

THE  
BRITISH  
MUSEUM

# Vikings



Gold arm-ring  
Viking  
10th century AD

Visit resource for teachers

Key Stage 2

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## Background information

### The Vikings

The term Viking covers all the pagan peoples of Scandinavia who spoke Old Norse, and originated in Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Gotland. The Vikings were mainly farmers, fishers, hunters and skilled craft workers. Many Vikings traded with Europe, Russia and Asia, exchanging furs, walrus ivory, amber and slaves for silver, gold and luxury goods including wine, fine textiles, pottery and glassware. Restricted by a lack of natural resources and land some Vikings migrated overseas to places such as Britain, Iceland, Greenland and Newfoundland in search of better land to farm.

### Vikings in Britain

The Vikings began to raid the coasts of Britain and Ireland towards the end of the 8th century. The earliest recorded raids in England were in AD 789 at Portland, Dorset and in AD 793 at Lindisfarne in north-east England. During the ninth century, Danish Vikings settled in eastern England. From AD 870 they moved west and invaded Wessex in AD 878. King Alfred of Wessex defeated them in battle and established a frontier dividing England in two. The north and east came under Danish control (Danelaw) while Alfred controlled West Mercia, Kent and Wessex. The most famous Danish king was King Cnut or Canute (1016-1035). During his reign and that of his son Harthacnut, Denmark, England and, for a while, Norway were politically united.

### Viking towns

The Vikings established major towns at York (Jorvic) and Dublin. They issued their own coinage and became important trading centres. In Scandinavia market and manufacturing settlements such as Ribe, Hedeby, Birka and Kaupang grew into centres for international trade.

## **Viking religion**

The Vikings practised a pagan religion with many gods. Their myths often involved complex relationships between mythical creatures, humans and gods. Very little is known about their religious practices, but there is surviving literary evidence of the stories associated with the pagan gods. Odin was the most powerful god whilst the most popular god was Thor. Amulets of Thor's hammer were very common. The Vikings would have come into contact with Christianity during their early raids and they adopted Christianity in areas they settled such as Britain and Ireland. By the 12th century the Scandinavian kingdoms had largely been converted to Christianity by missionaries from England and Germany.

## **Literature and language**

The Vikings spoke Old Norse which was a Germanic language spoken by the people of Scandinavia until around 1300. The letters of the Viking alphabet are called runes. The word 'norse' means 'north'. Most of the written evidence for the Viking period comes from monastic sources writing about the Viking raids, for example the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. Other evidence comes from the Icelandic Sagas. These were stories passed on orally which only came to be written down much in the 13th century.

## Viking timeline

793	Vikings raid monastery at Lindisfarne, north-east England
795	Raids in Ireland and Scotland
799	Raids in France
800s	Early Viking ship burials take place
832	Viking coins minted in Hedeby, Denmark
839	Swedish Vikings first recorded in Byzantine Empire
845	Viking raids to Germany and Spain
850	Vikings seek new homelands
870s	First recorded Viking settlements in Iceland
911	Vikings given Normandy
930	Viking republic established in Iceland
954	Eric Bloodaxe is killed
c. 965	Harold Bluetooth converts Danes to Christianity
985	Vikings in Greenland
c. 1000	Viking voyages to North America
1014	Brian Boru, king of the Irish, defeats the Vikings in battle
1016-35	Cnut/Canute reigns as king of England
1047	Death of Harthacnut (Cnut's son), the last Viking king of England
1066	English defeat the Norwegian Vikings at the Battle of Stamford Bridge

## Resources

### British Museum websites

#### Explore

Explore is an online database of over 5000 objects from the Museum's collections. To investigate Viking objects use the Explore option on the homepage

[www.britishmuseum.org](http://www.britishmuseum.org)

#### Ancient Civilizations: website [www.ancientcivilizations.co.uk](http://www.ancientcivilizations.co.uk)

This is an interactive website with text, images and maps relating to a range of civilizations across the world and through time.

#### Portable Antiquities Scheme: [www.finds.org.uk](http://www.finds.org.uk)

Find out about Viking finds from your local area using the PAS database.

## Books

### For adults

Page, R.L., *Runes*, British Museum Press, 2007

Page, R.L., *Chronicles of the Vikings*, British Museum Press, 2007

### For children

Green, John, *The Vikings Colouring Book*, British Museum Press, 2001

Wilson, David, *The Vikings Activity Book*, British Museum Press, 2007

## Gallery information

Room 41 displays material from the early medieval period in Europe. It contains objects from the end of Roman Britain (c. AD 410) and on into the early and later Anglo-Saxon period. There is a small amount of Viking material on display. It should be noted that the gallery also displays objects from the same period from other areas of Europe including material from the Byzantine Empire (the continuation of the Roman Empire in the east). Much of the Viking material is displayed in relation to the area in which it was found both in Britain and mainland Europe.

## What is it like to visit this gallery?

Room 41 is a medium-sized gallery which contains a large number of wall and free-standing cases. It has doorways on three sides giving access to the Roman Britain gallery and the later medieval galleries. This means that there can be quite a high level of through traffic across the middle and one corner of the gallery. The Viking material is concentrated in 5 cases in one corner of the gallery and this should be taken into consideration when planning your visit to avoid overcrowding. Students and adult helpers will need to have clear direction concerning the cases to be used for their study. The following cases contain Viking material: Case 28 – Ireland and the Vikings; Case 30 – Viking Gotland; Case 31 – Vikings in Scandinavia and beyond; Case 32 – Britain and Ireland Settlers AD 800-1000; Case 33 – Britain and Ireland AD 800-1000. There is also some Viking material in cases 42 and 43 (Germanic and Viking ornaments).

## Case Numbers

Please note that case numbers are usually small, white and high up on the glass.



## Preliminary activities

### General introductory activities

- Locate key places associated with this period such as Denmark, Sweden and Norway, places that Vikings settled: Britain, Ireland, Iceland, Faeroe Islands, Greenland, Normandy and Vinland (Canada) and places that they traded with: Russia, Ukraine, Baltic Sea, Byzantine Empire (c. AD 1000 this included modern day Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Turkey, Greece, southern Italy, Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro, Slovenia and Syria) and the Arab World.
- Look at Viking objects on Explore.
- Research the types of items the Vikings sold: honey, tin, wheat, wool, wood, iron, fur, leather, fish, walrus ivory and slaves and what they bought in return, such as furs, silver, spices, wine, pottery, glass, amber, jewellery and slaves. What does this tell us about life in Scandinavia and the raw materials available to them?
- Discuss archaeological evidence for the Viking period. What types of objects might survive in the ground and what might not survive? Why do some types of material survive better than others?
- Talk about the written evidence for the Viking period. Why might the authors of monastic records from Christian foundations in Britain, Normandy and Ireland want to portray the Vikings in a negative light? Monasteries were wealthy and usually poorly defended, which made them an ideal target for the early Viking raiders for economic not religious reasons. How are Vikings portrayed in modern history books?
- Find out about Viking gods and goddess and some of the myths associated with them. When were the sagas written? Where were they written?

## Activities to support gallery activities

- Follow the Explore online tour – The Vikings.
- What is the difference between sentimental and monetary value? Which is most important? Discuss how we keep important things safe. Why might people in the past have buried valuable items? Why might the items have stayed buried and not been uncovered until modern times?
- Make a collection of different everyday materials. Where do the materials come from (earth, plant or animal origin), what are their properties and what are they used for?
- Discuss different sources of evidence available to archaeologists and historians. What is the difference between primary and secondary evidence? What type of evidence will be available at the Museum?
- Discuss the role of personal adornment – functional, decorative, display of wealth/status. Confirm vocabulary used to describe different types of jewellery, e.g. necklace, pendant, brooch, ring. Look at examples (real and in catalogues) of modern jewellery. What are they made from and what motifs (images, writing, patterns) are used to decorate them?
- Look at the Viking PowerPoint presentation available in the *Other cultures* classroom resources section of the Schools and Teachers web pages. In particular, the Powerpoint can be used to look at design and object shapes. Ask the students to think about what materials are not represented in preparation for the British Museum displays which include a high proportion of metal compared with organic materials.

## **During your visit**

## Gallery activities: introduction for teachers

The gallery activities are a set of activity sheets which can be used by students working in Room 41. The sheets can be used as stand-alone activities or you may wish to develop work around particular sheets as suggested in the before and after sections of this resource.

- Where case numbers are indicated on a sheet, these are usually to be found marked in white numbers high up on the glass of that particular case.
- You are welcome to select the activities which are most appropriate for the focus of your visit and adapt sheets to meet the needs of your students.
- Each activity is designed to support the students in looking at, and thinking about, objects on display in the gallery.
- Individual activity sheets may be undertaken by single students, in pairs or as a small group.
- Where space is provided for recording this may be undertaken by the student or an adult helper as is most appropriate for the students involved.
- Familiarise the students and accompanying adults with the chosen activity sheets at school before the day of the visit. Make sure students and adults know what they are to do and are familiar with the vocabulary used on the sheets or which they may encounter in the gallery.

## **Gallery activities: briefings for adult helpers**

### **Gallery activity: Hoards**

- A hoard is a group of objects hidden away for safety. Some hoards may have been personal belongings (such as family jewellery) whilst other hoards may have been a trader's wealth or a metal smith's raw materials.
- This activity asks students to look at different types of Viking period hoards.

### **Gallery activity: Personal adornment**

- Jewellery was worn by women and men and could serve to show status or wealth, decorate the body or fasten clothing.
- This activity encourages the students to scan the objects on display to identify pieces which would have been worn on specific parts of the body.

### **Gallery activity: Material matters**

- Not all the materials used in the past survive over time. Materials such as metal and stone tend to survive well whilst organic materials such as leather, fabric and wood survive less well.
- This activity encourages the students to look at the condition of different materials which have been dug from the ground and think about why archaeologists may not find certain materials because they usually rot away.

### **Gallery activity: Viking fact and fiction**

- Objects are used by archaeologists as a source of evidence. They can help answer questions about the past.
- This activity encourages the students to use objects as evidence to help them decide if a statement is true or not.

### **Gallery activity: Brooches**

- Brooches were a key element of Viking personal adornment. They served as decoration and were used to fasten layers of clothing together before buttons and zips!
- This activity enables students to observe and record examples of patterns and designs used to decorate Viking brooches

## Hoard

A hoard is a group of objects, usually made out of precious metals like silver and gold, that have been hidden away to keep safe.

- Find case 33 which contains several hoards. Find each item in the hoards then tick the metal it is made from.

I have found a coin made of

silver

gold

I have found a cup made of

silver

gold

I have found an arm-ring made of

silver

gold

I have found a finger-ring made of

silver

gold

I have found a brooch made of

silver

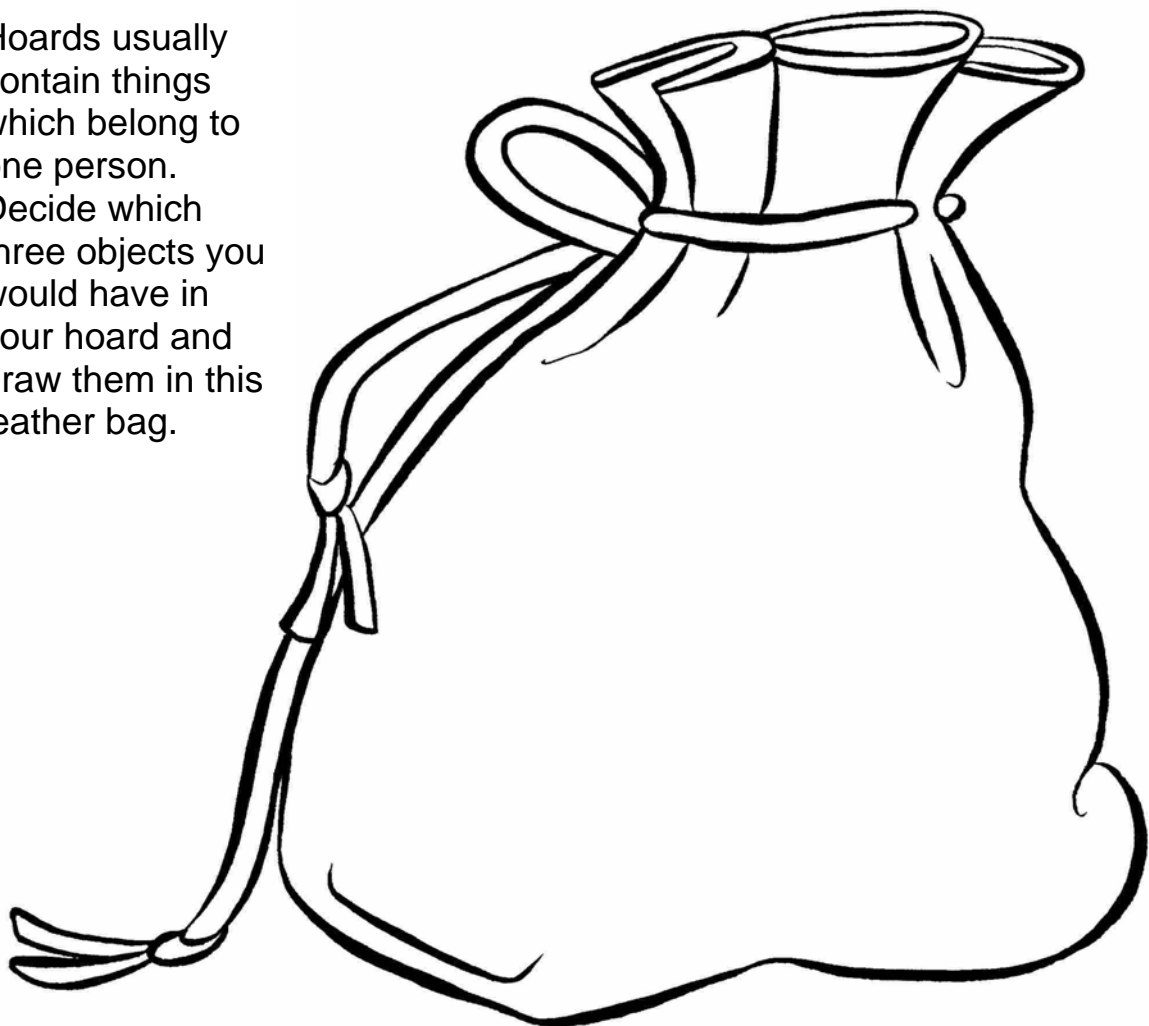
gold

I have found ingots (bars of metal) made of

silver

gold

- Hoard usually contain things which belong to one person. Decide which three objects you would have in your hoard and draw them in this leather bag.



- Look at the Cuerdale Hoard in the centre of case 33. This hoard contains 'hack-silver' - silver which has been cut up ready to be re-used. What do

you think some of the pieces were originally?

## Personal adornment

Both Viking women and men wore jewellery. It could be worn as decoration, to show wealth or to fasten clothing (Vikings didn't have buttons or zips).

- Look in case 30 to find and draw the objects below.

something to wear on your arm	something to wear on your finger
something to go around your neck	something to put on your clothes

- Discuss the similarities and differences between Viking jewellery and the jewellery people wear nowadays.
- Decide which piece of Viking jewellery in the case you would like to wear if



you had the choice.

## Material matters

The objects in cases 31 and 32 are all made from different materials, many of which were traded by the Vikings.

- Find the objects listed below and tick the box you think best fits the condition of each object. Make a drawing of three of them.

	drawing of object	good condition	poor condition
gold finger ring			
silver coin			
iron sword			
glass bead necklace			
bronze brooch			
whalebone plaque			
piece of fabric			

- Find the iron rivets that were part of a long-boat burial. Why do you think that the iron rivets survived and not the boat's wooden hull?

## Viking fact and fiction

Objects can be used as a source of evidence to help us find out about the past.

- Use the objects on display in cases 28, 30, 31, 32 and 33 to decide if you agree or disagree with the statements below. Circle your decision (either disagree or agree) and then explain why the objects support your decision.

• Vikings wore jewellery.	I agree / disagree because...
• Vikings lived in different areas of Europe.	I agree / disagree because...
• Vikings used silver to make things.	I agree / disagree because...
• Vikings were skilled craft workers.	I agree / disagree because...
• Vikings used hoarding as one way to keep things safe.	I agree / disagree because...

- Think of a question about the Vikings which you would like to research back at school and write it in the box below.

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## Brooches

The Vikings decorated their brooches with different designs and patterns including swirly lines, dots and animal shapes.



- Find this brooch in Case 42. It is called the Pitney Brooch. Tick the three decorations when you see them on the brooch.

swirly lines

gold dots

animal shapes

- Look at the other brooches on display and draw some of the different designs below. Do not draw the whole brooch, just the part of the design which includes an animal, a swirly line, a dot or a particular shape.

an animal

swirly lines

dots

shapes

- What materials are the brooches made from? Why do you think this is?

## **After your visit**

## Follow-up activities introduction

These activities aim to encourage students to reflect on the work undertaken with the displayed Viking material during their Museum visit.

- Some of the activities draw directly on the information gathered at the Museum while others encourage the students to draw on personal experience or undertake additional research in the classroom.
- Each activity includes a suggestion for classroom work and also an outcome which may be in the form of a written piece, drama presentation or artwork.
- You may also wish to look at some of the activities available on the Ancient Civilizations website ([www.ancientcivilizations.co.uk](http://www.ancientcivilizations.co.uk)) which relate to your visit.

## Follow-up activity: Hoards

Curriculum links: history, citizenship, DT, literacy

- Remind the students of the different examples of hoards which they saw in the gallery. What sort of objects might be in a hoard? Who might it belong to? Why might it have been hidden? Why do they think that Viking hoards buried over a thousand years ago are found today? What might have happened to prevent the owner returning to collect the hoard? Where do people keep precious objects nowadays?
- Make a container for a hoard. This might be a fabric bag – research a suitable design for the Viking period in books and on the web – or a box. Ask the students to decide who the hoard belonged to and then make suitable objects to be placed in the hoard container (e.g. coins, hack-silver, jewellery).
- Ask the students to write a first person account of the hoard from the original owner's point of view explaining where and why it was hidden.

## Follow-up activity: Personal adornment

Curriculum links: history, citizenship

- Discuss with the students the different examples of Viking jewellery on display in the gallery and which parts of the body they were worn on.
- Discuss what people in the past and the present have worn to show status, to display wealth, to bring good luck, to make themselves look nice. Is personal adornment just jewellery – how do people use their skin, hair and clothes for personal adornment?

## Follow-up activity: Material matters

Curriculum links: history, science

- Discuss with the students what happened to objects buried in the ground for a long time – ask them to draw on their observation of the different materials on display (or not on display) in the Viking cases at the Museum.
- Look for examples of materials which have weathered in the open air in the school grounds – can they find examples of rusty metal or rotting wood?
- Test the effect of being buried on a range of materials. For example use samples of paper, fabric, wood, plastic and foil and bury them in an area of the school grounds (or a large pot of soil). Leave for a set amount of time and then recover the objects and record any changes.



## Follow-up activity: Viking fact and fiction

Curriculum links: history

- Working from a whole class set of the gallery activity questions, ask the students to explain their response to each question saying whether they agreed or disagreed and why.
- Ask the class to propose a further set of statements or questions which they would like to research with information from books and the web. Discuss the fact that it is not always possible to answer a question from the available evidence and how there might not be one single answer to a question but rather several opinions.

## Follow-up activity: Brooches

Curriculum links: history, art and design

- Ask the students to design their own Viking brooch based on the design information they have gathered in the Museum on the brooch gallery sheet. They can also use Explore on the British Museum website to research further examples of Viking brooches.
- To create the actual brooch the students could transfer their design on to a circle of black card using gold or silver pens, press the design into a piece of silver foil over a soft cardboard surface or twist pieces of silver foil together to make the brooch.

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