [fellow Vikings].

An extract from a 1905 translation of *The Nine Books of the Danish History*, by the 12th-century Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus

Source 2

Men saw that a great bear [a *berserker*] went before King Hrolf’s men [King Hrolf was a warrior chieftain in the 6th century CE], keeping always near the king. He slew [killed] more men with his forepaws [bare hands] than any five of the king’s champions. Blades and weapons glanced off him and he brought down both men and horses in King Hjorvard’s forces, and everything which came in his path, he crushed to death with his teeth ...

An extract from *Erik the Red and Other Icelandic Sagas*, Gwyn Jones (ed.), Oxford University Press, 1961, p. 313



**Source 3** A 6th-century stone carving from Sweden, showing one man with a helmet adorned with the heads of birds. The other is depicted with the head of a wolf or bear. Bear skins were typically worn by *berserkers*.



**Source 4** These 12th-century chess pieces show Viking *berserkers* biting their shields.

skilldrill

## Writing an explanation using sources that are acknowledged

The four sources in this section portray berserkers from different perspectives. An important skill all historians need to develop is the ability to prepare a written text (in the form of an explanation) using evidence gathered from a range of sources. It is also important to acknowledge these sources.

On page XX of ‘The history toolkit’, you will find a detailed set of instructions that will help you write an explanation. The table below summarises the structure of an explanation.

Source 5 Structure of an explanation

Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Clearly states the main idea or aim.</li><li>Briefly outlines the reason/s why an event occurred and its effect/s.</li></ul>
Body	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Each idea must be supported by evidence. There should also be some analysis of the evidence to explain its significance or importance.</li><li>Information must be organised in paragraphs, with a new paragraph for each detail.</li><li>Language should be precise and not contain emotional words.</li><li>Personal opinions (e.g. ‘I’ or ‘my’) should be avoided.</li></ul>
Conclusion (optional)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Provides a short and clear overview of the main ideas presented in the body.</li><li>States a conclusion drawn from the evidence.</li></ul>

Any sources you have used in your historical writing must be acknowledged. First, you need to mention in your writing where information is coming from. This makes it clear to the reader what your evidence is and where you are drawing your opinions from. Second, you must formally acknowledge a source by citing (officially mentioning) it using an accepted citation system. There are a number of different citation systems, for example the Harvard (or author–date) system. More information about this system is also available on page XX of ‘The history toolkit’. For this exercise, however, we will focus on acknowledging the source within your writing.

Some examples of how you can do this are:

- ‘According to the 12th-century Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus ...’
- ‘The depiction of warriors in the 6th-century Swedish stone carving shows that ...’
- ‘The Icelandic saga *Erik the Red* demonstrates how ...’

### Apply the skill

Write a short explanation about why Vikings may have used *berserkers*, referring to at least two of the primary sources in this section as evidence to support your ideas. Your explanation can be in the form of a short written response, a newspaper article or an information brochure.

## Extend your understanding

The tactic of using fear to weaken your enemies in battle is not unique to the Viking *berserkers*. Today, many modern conflicts have become infamous because of their use of ‘terror tactics’. These tactics even include the use of suicide bombers – people who are willing to sacrifice their own lives in order to kill or weaken their enemies.

- In pairs, conduct some further research into Viking *berserkers* and suicide bombers. Create a table that compares and contrasts the types of tactics used by Viking *berserkers* and suicide bombers. Consider how the tactics used by both of these groups might affect:
  - the morale of the people and fighters on their side
  - the morale of the people and fighters against them
  - the individual *berserker* or suicide bomber.
- How do you think historians in 200 years’ time will explain the actions of suicide bombers today?



## 9.8 Changes within the Viking homeland

The Viking Age was a period in which many Vikings set sail to foreign lands to raid and plunder. The riches they brought back to the Viking homeland changed political and economic systems that had been in place there for hundreds of years. Over time, many Vikings left their homeland to settle in the places they, or their ancestors, had once raided. Others set out to discover new lands.

### Political changes

Warriors returned 'home' from their raids with large stores of plundered loot (including prisoners taken as slaves). This started a process of great change in the Viking homeland. In time, this loot made some local Viking rulers enormously wealthy. Some became so powerful and influential that they no longer needed the support of *jarls* in order to rule. Smaller local tribes began to join together under the protection of one ruler, forming larger **kingdoms**. These kingdoms covered the areas we now know as Norway, Sweden and Denmark (see Source 1).

### Economic changes

After they began raiding, the Vikings developed an economy based on exchanging goods for the value and weight of different precious metals. Silver was most commonly used. Much of this silver was brought back to the Viking homeland as plunder. These silver items would be broken into smaller pieces until they matched the weights needed to buy other goods such as cloth, grain and even slaves.

The Vikings also collected taxes (often as coins) from villagers in the places they colonised. The penalty for not paying taxes to the Viking rulers in Ireland during the 8th century was to have your nostrils slit with a knife. This is where the saying 'to pay through the nose' comes from.

Over time, the Vikings developed an economy based on money – that is, one where a particular

THE KINGDOMS OF NORWAY, SWEDEN AND DENMARK



Source 1

Source: Oxford University Press

coin had a particular value. This is similar to the way our currency works today. Most of the places the Vikings raided and colonised had similar economies. In many cases, Vikings even copied the designs of coins used in the regions they colonised. By the late 10th century, the kings of the emerging kingdoms of Sweden, Norway and Denmark were all issuing their own currencies.



Source 2 A scene from the Bayeux Tapestry showing the army of William, Duke of Normandy, crossing the English Channel to attack England. William was a descendant of Viking settlers who left their homeland to settle in northern France.

### keyconcept: cause and effect

### Christianity and the Vikings

In addition to political and economic changes, one of the most important things that changed life in the Viking homeland was the introduction of a new belief system called Christianity.

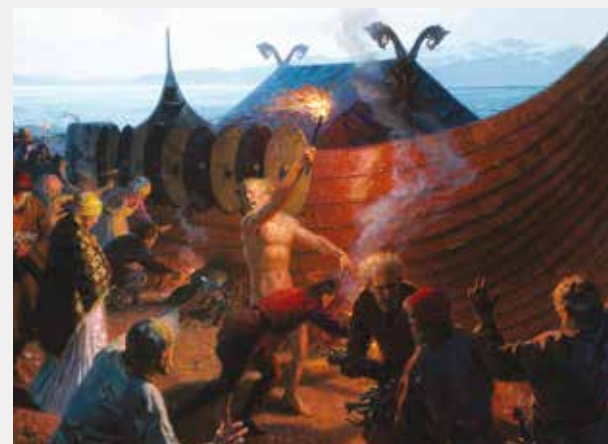
During the Viking Age, many of the towns, villages and monasteries raided belonged to Christians. Many of the places in which the Vikings later settled were also Christian lands. In addition to this, around 1000 CE Christian missionaries travelled to parts of the Viking homeland to convert as many Vikings as they could. Over many generations, all of these factors, and others, combined to cause the Viking people to change their beliefs. This affected many aspects of Viking behaviour – in particular the ways in which people were dealt with after death.

Source 3 is an account of a traditional Viking funeral that was common before the Vikings converted to Christianity.

#### Source 3

The dead chieftain was put in a temporary grave that was covered for ten days until new clothes were prepared for him. They asked which of his thrall [slave] women wanted to join him in the afterlife and one of the girls volunteered ... When the time had arrived for cremation, his longship was pulled ashore and put on a platform of wood. On the ship, a bed was made for the dead chieftain. Soon after, an old woman named the 'angel of death' put cushions on the bed. She was an old witch, stocky and dark. She would be responsible for the ritual and would be the one to kill the thrall [slave] girl.

An extract from an account of a human sacrifice at a Viking funeral, by the Arab traveller Ibn Fadlan



Source 4 An artist's impression of a Viking cremation before the adoption of Christian beliefs. A boat would be filled with goods and slaughtered animals – even sacrificed slaves – and set on fire. It was then covered with a mound of earth. Runestones might be erected at the site.

After converting to Christianity, Vikings adopted similar burial practices to those followed in Christian countries to this day. Many other changes also took place as a result of the shift to Christianity:

- Attacks on Christian communities stopped altogether.
- Human sacrifices stopped.
- A large number of Christian churches were built.
- Many Vikings granted slaves their freedom.
- New Christian festivals were celebrated, such as Christmas; although in some cases, Christian rituals were mixed with elements of traditional Viking beliefs.

For more information on the key concept of cause and effect, refer to page XX of 'The history toolkit'.

### Check your learning 9.8

#### Remember and understand

- 1 How did Viking raids change the status and influence of some Viking rulers?
- 2 Where does the expression 'to pay through the nose' come from? What does this expression mean?

#### Apply and analyse

- 3 Explain in a short paragraph how conversion to Christianity changed the traditional burial practices of the Vikings.



## 9.9 Changes in other societies

Viking societies were not the only ones that changed as a result of the raids. The societies that Vikings came in contact with also experienced many changes. Deals were struck between Viking leaders and the rulers of places they raided. Some of these deals involved payments of money, others involved grants of land. In time, the language, customs and beliefs of Viking settlers mixed with those of the local people, changing both societies.

### The first Viking raids

The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, a collection of records kept by the **Anglo-Saxons**, lists 787 CE as the year of the first Viking attack on England. Three ships

manned by Danish Vikings came ashore in the south of the country. They were met by a royal official who assumed they were merchants. The official intended to escort them to the king's town so that they could pay the required taxes. Instead, they murdered him.

Six years later, Vikings attacked the Christian **monastery** at Lindisfarne, in north-east England. This was one of Britain's most sacred sites. The attack was the beginning of 200 years of uncertainty and terror for many monasteries and settlements in lands around the Viking homeland.

The first Viking raids were hit-and-run affairs. There was no long-term plan behind them – the aim was just to loot and plunder. Over time,

though, Viking attacks along rivers pushed deeper into Europe and Asia. They also extended their plundering missions into modern-day Wales, Scotland and Ireland. Their attacks were swift, noisy and usually unexpected. By all accounts, they were brutal affairs.

#### Source 2

The number of ships grows: the endless flood of Vikings never ceases to grow. Everywhere Christ's people are the victims of massacres, burnings and plunderings. The Vikings conquer all in their path and nothing resists them.

A translation from the writing of the Frankish monk Ermentarius of Noirmoutier, 860 CE

### The end of Viking raids in Britain

In 865 CE, Britain was invaded by a huge Viking army from Denmark. This time the motive was conquest, not plunder. Within a year, Vikings controlled the Northumbrian city of Jorvik (now known as York). By 870, they controlled every Anglo-Saxon kingdom in England except Wessex.

From 871 to 899, a man called Alfred (later Alfred the Great) was the king of Wessex. King Alfred fiercely resisted Viking attacks. By 878, he had forced the Viking leader, Guthrum, to accept a truce – and to convert to Christianity. As part of the peace treaty the two men drew up, King Alfred agreed that the Danish Vikings could take an area in England as their own. This agreement and the area of land that came under it became known as the **Danelaw** – meaning 'the area where the law of the Danes is enforced' (see Source 3). Over the next 100 years or so, Viking traditions, beliefs and language took hold in the former Anglo-Saxon community, influencing the history and society of England.

Viking raids continued, on and off, after Alfred's rule. Instead of fighting the invaders, some English kings preferred to pay the Vikings to leave them in peace. In 991 CE, King Ethelred became the first English king to make these kinds of payments to the Vikings. They became known as *Danegeld* (meaning Danes' money). In 1007 alone, the English paid Danegeld of nearly 13 500 kilograms of silver. The payments put a crushing weight on the English economy.

In 1016, the council that appointed English kings asked the then king of Denmark, Cnut, to become

THE AREA OF THE DANELAW IN 878 CE



Source 3

Source: Oxford University Press

England's king. King Cnut ruled England wisely and well until his death in 1035. His reign largely ended the era of Viking raids for England. They stopped altogether with William the Conqueror's victory at the Battle of Hastings in 1066. English society would then be changed again, in a different way, when William became king of England – he would go on to introduce **feudalism**.

### Check your learning 9.9

#### Remember and understand

- 1 When was the first ever recorded Viking attack on Britain?
- 2 What was *Danegeld* and how was it supposed to help keep the English safe from Viking raids?

#### Apply and analyse

- 3 What does Source 2 reveal about how some felt about Viking attacks?

#### Evaluate and create

- 4 Develop a concept map to explain how you think villagers living near Lindisfarne (who would have heard about the attack on the monastery) might have felt and acted. Think how this event might have changed their lifestyle.

At first, Viking raids were hit-and-run events, timed and designed to cause maximum panic.

In Viking society, to be a thief was a great dishonour. To Vikings, however, raiding and plundering was not considered stealing; instead, it was seen as an honourable way of gaining wealth and fame.

The Viking raiders killed innocent people, raped women and took many people (including monks) as slaves. Some were sold, others were put to work on Viking farms and building projects.

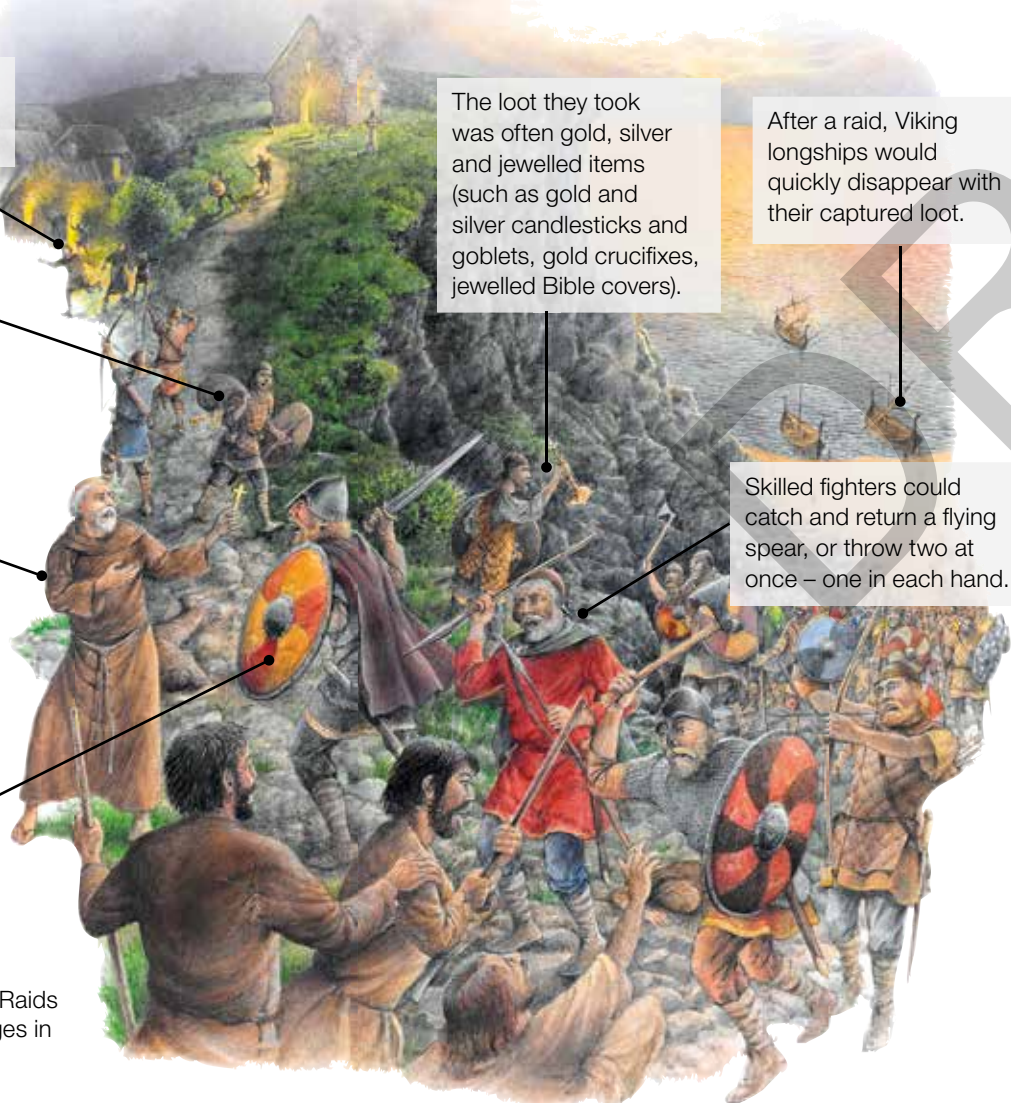
One or more *berserkers* might be part of a raid; their appearance and behaviour was terrifying to innocent victims.

The loot they took was often gold, silver and jewelled items (such as gold and silver candlesticks and goblets, gold crucifixes, jewelled Bible covers).

After a raid, Viking longships would quickly disappear with their captured loot.

Skilled fighters could catch and return a flying spear, or throw two at once – one in each hand.

**Source 1** An artist's impression of a Viking raid on an English monastery. Raids like these brought about many changes in societies across Europe.





## 9.10 Significant individual: Leif Ericson

The first European explorer to discover the North American continent was a Viking by the name of Leif Ericson. In fact, Vikings were already living in North America 500 years before Christopher Columbus even came close to its shores. Leif and his crew landed in what is now Greenland and Canada. This significant event was recognised in 1964 when the US president declared 9 October as 'Leif Ericson Day'.

### Leif's early life

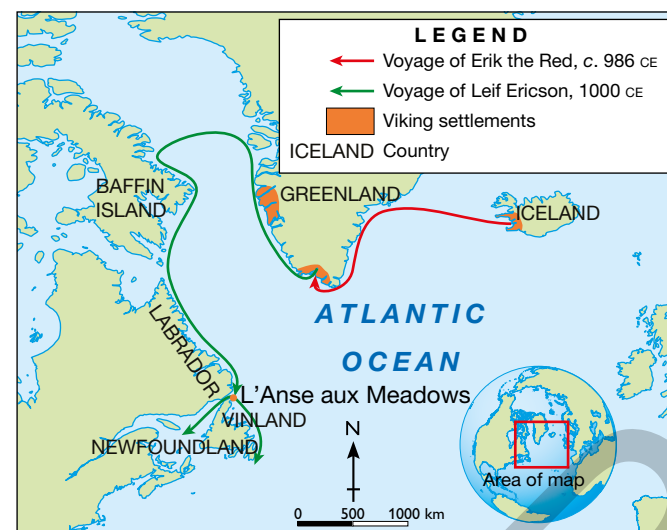
Leif was the second son of the Viking explorer Erik the Red and was born in Iceland around 970 CE. In 982, when Leif was about 12 years old, his father was banished from Iceland for killing a man. So Erik and his family set out in a boat with slaves and supplies, heading west. He called the land he found Greenland. There he settled, later encouraging other Icelanders to join him.

### Finding North America

Different accounts (known as **sagas**) have been written about Leif's discovery of North America. As a result, there is some debate among historians as to how Leif actually found North America. According to *Eiríks Saga* (*Saga of Erik the Red*), Leif visited Norway in 999 with gifts for the king, Olaf I Trygvasson. He stayed for a year, and converted to Christianity. He then returned to Greenland with the intent of carrying out the king's request to convert Greenlanders to Christianity. However, he was blown off course, ending up in what is today known as Newfoundland on the Canadian east coast.

Another account, the *Groenlendinga Saga* (*Greenlanders Saga*), is generally considered to provide more reliable evidence, even though – like the *Saga of Erik the Red* – it was written 200 to 300 years after the events occurred. It states that Leif's discovery

THE VOYAGES OF ERIK THE RED AND HIS SON LEIF ERICSON



Source 1

Source: Oxford University Press

was far from accidental. In 986, Bjarni Herjólfsson, a Norwegian explorer, arrived in Greenland looking for his father (who had recently emigrated from Iceland with Erik the Red). Along the way, Bjarni got lost. He reported to Leif that he had seen a wooded, hilly land to the west of Greenland, but it was more than a decade before Leif Ericson acted on this news.

Leif bought Bjarni's boat and, in around 1000 CE, set off with a crew of about 35 people to find the unknown land Bjarni had spoken of. One year later, after making two landings – first in a place he named Helluland (Flat Rock Land) and second in a place he named Markland (Wood Land) – he settled in a grassy place he called Vinland (Wine Land). They built shelters there and spent the winter before returning to Greenland.



Source 2 An artist's impression of Leif Ericson and his crew landing in Newfoundland, Canada, in 1001 CE

### Where Leif settled

Historians cannot say for certain exactly where Leif Ericson's expedition landed in North America, but most agree it was probably somewhere on the east coast of Canada – possibly Newfoundland. In 1963, archaeologists discovered the remains of a Viking settlement in a place now called L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland. Radiocarbon dating of charcoal found at the site indicates it was used in around 1000 CE.

### Later visits

After Leif returned to Greenland, his brother and other family members made trips to the settlement he had established. Leif never returned though, and died in 1020. The new Viking settlement remained for a few years, but faced increasingly hostile attacks from the Indigenous people there. Eventually these attacks forced the Vikings to abandon the settlement and return to Greenland.

Source 4 A statue of Leif Ericson in the capital of Iceland, Reykjavik



Source 3 The heritage-listed site of L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland, Canada (with its reconstructed dwellings)

### Check your learning 9.10

#### Remember and understand

- 1 Explain how and why Leif Ericson ended up in Greenland.
- 2 What eventually forced the Vikings to abandon their settlement in North America?

#### Apply and analyse

- 3 Refer to Source 1 and the information provided in the two Viking sagas to complete the following tasks:
  - a Draw two flow charts, each showing how Leif discovered North America according to the two different sagas.
  - b Which saga do most historians believe to be the most reliable?
- 4 How do you think the 'discovery' of North America affected the Viking society in Greenland? Give reasons for your opinion.

#### Evaluate and create

- 5 Use Source 1, together with Google Earth and images collected from the Internet, to create a travel diary describing what Leif might have seen on his journey from Greenland to Vinland.
- 6 In pairs, conduct some further research into Leif Ericson. Create a timeline plotting important events in his life, using data from the *Greenlanders Saga*.



9C rich task

# The Viking legacy

The legacy of Viking culture, language and traditions can be seen all around us today. One example of this is the influence that Viking customs had on the Christian festival of Christmas.

The Viking festival known as Yule dates back thousands of years and was celebrated long before Christianity arrived in the Viking homelands. Yule was a winter festival held for 12 days in December to celebrate the Winter solstice (the shortest day and longest night of the year). During the Yule festival, Vikings would sacrifice animals to honour the gods, feast, dance and decorate trees. They even gave presents.

If you have ever wondered where Christmas traditions, such as Santa Claus and Christmas trees, come from the following sources may help answer some of your questions.



**Source 1** During Yule celebrations, Vikings would cut down a large tree and carve the trunk with special runes to honour the gods. They would burn the log over the 12 days of the Yule celebration. Today, in many countries around the world, families celebrate Christmas by eating a cake known as a yule log.

Source 2

It was ancient custom that when sacrifice was to be made, all farmers were to come to the temple and bring along with them the food they needed while the feast lasted. At this feast all were to take part of the drinking of ale. Also all kinds of livestock were killed in connection with it, horses also; and all the blood from them was called *hlaut* [sacrificial blood], and *hlautbolli* [the cup holding the blood]; and *hlautteinar* [the sacrificial twigs]. These were fashioned like sprinklers, and with them were to be smeared all over with blood the pedestals of the idols [statues of gods] and also the walls of the temple within and without [inside and out]; and likewise the men present were to be sprinkled with blood. But the meat of the animals was to be boiled and served as food at the banquet. Fires were to be lighted in the middle of the temple floor, and kettles [large pots] hung over them. The sacrificial cup was to be borne around the fire, and he who made the feast and was chieftain, was to bless the cup as well as all the sacrificial meat.

A description of Yule celebrations by Snorri Sturluson, c. 1230, in *Heimskringla: History of the Kings of Norway*, trans. M Lee Hollander, University of Texas Press, 2007



**Source 3** The tradition of Christmas trees date back to pre-Christian times. During Yule, Vikings decorated evergreen trees with pieces of food and clothes, small statues of the Gods, and carved runes.

Source 4 A comparison of modern Christmas traditions and practices of Vikings

Christmas celebrations or Christian traditions	Yule celebrations or Viking traditions
A feast, which includes a Christmas ham or turkey	Feasting, which often included a roast boar
Takes place in late December, though Christ was likely not born then	Coincided with the winter solstice, which was celebrated by many pagan (non-Christian) peoples
Santa rides a flying sleigh pulled by magic reindeer	The Viking god Thor rode a flying chariot pulled by magic goats
A 'Yule log' – a type of log-shaped cake that is sometimes eaten at Christmas	The Yule log was a large log that burned during Yule celebrations
The 12 days of Christmas	Celebrations of Yule lasted for 12 days
Decorated Christmas trees	Vikings used to decorate evergreen trees with clothing, food and other ornaments
Father Christmas (Santa) brings gifts	The Viking god Odin was thought to visit families in secret during winter and leave gifts

skilldrill: Continuity and change

## Developing a written historical argument

Presenting a series of historical arguments in writing is an important skill for all historians. It is particularly useful when convincing others of your point of view on a historical research question. To achieve this, you will need to present well-reasoned points and support your argument with information from various sources.

When developing a written historical argument, follow these steps:

- Step 1** Devise a research question or argument.
- Step 2** Read and understand the information in the sources.
- Step 3** Create a table, diagram or mind map to compare and contrast information in the sources. Work out which sources agree with each other and which do not.
- Step 4** Find any information in the sources that supports or refutes your argument.
- Step 5** Write your argument into one or more paragraphs using the sources as evidence. You should explain why particular sources support your argument, and give reasons why the sources that disagree with you are not as important or valid.
- Step 6** Acknowledge your sources using referencing conventions.

### Apply the skill

- 1 Study the sources on these pages.
- 2 Research and prepare a written response to the following argument: ‘Many Christmas traditions today originate in Viking customs.’

### Extend your understanding

- 1 Discuss with your classmates why you think Christians would have included so many non-Christian traditions in their celebrations of Christmas.
- 2 Now, imagine you are important members of the Church, trying to bring Christianity to the Vikings. Stage a debate about whether to include local customs in your Christmas celebrations, or whether to stay true to the religious story and ignore local non-Christian customs.