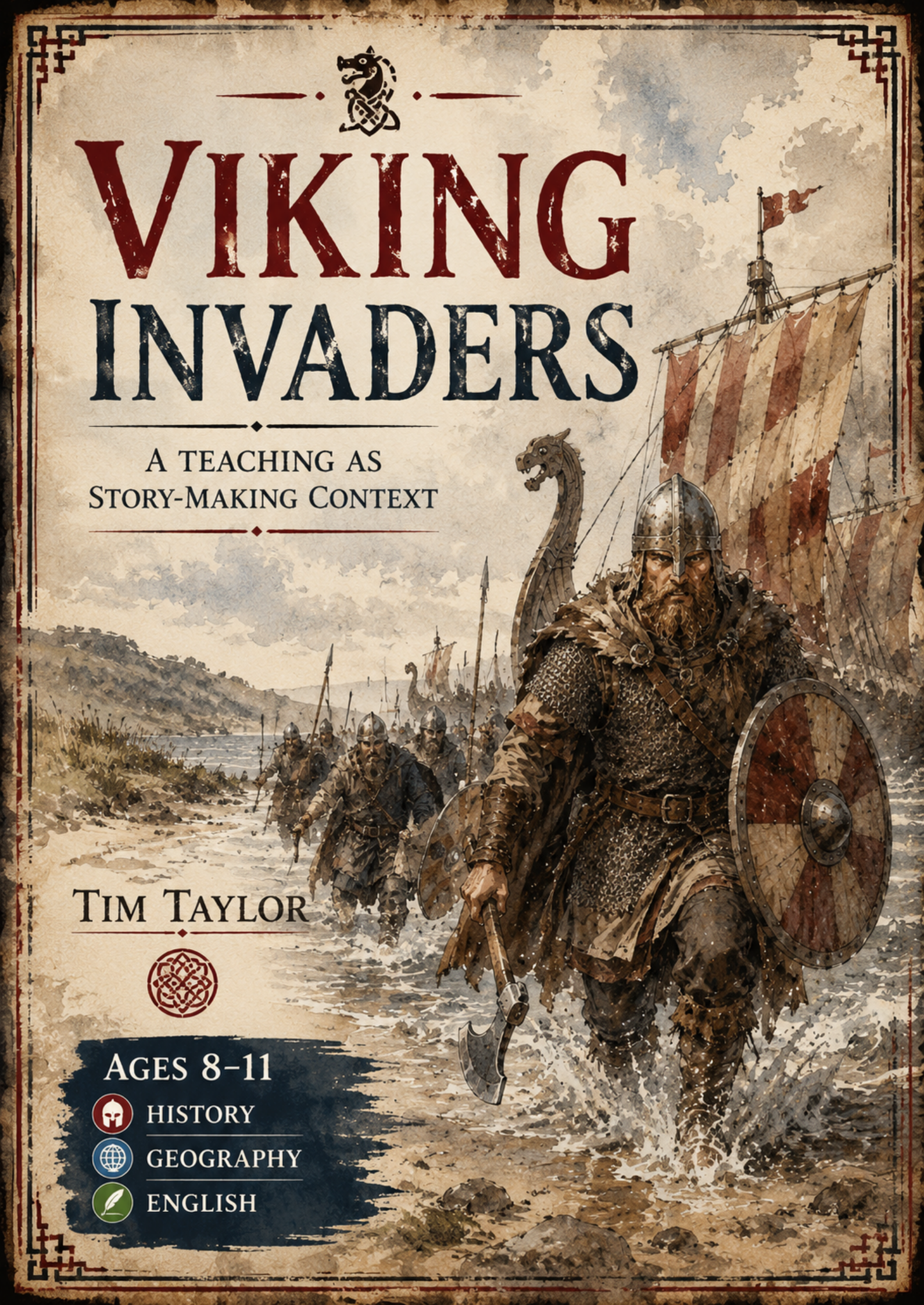
Viking Invaders

A Teaching as Story-Making Context



Tim Taylor

Ages 8–11

History

Geography

English

Contents and Context Map

Viking Invaders · TSM Teaching Guide · 7 Episodes · Ages 8–11

Ep.	Title	Main function	Resources	Student outcome
1	The Great Hall	Students enter the Viking world as clan members; meet the Jarl; learn about the Great Hall; draw equipment for the raid.	Slides; printed Great Hall text; topic books; workbooks	Workbook drawings of equipment with named kenning weapons; written Viking character background
2	The Attack on Lindisfarne	Explore the 793 AD raid; contrast Viking and Christian beliefs; write from the perspective of a survivor.	Slides; topic books; workbooks; videos	Written account from the boy's point of view; hillfort defence drawing
3	The Great Heathen Army	The Viking invasion of 865 AD; students in role as King Edmund's lords negotiating with the Great Heathen Army.	Slides; topic books; workbooks	Written decision as a lord; written account of events in East Anglia
4	Alfred the Great	Alfred's flight, the Battle of Edington, and the Treaty of Wedmore; students as housecarls; escape plan and tapestry moment.	Slides; topic books; workbooks	Written account of Alfred's escape and victory; map of England after Treaty of Wedmore
5	The Vikings Settle	Viking settlements and the Danelaw; design a Viking village; enact the Thing legal assembly.	Slides; topic books; workbooks; Place Names worksheet; A3 paper	Viking settlement drawing; participation in the Thing scenarios
6	Vikings Resurgence and Conflict	Sweyn Forkbeard's life and ambitions; tapestry groups; write as a chronicler; Viking burial ship archaeology.	Slides; topic books; workbooks; Six Events cards (print and cut); Archaeologists' Notes (print)	Written chronicler's account with illustration; burial object drawing

Ep.	Title	Main function	Resources	Student outcome
7	The End of the Viking Era	Cnut's coronation; political dissent; Battle of Stamford Bridge; end of the Viking Age in England.	Slides; workbooks; strips of paper; printed timeline; printed Stamford Bridge text	Written account from a Viking's point of view; illustrated timeline

Context Overview

Narrative

In this unit, students begin by taking on the role of a Viking raiding party planning an attack on the unprotected island of Lindisfarne. From there, they explore the 250-year struggle between the Anglo-Saxons and Vikings for control of the kingdom of England. The unit covers the initial Viking invasions, the capture of York, Alfred the Great's resistance, the establishment of the Danelaw, the first Viking king, and the decline of Viking power, ending in 1066.

Learning Overview

Timeline, geographical locations of the Vikings and Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, Viking coastal raids, Viking culture and religion, ships, attacks on monasteries, the Great Heathen Army, the capture of York, Alfred the Great's resistance, the establishment of the Danelaw, Viking life in England (farming, trade, and law), the influence of Viking culture (language and place names), Sweyn Forkbeard, the first Viking king of England, King Cnut, and the Battle of Stamford Bridge.

Inquiry Questions

Culture: How did Viking and Anglo-Saxon daily life differ, and what can we learn about their values through their art, stories, and customs?

Religion: How did the Norse gods influence Viking behaviour, and what impact did the spread of Christianity have on both Vikings and Anglo-Saxons?

Transport: What role did Viking longships play in their ability to explore, trade, and raid distant lands, and how did they compare to Anglo-Saxon vessels?

Food: What did Vikings and Anglo-Saxons eat, and how did farming, hunting, and trade influence their diets?

War: What military strategies and tactics did the Vikings use in their raids and battles, and how did the Anglo-Saxons defend their kingdoms?

Law: What were the key differences between Viking law (in the Danelaw) and Anglo-Saxon law, and how did these systems influence justice in England?

Philosophy / Beliefs: How did Viking beliefs about fate and the afterlife (such as Valhalla) shape their approach to war and exploration?

Power and Leadership: How did Viking leaders maintain control over England, and what role did Anglo-Saxon kings play in resisting them?

Legacy: How did Viking invasions and settlements impact the language, culture, and place names in England, and what traces of their influence remain today?

Live Teaching Guide · Episode 1

The Great Hall

Curriculum focus

Viking society and leadership (Jarl); Norse culture; dramatic imagination (light/darkness, sound/silence, movement/stillness); historical geography; Viking longship design; Viking shield patterns; kennings in Norse poetry.

Resources

- Slides
- Printed copies of the Great Hall text (see step 8 and Appendix)
- Topic books
- Workbooks

Student outcome

Workbook drawings of Viking equipment, weapons named with kennings; written character background (experience, scars, weapon origin).

Teaching route

1. Part 1: Narrate Viking origins (Slides 1–4); discuss the Jarl; read and annotate the Great Hall text for dramatic imagination.
2. Part 2: Rearrange classroom as the Great Hall; students take their places; Jarl speech; workbook drawing of raid equipment.
3. Part 3: Return as Jarl; reveal the target – Lindisfarne.
4. Further activities: mapping, longship drawing, shield design.

Keep in view

This is students' first entry into the Viking world. Allow time for them to invest in their characters before the Jarl speech. Prompt historical accuracy in drawings – ask students to check the slides and topic books. The kennings task (naming weapons) connects to Norse poetry; mention this explicitly.

Episode 1: The Great Hall – Full Sequence

Summary

In this episode the students are introduced to a Viking clan. They learn about their leader, called a Jarl, about the Great Hall, and about a raid the next day on a monastery on the British coast.

Areas of Study

Viking society, leadership (Jarl), Norse culture, dramatic imagination (light/darkness, sound/silence, movement/stillness), historical Viking halls, Viking weapons and armour, kennings in Norse poetry, historical geography (mapping Viking routes), Viking longship design, Viking shield patterns, and the symbolism of carvings and artefacts.

Resources

- Slides
- Printed copies of the text in step 8
- Topic books
- Workbooks

Part 1: Slide 1 & Slide 2

Narrate: ‘Gradually, on the sea fronts and waterways of northern Europe, a people grew – Slide 3 – strong and hard like the land, adventurous and far-seeing like the wind, wild and deep like the sea. They became known as the Viking people. In the early days, they had no kings but instead gathered in clans and owed fierce allegiance to their chieftain, known as the Jarl.’ Slide 4

Ask, ‘What kind of person do you suppose these people would respect as their Jarl?’

Discussion.

Sit on a chair at the front of the class.

Say, ‘I’ll be the Jarl for a moment. How do you suppose he would sit? What might he have on his lap? What would there be around his feet? What would his “high seat” look like? What carvings would be in the wood?’

Discussion.

Ask the students if one of them would like to take your place. Say, ‘It could be a woman; occasionally, women would sit in the high seat.’

Read:

The Jarl sat at one end of the great hall; his figure outlined by the flickering glow of the fire at the room's centre. His high seat, carved from ancient oak, stood on a raised platform, towering over the long wooden tables that stretched the length of the hall. The armrests were adorned with intricate carvings of wolves and ravens, symbols of power and wisdom, while the floor around him was softened with the pelts of bears and wolves, marking his status as leader and protector.

The hall itself was vast, its roof arching high above, supported by thick beams that groaned under the weight of the thatched roof. The air was thick with the scent of woodsmoke and roasted meat, mingling with the earthy smell of damp furs and the tang of spilled mead. Long tables lined the room, where warriors and villagers alike gathered, their laughter and conversation rising to the rafters in a hum of activity.

Around the fire, which crackled and snapped at the centre of the hall, the faces of those gathered were illuminated in the dim light. Shadows danced across the walls, where shields, swords, and battle-worn banners hung, testaments to past victories and the strength of the clan. The carvings that lined the walls told tales of gods and heroes, of battles fought in distant lands, and the great voyages that had brought them here.

Outside, the wind howled across the settlement, but within the hall, there was warmth and safety. The light of the fire flickered across the Jarl's face, his eyes reflecting the flames as he listened to the tales and decisions being made in the hall—a leader, surrounded by the strength of his people and the history that echoed in every beam and timber of the great hall.

Hand out the text.

> **Task:** 'Can you please read through the text and underline every time you see the author use one of the six forms of dramatic imagination: light and darkness, sound and silence, movement and stillness?'

Discussion.

Part 2

Say, 'Can I ask you all to stand for a moment?'

'Let's take a look at the Great Hall. Let's move the tables and chairs and see what it might have looked like.'

Support the students in rearranging the classroom.

Once they are ready, gather everyone together at the front of the class.

Ask, ‘Who do you suppose would be closest to the Jarl?’

Discussion.

‘I imagine his guards would stand close by, with their spears and shields in hand. Where would his family be? What about his most trusted warriors? Then again, who might be standing in the shadows at the side of the Hall?’

‘Could I ask you to step into this picture, imagine who you might be and why you are here. Some of you might be sitting, and some might be standing.’

Give the students time to arrange themselves around the room.

When they are ready, countdown: ‘3-2-1. Please stay perfectly still for a moment.’

Read: ‘The people of the clan are gathered together in the Great Hall. Their grey-haired Jarl sits in the high seat at the top of the Hall, surrounded by his guards and his family. He raises his hand and calls for silence.’

Speak as the Jarl:

‘I have brought you all here this evening to celebrate the end of the long winter. For many years we have fought together, travelled together, and suffered together. I consider you all my brothers and sisters. We have been successful—the mead flows in our cups, the food fills our plates, and the shields of our enemies hang on our walls! But I want more! We want more! News has reached me of an island across the sea, where people believe in a single God. They worship him on their knees in a temple filled with gold. They are unarmed and unprotected. Tomorrow, we shall load up our longships and sail to this island, taking what these people cannot defend and returning rich with gold and slaves!’

Come out of role.

Task: ‘Can I ask you now to return to your desks, open up your workbooks and draw pictures of everything you think you are going to need to go on this raid. It’ll be only what you can take on the longship.’ Slide 5

Note: as the students work ask them to refer to the picture on the slide and other pictures in the topic books you have provided. Ask them to be historically accurate and to look carefully at the style and design of Viking weapons, clothing, and armour.

Say, ‘The Vikings often gave names to their weapons, like Blood Drinker or Skull Splitter, using kennings—two-word metaphors common in Norse poetry. These

> vivid combinations, such as “whale-road” for the sea and “battle-sweat” for blood, added power and meaning to their language and stories.’
>
> **Task:** ‘Can I ask you to give names to your weapons and write them beside the pictures?’ Examples: ‘Skull-splitter’; ‘Shield-crusher’; ‘Blood-bringer’.
>
> **Task:** ‘Also, write how you got this weapon. Was it given to you as a prize, is it a family heirloom, or did you take it from a defeated enemy?’
>
> **Task:** ‘Now write whether this is your first raid, your first time overseas, or if you are a veteran of many raids and battles.’
>
> **Task:** ‘Write about any scars or marks you have from your time as a Viking. How did you get them, and what were the circumstances?’

Discussion.

Part 3

> *Return as the Jarl:*
> ‘The place we are to raid is called “Holy Isle” or Lindisfarne. It lies on an island across the tempestuous sea. Slide 6 They will not expect us, for they believe their God will protect them and they carry no weapons. We shall strike like serpents, returning with gold, silver, and slaves.’

Further Activities

Mapping

Ask the students to mark Viking homelands and their route to Lindisfarne on a map. Discuss how the longships made the journey possible. [See Appendix]

Look at Viking exploration Slide 7

Viking longship

Draw a Viking longship, considering historical accuracy in design. Slide 8

Shield Design

Students design their own shields using Viking patterns and symbols. Slide 9

Live Teaching Guide · Episode 2

The Attack on Lindisfarne

Curriculum focus

Viking raids; Anglo-Saxon history; comparative religious beliefs (Valhalla vs resurrection); historical interpretation; creative writing; Anglo-Saxon leadership; Viking legends; defence strategies; hillfort design.

Resources

- Slides
- Topic books
- Workbooks
- Videos

Student outcome

Written account from the perspective of the boy survivor; drawing of a hillfort for coastal defence.

Teaching route

5. Part 1: Narrate the crossing and attack (Slides 11–14); painting discussion (Slide 15); contrast Viking and Christian beliefs; read The Boy in the Tower; writing task.
6. Part 2: Report to King Æthelred (Slides 20–22); Pope's letter read aloud (Slide 23); narrate continued raids.
7. Further activities: hillfort drawing; Ragnar Lothbrok research.

Keep in view

Read The Boy in the Tower slowly, with full commitment – the dramatic tension depends on pacing. Discuss the contrast between Viking and Christian beliefs before students write. The Pope's letter works well read aloud in role. Note: Slide 20 is referenced twice in the original text (narrate and hillfort activity).

Episode 2: The Attack on Lindisfarne – Full Sequence

Summary

In this episode, students explore the Viking raid on Lindisfarne in 793 AD. They listen to a narrated account of the raid, engage in discussions about Viking and Christian beliefs, and analyse a painting depicting the event. They reflect on the experience of a young boy survivor, writing from his perspective about what he saw and how he survived. Students then examine King Æthelred's response and the Pope's letter urging action against the Vikings. The lesson concludes with tasks such as drawing a hillfort for coastal defence and learning about Viking legend, Ragnar Lothbrok.

Areas of Study

Viking raids, Anglo-Saxon history, comparative religious beliefs (Valhalla vs. resurrection), historical interpretation, creative writing, Anglo-Saxon leadership, Viking legends, defence strategies, hillfort design.

Resources

- Slides
- Topic books
- Workbooks
- Videos

Part 1 – Slide 11

Narrate: 'As the sun rose the Vikings prepared to set sail. They left the fjord and set off across the North Sea Slide 12 for the Holy Island of Lindisfarne. The crossing was rough. Slide 13 Lindisfarne was a small island off the northeast coast of England, home to a famous and wealthy monastery and a centre for Christian learning.'

'The monks were not expecting the Vikings and the monastery was undefended, the monks believed God would protect them.' Slide 14

'The Vikings looted the monasteries treasure and killed many of the monks, taking those who survived back to Scandinavia as slaves (thralls).'

> **Task:** Slide 15 "Here is a painting depicting the event. Take a moment to see what you notice. Talk to the person next to you.'

Discussion. Ask the students to describe what they can see. Point out the monk holding up the cross to defend himself. Discuss the difference between the monk's belief as a Christian in the resurrection, and the Viking's belief in Valhalla:

Christian Belief in the Resurrection: Christians believe in the resurrection of the body and eternal life in heaven after death, where souls are judged and rewarded with eternal peace in the presence of God.

Viking Belief in Valhalla: Vikings believed that warriors who died in battle were taken to Valhalla, a great hall where they would feast and prepare for the final battle, Ragnarök, alongside Odin.

The Boy in the Tower

Narrate: 'The boy had been out on the hill tending sheep when the Vikings arrived. Slide 16 He had seen them pull their ships out of the sea and come stomping up the beach bashing their swords and axes against their shields.'

'Terrified, he had climbed up the round tower beside the monastery and watched the raid through a hole in the wall.' Slide 17

'At one point, a Viking warrior came up the steps, and the boy hid under an old cloth sack. Slide 18 He could hear the Viking's footsteps growing louder, each one a heavy thud on the wooden floor. The boy held his breath, his heart pounding so hard he feared it might give him away. The sack's rough fabric scratched his skin, but he dared not move.

The Viking paused. The boy could see his feet beneath the cloth—thick boots, caked with mud, just inches from where he crouched. The Viking grunted, muttering something in a language the boy didn't understand. The sound of metal clinking—was it a sword, or armour? The boy squeezed his eyes shut, willing himself to be invisible.

For a moment, everything was silent except for the Viking's slow, deliberate breathing. Then, another thud—the Viking had moved on. The boy waited, every muscle tense, until the footsteps faded down the tower. Only then did he allow himself a shaky breath, still hidden beneath the sack, praying the danger had passed.'

'The boy was the only survivor on the island when the King's men arrived the next day. They found him still hiding under the old sack and brought him out in front of their commander. The commander sat with the boy and wrote down everything that happened.' Slide 19

Task: 'Open your workbooks and write the boy's words: what was he doing when the Vikings arrived, where did he go, what did he see, how did he survive?'

Part 2

Narrate: ‘The report was carried immediately to Æthelred I, King of Northumbria at Bamburgh.’ Slide 20

‘The King read the letter, a look of thunder on his face.’ Slide 21

‘The king ordered that news of the attack be sent immediately to the Pope, the head of the Roman Catholic church in Rome.’ Slide 22

The Pope replied with a letter of his own Slide 23

To Æthelred, King of Northumbria,

By the grace of God, I write to you with a heart filled with sorrow and righteous anger. News has reached Rome of the unspeakable horrors that befell Lindisfarne, a sacred place of prayer and learning. The attack on God’s servants and the plundering of holy relics is an affront not only to Northumbria but to Christendom itself.

How could such a grievous act occur on the soil you are sworn to protect? The blood of monks and the desecration of a holy site demands an answer. It is your solemn duty, as the protector of your realm and as a Christian king, to defend the Church and its people from such barbarity.

The Viking scourge must be met with divine justice, for the enemies of God and His Church cannot be allowed to triumph. I urge you, by the will of Christ, to take swift and decisive action. Let the world see that Northumbria stands firm in its faith.

May God guide your hand in these dark times.

In Christ, Pope Hadrian I

Narrate: ‘Despite the efforts of the Northumbrian kings during this period, the Vikings continued to raid monasteries and towns along the English coast between 794 and 850 AD.’

Further Activities

Draw a hillfort to protect the coastline of Northumbria. Slide 20

Learn about the story of Ragnar Lothbrok, (also known as Ragnar Lodbrok), a legendary figure whose exploits have become the stuff of Norse sagas.

Live Teaching Guide · Episode 3

The Great Heathen Army

Curriculum focus

History: Viking raids, the Great Heathen Army 865 AD, King Edmund. Geography: Viking movements in England. Religious Education: Edmund's martyrdom and sainthood. Art and Design: Anglo-Saxon crosses. PSHE: negotiation, leadership, decision-making. Writing.

Resources

- Slides
- Topic books
- Workbooks

Student outcome

Written decision as one of King Edmund's lords; written account of events in East Anglia.

Teaching route

8. Part 1: Narrate 50 years of raids and the Great Heathen Army (Slides 24–27).
9. Part 2: In role as King Edmund at his council; Viking ultimatum letter delivered.
10. Part 3: Students write their decision as lords; read responses aloud.
11. Part 4: Narrate Danegeld paid; Edmund's martyrdom and sainthood (Slide 29).
12. Further activities: written account; Anglo-Saxon cross drawing; research sons of Ragnar.

Keep in view

Students are in role as lords throughout Part 2. Hold the tension – do not resolve the situation for them before they write. In the Viking messenger scene, do not negotiate or concede: remind the class they are outnumbered. Slide 29 (Edmund's martyrdom) is graphic; exercise discretion.

Summary

This episode tells the story of the Viking invasion of East Anglia in 865 AD by the Great Heathen Army, led by Ivar the Boneless, Ubba, and Halfdan. After landing in East Anglia, the Vikings shifted from raiding to demanding tribute, known as Danegeld. King Edmund, knowing his forces couldn't match the Vikings', opted to negotiate. The Viking leaders issued an ultimatum, demanding gold, silver, and hostages. Left with few choices, King Edmund eventually paid the Danegeld. However, after refusing to renounce his Christian faith, Edmund was martyred. His death led to his veneration as a Christian saint.

Areas of Study

History: Viking raids, the Great Heathen Army 865 AD, King Edmund. Geography: Viking movements in England. Religious Education: Edmund's martyrdom and sainthood. Art and Design: Anglo-Saxon crosses and cultural symbols. PSHE: Negotiation, leadership, and decision-making. Writing: Write about the invasion, Viking ultimatum, Danegeld.

Resources

- Slides
- Topic books
- Workbooks

Part 1

Slide 24 – Narrate: 'For more than fifty years after the attack on Lindisfarne, the Vikings raided the east coast of England, targeting towns and monasteries, stealing treasures, and capturing many of the inhabitants to take back as thralls.'

'However, in 865, the Vikings changed their tactics and formed a mighty coalition of warriors from Denmark, called "The Great Heathen Army" by Christians. The army was led by several Viking leaders, most notably Ivar the Boneless, Ubba, and Halfdan, who were believed to be sons of the legendary Viking chieftain Ragnar Lothbrok. According to some accounts, the invasion was partly motivated by a desire for revenge after Ragnar's death at the hands of King Ælla of Northumbria, though this version blends history with legend.' Slide 25

'The size of the Great Heathen Army is difficult to estimate accurately, but it was likely a substantial force, consisting of warriors, settlers, and support personnel, including families. The army landed in East Anglia in 865 AD, Slide 26 where they initially made peace with the local rulers in exchange for supplies. Their strategy

was not to engage in immediate large-scale battles but to negotiate and demand tribute (Danegeld) from local kings.'

Part 2

'Imagine the first encounter between the leaders of the Great Viking Army and King Edmund of East Anglia. The Viking army is far larger than any force in eastern England, and their reputation is fearsome. The last thing King Edmund wants is a battle, which he is very likely to lose, so calls a king's council to discuss inviting the Viking leaders to a parley at the hillfort in Thetford.' Slide 27

Task: 'Come stand at the front of the class.'

In role as King Edmund:

'As lords of this realm, it is our duty to protect our people and property from those who would take them from us. You have all seen the campfires of the Great Heathen Army in the fields by the river. Let us not deceive ourselves—we neither have the men nor the means to engage them in battle. Therefore, we must plead for peace. I have invited their leaders to meet us here this evening to proclaim their terms. We must negotiate, but we shall not surrender more than we must.'

Task: Pause the story and ask, "What do you make of that?" Discuss the predicament of the King and his lords. Remind them of the fierce reputation of the Vikings and the sons of Ragnar Lothbrok. What would they be prepared to give the Vikings in return for peace? Gold, land, people?

Narrate: 'It was at that moment there was a loud thump on the gates of the fort and a messenger from the Viking army was admitted to the courtyard. He carried a large axe on his back. He walked up to the King and announced:' Slide 28

To King Edmund of East Anglia,

I speak the words of the sons of Ragnar Lothbrok—Ivar the Boneless, Ubba, and Halfdan—leaders of the great host of warriors who have descended upon your shores. This is their message.

By the might of our blades, your land now lies at the mercy of the Great Viking Army. We have come to claim what is owed, not merely by the strength of our numbers, but by the will of the gods and the blood of our father, Ragnar, who fell unjustly by the hand of the English.

To spare your people from the fire and fury of our conquest, we demand that you pay us tribute—Danegeld—in the form of silver and treasure, sufficient to satisfy our warriors and ensure the safety of your kingdom. In addition, we require the firstborn children of each of your lords, to be held as hostages, guaranteeing your compliance with our terms.

Refuse, and we shall lay waste to your towns, burn your holy places, and take your people as thralls. No wall will stand, no shield will hold, and no prayer will save you.

The choice is yours, King Edmund: pay the Danegeld, and we will grant you peace and leave your kingdom intact. Defy us, and we will visit upon East Anglia the full wrath of the sons of Ragnar.

You have until the next full moon to meet our demands.

Ivar the Boneless, Ubba, Halfdan, Sons of Ragnar Lothbrok, Leaders of the Great Viking Army

Task: ‘Let’s pause the story there for a moment. “How would you negotiate with this Viking messenger?” Discussion.

Task: Return to the story. Speak in role as the Viking messenger: “You have heard my words, what say you?” Discuss. Don’t compromise, remind them they are outnumbered and would stand no chance in battle.

Part 3

Task: ‘In your workbooks, please write down what you would do in this terrible situation if you were one of these lords and why. Each lord has land, servants, and tenant farmers (called serfs) who work the land. You have few options: stand up to the Vikings (and likely die); flee to another land with whatever you can carry; or pay the Danegeld and swallow your pride.’

Task: “The next morning, the King called his lords together to hear their responses.”

The students read their decisions, explaining what they would do and why.

Part 4

Narrate: ‘Later that day, the Vikings arrived to collect their Danegeld. King Edmund paid his due. Those who resisted were killed, some who fled managed to escape to other regions or overseas, but those caught trying to escape were executed.’

‘The Vikings stayed in East Anglia until the next year. Some settled and continued to live there permanently, others marched north and captured the city of York, which they later called Jorvik.’

‘The following winter, the army returned to Thetford and murdered King Edmund after he refused to give up his Christian faith. Legend says that he was tied to a tree, beaten, and shot with arrows. And that afterwards he was beheaded, and his severed head was thrown into a forest. Miraculously, his followers were said to have found the head after hearing a wolf guarding it call out “Here, here” in Latin. King Edmund’s death led to him being venerated as a Christian saint and martyr. His remains were later enshrined at Bury St Edmunds, which became an important religious site in medieval England.’ Slide 29 (show at your own discretion.) (Ref. The martyrdom of Edmund: Folios 14r and 14v from the 12th-century Passio Sancto Eadmundi (Morgan Library and Museum, New York)

Further Activities

Write an account of the events in East Anglia: how the Vikings arrived and gave the King an ultimatum, how the King paid the Danegeld, but was later murdered and became a saint.

Draw an Anglo-Saxon cross in memory of Saint Edmund. Slide 30

Discover what happened to the sons of Ragnar Lothbrok.

Live Teaching Guide · Episode 4

Alfred the Great

Curriculum focus

History: Viking invasions, Alfred the Great, Battle of Edington, Treaty of Wedmore. Geography: location of Wessex, Athelney, and the Danelaw. Religious Education: Christianity and Guthrum's conversion. Art and Design: representing moments from Alfred's escape. Literacy: writing descriptions of historical events.

Resources

- Slides
- Topic books
- Workbooks

Student outcome

Written description of Alfred's escape, time in the marshes, and defeat of Guthrum at Edington; map of England after the Treaty of Wedmore.

Teaching route

13. Part 1: Introduce Alfred (Slide 33); think-aloud in role as Alfred; students become housecarls; discuss Viking truce offer.
14. Part 2: Groups plan the escape; tapestry moment in groups (Slide 36).
15. Part 3: Narrate Athelney, Battle of Edington, Treaty of Wedmore (Slides 37–40).
16. Further activities: written account; map of England after Wedmore; Alfred and the burnt cakes research.

Keep in view

When selecting housecarls, name each student's quality individually – this builds collective investment. The tapestry moment needs a full countdown and at least ten seconds of held stillness to land properly. The further activity (Alfred and the cakes) works well as independent reading or homework.

Summary

In this episode, Alfred the Great faces a Viking attack led by Guthrum, who has taken control of much of England. The Vikings surround Alfred's royal estate at Chippenham over Christmas, forcing him to flee with his loyal housecarls to the marshes of Athelney. Hiding in the marshes, Alfred regroups and gathers his forces. In the spring, he surprises the Viking army, defeating them at the Battle of Edington. Guthrum surrenders, and the Treaty of Wedmore is established, leading to Guthrum's conversion to Christianity and the creation of the Danelaw.

Areas of Study

History: Viking invasions, Alfred the Great, Battle of Edington, Treaty of Wedmore; Geography: location of Wessex, Athelney, and the Danelaw; Religious Education: Christianity and Guthrum's conversion; Art and Design: representing moments from Alfred's escape; Literacy: writing descriptions of historical events.

Resources

- Slides
- Topic books
- Workbooks

Part 1

Gather the students at the front of the class. Slide 31

Narrate: 'Following the campaigns of Ragnar Lothbrok's sons, Guthrum emerged as a leader of the Great Heathen Army. By the 870s, Viking forces controlled East Anglia, Northumbria, and parts of Mercia, with only the Kingdom of Wessex standing in opposition to their complete conquest of England.' Slide 32 – map

'The King of Wessex was a young man called Alfred.'

Task: Show Slide 33. Ask, "Take a moment to look at this depiction of Alfred. What might you say about his interests and the things that are important to him?" [Draw attention to the manuscripts, suggesting that he valued education, literacy, and the preservation of knowledge. The image on the wall hints that he appreciated art. His hands are clasped together, and his eyes are staring at the floor, suggesting he has a lot on his mind and might be in prayer].

Bring a chair to the front of the class. Say, 'When I sit on this chair I'm going to represent Alfred at this moment in his life. Listen to what he is thinking to himself.'

As Alfred:

‘They are at the gates. Not even our Lord’s Birth Day holds them from their blood lust. They are truly heathen.’

Stand up, come out of role, and ask, ‘What did you hear?’

Discuss Alfred’s words. Repeat them if necessary.

Convey the information:

- The Vikings, under the leadership of Guthrum, have made a surprise attack on Alfred’s royal estate in Chippenham, in the heart of Wessex.
- It is Christmas, and the Christians never fight over Christmas.
- The Vikings have surrounded the walls of the King’s palace and are threatening to burn it to the ground.

Bring the students into the fiction: “Stand up as the king’s housecarls (his elite bodyguards).” Slide 34 Encourage the students to represent the soldiers holding weapons. Demonstrate how to hold a spear. Select one or two who have grasped the idea and say: “Here is one I would trust my life to.” “Here is one who will not leave my side.” “Here is one who will stand with me until the end.”

Speak as Alfred:

‘The Vikings are calling for a truce. They say if we surrender peacefully, they will spare our lives and treat our people with respect. What do you say?’

Discuss the Viking’s offer. Remember what happened to King Edmund.

Alfred:

‘We have no choice but to try and escape to the marshes of Athelney, there we can hide from the Heathens. But how can we escape from this place, they have it surrounded?’

Part 2

Task: ‘Look at the image on Slide 35 and, working together in groups, draw a plan to escape the Vikings and hide in the marshes of Athelney.’

Task: After creating a plan ask the students to represent one moment from the escape as if it were woven into a tapestry: “Can I ask you now, working in your groups, to create one moment from the escape (which, in the centuries to come, would become one of the most famous in history) as if it were woven into the fabric of a tapestry.” Slide 36

Give the students time to work together and decide which moment to choose. Help those groups who need extra support.

Once they are ready, count down, '3...2...1... hold it there.'

Narrate as the students stay in the picture:

'Under the cover of darkness, Alfred and his small band of household crept out of the hillfort, past the guards and those sleeping in their tents. They waded across the river and disappeared into the darkness of the trees. Not even the owls nor the night creatures of the forest heard their passing.' [Adapt this to represent the students' ideas]

Part 3

Ask the students to relax and come back to the front of the class.

Narrate: 'Alfred and his household emerged from the forest and found refuge in the waterways of the marshes of Athelney. The marshes offered a natural place of protection, with their dense wetlands and difficult terrain that the Vikings were reluctant to follow. Hidden from view, Alfred used this brief time to regroup, gather together his loyal supporters, and plan his next move.' Slide 37

'When he re-emerged the following spring, it was Alfred's turn to catch his enemies off-guard. He gathered together his scattered forces from across Wessex and attacked the Viking army at the Battle of Edington. Slide 38 The battle saw fierce, close-quarters combat between the Anglo-Saxons and Vikings, with Alfred's troops forming a shield wall to withstand the Viking onslaught. After intense fighting, Alfred's forces broke through the Viking ranks, forcing Guthrum and his men to retreat to their fortified camp.'

'Following their defeat, Guthrum and his army were besieged by Alfred's forces. Realizing they were outnumbered and unable to break out, Guthrum eventually surrendered.'

'This led to the Treaty of Wedmore, where Guthrum agreed to convert to Christianity Slide 39 and to return to the lands of the North and East Anglia, which became known as the Danelaw.'

Map of the Danelaw. Slide 40

Further Activities

Write a description of Alfred's escape from Chippenham, his time hiding in the marshes of Athelney, and his defeat of Guthrum at the Battle of Edington.

Draw a map of England after the Treaty of Wedmore. Slide 40

Live Teaching Guide · Episode 5

The Vikings Settle

Curriculum focus

History: Viking settlements, the Danelaw. Geography: mapping Viking territories. Law and Citizenship: Viking legal systems. Art and Design: drawing Viking settlements. Drama: role-playing legal scenarios. Literacy: discussion, debate, and narrative writing.

Resources

- Slides
- Topic books
- Workbooks
- Worksheet: Viking Place Names (Appendix)
- A3 paper and art resources

Student outcome

A large group drawing of a Viking settlement; participation in the Thing legal scenarios; Viking place name work.

Teaching route

17. Part 1: Narrate settlements (Slides 41–43); Viking place name suffixes; place names worksheet.
18. Part 2: Where to settle – discussion (Slides 44–45); design a Viking village on A3.
19. Part 3: Narrate the Thing (Slide 46); rearrange classroom; law-speaker ritual; first trial (tool theft).
20. Part 4: Further Thing scenarios in groups or as a class (Slide 47).

Keep in view

Rearranging the classroom for the Thing takes time – plan this before the lesson if possible. The law-speaker role works well if the teacher takes it initially to model the register and tone. The first trial sets the expectations for the Thing; keep the rules of the assembly clear before starting.

Summary

Students explore Viking settlements after the Treaty of Wedmore, learning about Viking place names and settlement practices. They work in groups to design a Viking village, considering important features like longhouses and boathouses. The sequence also introduces the Thing, a Viking assembly for settling disputes, with students enacting roles in legal scenarios. They debate various cases, such as land disputes and compensation, learning how the Viking legal system worked.

Areas of Study

History (Viking settlements, Danelaw), Geography (mapping Viking territories), Law and Citizenship (Viking legal systems), Art and Design (drawing Viking settlements), Drama (role-playing legal scenarios), Literacy (discussion, debate, and narrative writing).

Resources

- Slides
- Topic books
- Workbooks
- Worksheet – Appendix: ‘Episode 5 – Viking Place Names’
- A3 paper and other resources for step 6

Part 1 – Slide 41

Narrate: ‘In the years following the Treaty of Wedmore the Vikings began to settle all over the Danelaw. Establishing the city of Jorvik (York) in the North and other places in Mercia, East Anglia, and Northumbria. In that time, as many as tens of thousands of people came from Scandinavia and settled in England.’ Slides 42

‘You can still find their new homes in the names of places that end in suffixes like: Slide 43

–by: Meaning “farm” or “village.” For example: Grimsby, Whitby, Derby, Selby, Wetherby.

–thorpe: Meaning “secondary settlement” or “outlying farm.” For example: Scunthorpe, Mablethorpe, Cleethorpes.

–thwaite: Meaning “clearing” or “meadow.” For example: Braithwaite, Satterthwaite, Applethwaite.

–toft: Meaning “homestead” or “plot of land.” For examples: Lowestoft, Eastoft, Langtoft.

Task: ‘Take a look at this worksheet.’ [See Appendix ‘Episode 5 – Viking Place Names’]

Part 2

Task: ‘Where would be a good place to settle if you were part of a Viking clan. What things would you consider as important?’ Slide 44

Discussion. Slide 45

Task: ‘Working as part of a group, draw a large picture (A3) of your Viking settlement, include all the important factors on, as well as longhouse, farm buildings, workshops, storehouses, barns, boathouses for ships, watchtowers for defence, market stalls for trading, temple, or church for worship.’

Part 3 – Viking Law and Order

Narrate: ‘Once a season, the people of the settlement would come together in an open space to hold a Thing. Slide 46 Here, they would discuss important matters, settle disputes, make laws, and ensure justice was served. Farmers, warriors, and craftsmen alike would voice their concerns, and the law-speaker would recite the laws from memory. Decisions made at the Thing shaped the future of the community, and everyone’s opinion could be heard.’

Task: ‘How should we rearrange the classroom to represent the Thing?’

Help the students to move the furniture. Decide where the ‘law-speaker’ will sit.

Task: ‘How should we start the Thing? Will there be a ritual of some kind?’

Discuss.

Enact, ‘Start the fiction by enacting the ritual.’

Speak in role as the law-speaker:

“Today we are gathered to uphold the laws of our people, settle disputes, and ensure justice is served. Let all speak with truth, for the decisions we make here will shape the fate of our community.”

> “The first trial today is of a man accused of stealing tools from a fellow villager. If found guilty, he may be declared an outlaw, banished from the community.”

Pause the fiction to divide the class between those who would defend the man and those who would have him convicted: “Let’s pause the story for a moment. Can I ask the people on this side of the room to think of a defence for the man. He was caught stealing the tools, so his guilt is not in question, but what could be his defence? And those on the other side to consider why he should be “outlawed,” meaning banished from the community.”

Give time for discussion in groups.

Go back into the fiction to hear both sides. One of the students might represent the man on trial.

Part 4

Here are some other scenarios for the Thing to consider. These can be done in groups or as a whole class, just like the previous example. Slide 47

Land Dispute: Two families claim ownership of the same plot of land, each saying it was promised to them by a deceased relative. The Thing must decide who has the rightful claim.

Weregild Compensation: A man accidentally kills his neighbour’s cow, which was a crucial source of milk for the family. The neighbour demands weregild (compensation) for the loss.

Marriage Agreement: Two families have arranged a marriage, but one family refuses to provide the agreed dowry. The other family brings the dispute to the Thing to enforce the agreement.

Boundary Dispute: Neighbours argue over the boundary between their farms after a river changed course. Both claim the new land created by the river belongs to them.

Trial by Combat: Two warriors accuse each other of cowardice during a raid. They demand a trial by combat to prove their honour in front of the Thing.

Fishing Rights: A dispute arises between two families over who has the right to fish in a section of the river. The Thing must decide who has the legal claim to the fishing grounds.

Assault Accusation: One villager accuses another of attacking him during a feast. Both men bring witnesses, and the Thing must decide if an assault occurred and what the punishment should be.

Inheritance Dispute: Following the death of a wealthy landowner, his two sons argue over how to divide the inheritance. One son claims he should inherit the entire estate as the eldest, while the other argues for an equal split.

Breaking a Trade Agreement: A traveling merchant claims a villager broke a trade agreement by not delivering goods in exchange for payment. The Thing must decide if the villager should return the money or fulfil the agreement.

Further Activities

Find out more about life in a Viking Settlement. Visit the BBC Bitesize website.

Find out more about Viking beliefs. The Gods and the afterlife.

Live Teaching Guide · Episode 6

Vikings Resurgence and Conflict

Curriculum focus

History: Viking England, Sweyn Forkbeard. Art: tapestry depiction. Literacy: writing as a chronicler. Archaeology: burial ship analysis. Drama: historical re-enactment.

Resources

- Slides
- Topic books
- Workbooks
- Six Events in the Life of Sweyn Forkbeard cards (print and cut, one full set per group)
- Archaeologists' Notes (print, one per student or per group)

Student outcome

Written account as a chronicler with illustration; drawing of a burial object for Sweyn Forkbeard's burial ship.

Teaching route

21. Part 1: Narrate Sweyn Forkbeard (Slides 48–50); groups choose one of the Six Events and represent it as a tapestry; read description aloud.
22. Part 2: Write as a chronicler; illustrate.
23. Part 3: Viking burial ship (Slide 52); Archaeologists' Notes; draw a burial object and write who brought it and why.
24. Further activities: Viking burial ritual research.

Keep in view

Print and cut the Six Events cards before the session – one full set per group. Encourage students to "get the faces right" in the tapestry moment. The burial ship discussion is rich; allow generous time before moving students to the drawing and writing task.

Episode 6: Vikings Resurgence and Conflict – Full Sequence

Summary

Students explore the life of Sweyn Forkbeard through storytelling, group tasks, and creative activities. They depict key moments from his life, write as chroniclers, and analyse Viking burial rituals using an imaginary excavation of Sweyn's burial ship. The lesson emphasises understanding Viking beliefs, leadership, and their impact on England through art, writing, and discussion.

Areas of Study

History (Viking England), Art (tapestry depiction), Literacy (writing as a chronicler), Archaeology (burial analysis), Drama (historical re-enactment).

Resources

- Slides
- Topic books
- Workbooks
- Print and cut out the 'Six Events in the life of Sweyn Forkbeard' for step 5
- Print out 'Archaeologists' Notes' for step 16

Part 1

Slide 48 – Narrate: 'A hundred years after the death of Alfred the Great, the long peace came to an end when the Viking King, Sweyn Forkbeard of Denmark Slide 49 decided to attack England. He saw that the kingdom was weakened under the rule of King Æthelred the Unready, with internal divisions and poor defences making it vulnerable to invasion. Sweyn aimed to claim the riches of England, plundering its towns, and ultimately seeking to take control of the throne himself.'

'Sweyn Forkbeard born around 960 AD became the first Viking ruler of England. His life was marked by conquest, rebellion, and ambition, leading to his eventual reign as one of the most powerful Scandinavian kings of his time.'

Narrate: "Hanging in the halls of his great longhouse long after his death in 1014 was a magnificent tapestry depicting Sweyn Forkbeard's life and adventures." Slide 50

Task: "Working in groups, look at the events of his life and select one to depict as if it were part of the tapestry."

Slide 51 Hand out the “Six Events in the Life of Sweyn Forkbeard,” one complete set for each group. Ask them to read all six and choose a moment from one of the events to depict.

Support the groups as they work to represent the moment in the tapestry.

Ask each group to write a short description of their chosen moment to be read out. For example, “Sweyn Forkbeard leads his army into battle at Maldon.”

Have each group read their description and display their chosen moment, one at a time.

Encourage the students to “get the faces right”—not to pretend, but to genuinely try to capture the expression of the people as the artist intended.

Discuss each moment, focusing on how the “artist” has chosen to depict the people in the tapestry. For example, “You can see the furious intent of Sweyn here and those around him. He must have been terrifying to face in battle.”

Part 2

Task: ‘In your workbooks, choose a moment from Sweyn’s life and write about it as if you are a chronicler from that time. Describe the event in detail, the significance of the moment, and how Sweyn’s actions affected the people around him and his legacy. Make sure to use vivid language to bring the event to life, just as a chronicler would.’

Task: ‘Illustrate your writing with a drawing.’

Part 3

Task: ‘Look at the Viking burial ship. Slide 52 What do you notice?’

Task: ‘Imagine this was the burial ship of Sweyn Forkbeard. What might it tell us about his beliefs and the things that were important to him, if we were a team of archaeologists uncovering it?’

Discussion.

Task: Look at the ‘Archaeologists’ Notes’ around the image.

Discussion.

Task: Draw an object to be placed in the burial ship of Sweyn Forkbeard. Write beside it, who brought this object and why. For example, “a sword brought by one of his loyal warriors, who fought alongside Sweyn in many battles, to symbolize Sweyn’s strength and leadership in war.”

Further Activities

Find out more about Viking burial rituals.

Live Teaching Guide · Episode 7

The End of the Viking Era

Curriculum focus

History: Viking England, Cnut, Battle of Stamford Bridge. Art: historical illustrations. Drama. Literacy: creative writing, point-of-view. Politics: monarchy and power dynamics.

Resources

- Slides
- Workbooks
- Strips of paper (one per student, for Step 8)
- Printed timeline (Appendix: Episode 7)
- Printed Battle of Stamford Bridge text (Appendix)

Student outcome

Written account of the Battle of Stamford Bridge from a Viking's point of view; illustrated timeline.

Teaching route

25. Part 1: Narrate Cnut (Slides 53–55); coronation scene – students decide if they are for or against the king; watcher task.
26. Part 2: Narrate Cnut's legacy (Slide 56); timeline illustration task (Slide 57).
27. Part 3: Narrate the Battle of Stamford Bridge (Slides 58–62); read the Stamford Bridge account; draw the Berserker on the bridge.
28. Part 4: Point-of-view writing task (Slide 63).

Keep in view

Print the timeline and Battle of Stamford Bridge text before the session. In the coronation scene, students must commit to a position and write it down before it is revealed – do not let them discuss it with others first. The watcher task (half the class identifying who is for or against the king) adds real tension; allow enough time for it.

Episode 7: The End of the Viking Era – Full Sequence

Summary

In this episode students explore the rise and rule of Cnut, the final Viking battles in England, and the cultural and political changes during his reign. They analyse political dissent at Cnut's coronation and examine key moments in the Battle of Stamford Bridge.

Areas of Study

History (Viking England), Art (historical illustrations), Drama, Literacy (creative writing, point-of-view), Politics (monarchy and power dynamics).

Resources

- Slides
- Workbooks
- Strips of paper, enough for everyone for Step 8
- Printed timeline, see Appendix: Episode 7 – Timeline
- Print out copies of the 'Battle of Stamford Bridge', see Appendix

Part 1

Slide 53 – Narrate: 'After the death of Sweyn Forkbeard in 1014, there were two years of unrest before his son, Cnut finally wrestled the throne from his rival, Edmund Ironside, the son of Æthelred the Unready. After a series of fierce battles, the two reached an agreement to divide the kingdom. However, Edmund's sudden death later that year left Cnut as the undisputed King of all England, uniting it with Denmark and Norway to create a vast North Sea Empire.' Slide 54

'Cnut's coronation took place in 1017, Slide 55 in London, which was a traditional site for the crowning of English kings. Cnut embraced Christianity and was crowned in a Christian ceremony, signalling his intention to rule in continuity with Anglo-Saxon traditions rather than as a foreign invader.'

'Not everyone there, however, was happy to see him made king. Edmund's loyal supporters and family, still grieving his sudden death, harboured deep suspicions about the circumstances. Many believed that Edmund had been cheated out of his rightful claim, and rumours of assassination on Cnut's orders, though unproven, spread quickly. Tensions escalated as Cnut began consolidating his power. To secure his rule, he ordered the execution of key opponents and exiled other potential threats to his reign.'

Task: Ask the students to stand. ‘Let’s imagine the ceremony at the cathedral. Some of those there would be close allies to the king, trusted advisors, family, and warriors who had stood by him through battles and the uncertainty of war. They would look upon the coronation with pride, knowing their loyalty had been rewarded. Others, however, would watch with unease, perhaps even resentment. These were former supporters of Edmund Ironside or the Anglo-Saxon nobility, who now found themselves in a difficult position—forced to accept Cnut’s rule or face the consequences. The tension in the air would have been palpable, as behind the ceremonial grandeur, whispers of betrayal and suspicion still lingered, a reminder that Cnut’s path to the throne had been paved with blood.’

Ask a student to represent Cnut receiving the crown.

Task: Ask the rest of the class to decide where they are at this moment: “Please find a place for yourself at the ceremony. You might be one of the clergy conducting the ritual, a family member standing close by, or perhaps one of those who harbours thoughts of hatred and betrayal.”

Ask, “Everyone ready? 3...2...1 Hold it there for a moment.”

Task: “As you stand there, can I ask you to decide whether you are for or against the king. Without saying a word to anyone, please take one of the strips of paper and write whether you are for the king or against him and explain why. For example: “I am for the king because he has brought peace and stability after years of war,” or “I am against the king because I believe he betrayed Edmund and seized the throne unfairly.”

Say, “Memorise what you’ve written and show no one.”

“Now return to your place at the ceremony.”

Task: “Among the King’s retinue – his assistants and advisers – were those given the job of watching those who attended the coronation. I wonder if they could spot who was for and who was against just by looking at their faces?”

Task: Divide the class in half. Ask one half to be the ‘watchers’ and the other half to be the attendees. Go through each attendee and ask the watchers if they believe the attendee is for or against the king. Each time, the attendee will then answer truthfully, giving their reasons.

Repeat with the other side of the class.

Discuss: “What would you do if you were the king’s advisers? Should you accept some degree of dissatisfaction, knowing it may be inevitable, or should the king take more decisive action to suppress opposition? Consider whether it’s better to rule through tolerance or to take stricter measures to maintain control.”

Part 2

Narrate: Slide 56 “Despite his difficult start, Cnut eventually secured his position as king through a combination of military strength, diplomacy, and religious alignment. He won over many of the Anglo-Saxon nobles by retaining their lands and titles, marrying Emma of Normandy to solidify his claim, and embracing Christianity. Over time, his reign brought a period of relative peace and prosperity to England. Cnut’s rule marked the height of Viking power in England, and he was remembered by many as a wise and just ruler who bridged the gap between the Vikings and the English.”

‘When he died in 1035, his sons, Harold Harefoot and Harthacnut, struggled to maintain control over Cnut’s empire. Tensions between them and their supporters weakened the unity of the North Sea Empire. Harold ruled England from 1035 to 1040, but his reign was marked by instability. After his death, Harthacnut briefly took the throne, ruling England and Denmark, but his reign was also short-lived. The death of Harthacnut in 1042 effectively ended the Viking dynasty in England, paving the way for the restoration of the Anglo-Saxon line with Edward the Confessor.

Task: ‘Look at the timeline in Appendix – Episode 7. Draw illustrations to go in the margin and add to your workbook.’ Slide 57

Part 3

Narrate: Slide 58 “The final battle of the Vikings in England happened at Stamford Bridge when Harald Hardrada, the King of Norway, launched a last great invasion in September 1066. King Harold Godwinson of England marched his army north to confront the invaders. The battle was fierce, but Harold’s forces decisively defeated the Vikings, killing Hardrada and Tostig, Harold’s own brother who had allied with the Norwegians. This battle marked the end of the Viking Age in England, just weeks before the Norman invasion at the Battle of Hastings.”

‘Harald Hardrada was the last of the Viking Kings to invade England. Allegedly standing seven feet tall Hardrada was a terrifying figure who rose to prominence through his strength, bravery and willpower. His name Hardrada translates to hard-ruler, a title earned due to his ruthless actions.’

Task: ‘Read this account of the Battle.’ [See Appendix – Battle of Stamford Bridge]

Show Slide 59, 60, 61, 62

Task: In your workbooks draw a picture of the ‘Berserker’ on the bridge.

Part 4

> **Task:** ‘Look at the Vikings on Slide 63, write an account of the battle from one of their points-of-view. What they saw, what they heard, how they felt. When were they most excited, when were they most afraid, and how did they respond to the chaos around them? Describe key moments, like charging into battle or defending against an attack. Finally, reflect on the aftermath—how did they feel once the battle was over? Broken, defeated, and haunted by what they had experienced?”

Further Activities

Find out about the legend of Cnut and the sea.

Appendix

Reference materials for each episode. Original text preserved in full.

Appendix: Episode 1

The Great Hall – Text for Distribution

Printed copies of this text are handed out in Part 1 of Episode 1 for the dramatic imagination annotation task.

The Jarl sat at one end of the great hall; his figure outlined by the flickering glow of the fire at the room's centre. His high seat, carved from ancient oak, stood on a raised platform, towering over the long wooden tables that stretched the length of the hall. The armrests were adorned with intricate carvings of wolves and ravens, symbols of power and wisdom, while the floor around him was softened with the pelts of bears and wolves, marking his status as leader and protector.

The hall itself was vast, its roof arching high above, supported by thick beams that groaned under the weight of the thatched roof. The air was thick with the scent of woodsmoke and roasted meat, mingling with the earthy smell of damp furs and the tang of spilled mead. Long tables lined the room, where warriors and villagers alike gathered, their laughter and conversation rising to the rafters in a hum of activity.

Around the fire, which crackled and snapped at the centre of the hall, the faces of those gathered were illuminated in the dim light. Shadows danced across the walls, where shields, swords, and battle-worn banners hung, testaments to past victories and the strength of the clan. The carvings that lined the walls told tales of gods and heroes, of battles fought in distant lands, and the great voyages that had brought them here.

Outside, the wind howled across the settlement, but within the hall, there was warmth and safety. The light of the fire flickered across the Jarl's face, his eyes reflecting the flames as he listened to the tales and decisions being made in the hall—a leader, surrounded by the strength of his people and the history that echoed in every beam and timber of the great hall.

Viking Longships – Reference

1. Design and Construction

Long and Narrow: Viking longships were characterised by their long, narrow shape, designed to cut through the water efficiently. They ranged in length from about 20 to 30 metres (65 to 100 feet), though some could be even longer.

Shallow Draft: One of the most important features was the shallow draft, meaning the ship didn't sit very deep in the water. This allowed longships to navigate both open seas and shallow rivers, enabling the Vikings to sail up rivers far inland for raids and settlements.

Double-Ended: Longships were double-ended, meaning both ends of the ship were shaped similarly, which allowed them to reverse direction without turning around, making them agile in battle and exploration.

Wood Construction: They were built primarily from oak wood, which was abundant in Scandinavia. The hulls were made using the clinker method, where overlapping wooden planks were fastened together with iron rivets, creating a sturdy and flexible structure.

Oars and Sail: Longships had both oars and sails. Oarsmen powered the ship in calm waters or close to shore, while a single large rectangular sail made of wool or linen was used for longer journeys across the open sea. There could be as many as 40–60 oarsmen, depending on the size of the ship.

2. Speed and Efficiency

Longships were fast and highly manoeuvrable, capable of reaching speeds of up to 15 knots (about 28 km/h or 17 mph) under sail.

Their speed, combined with the ability to quickly beach the ships on shorelines, made them perfect for raids. Vikings could land, attack, and retreat before the enemy had time to react.

3. Types of Longships

Viking longships came in different types, suited to different purposes:

Drakkar (Dragon Ship): The drakkar was a large warship, often featuring a carved dragon or serpent on the prow to intimidate enemies. These were typically used by Viking leaders and could carry a large crew of warriors.

Snekkja: A smaller, more versatile longship, designed for both raids and exploration. It could be used on open seas or rivers.

Karvi: This was a multi-purpose vessel, used for trading, transportation, and smaller raids.

4. Role in Viking Raids and Exploration

Viking longships allowed for swift surprise attacks on coastal towns and monasteries. Their shallow draft meant they could navigate up rivers to attack inland settlements, as seen during the famous raid on Lindisfarne in 793 AD.

These ships also played a key role in Viking exploration. Vikings used longships to reach far-flung destinations, including Iceland, Greenland, and even North America (Leif Erikson is believed to have reached modern-day Canada around 1000 AD).

In addition to raiding, the ships were used for trade and colonisation, as Vikings settled in places like England, Ireland, and Normandy.

5. Symbolism and Status

Longships were more than just practical vessels; they were symbols of status and power. A well-crafted, decorated longship was a sign of wealth and military prowess.

They were often ceremonially buried with their owners. Famous Viking burials, such as the Oseberg ship burial in Norway, show how important these vessels were to Viking culture. In such burials, the ship would be buried with a chieftain or noble, along with treasures and sometimes human sacrifices, to accompany the deceased into the afterlife.

6. Navigational Skills

Vikings were exceptional navigators, using their longships to travel across vast distances, often with little more than their knowledge of celestial navigation, wind patterns, and landmarks. Some historians believe they used tools like the sunstone, a type of crystal, to help find the sun on cloudy days.

Their ability to navigate both the treacherous open seas of the North Atlantic and shallow coastal waters gave them a significant advantage over their contemporaries.

Appendix: Episode 2

Ragnar Lothbrok

One of the most famous Vikings during the early raids between 793 and 850 AD was Ragnar Lothbrok (also known as Ragnar Lodbrok), a legendary figure whose exploits have become the stuff of Norse sagas. While the historical accuracy of Ragnar's life is debated, his story captures the spirit of the Viking Age, particularly the early raids on Britain and France.

According to the sagas, Ragnar was a fierce warrior and seafarer who led numerous raids on the coasts of England and France. He was known for his cunning, ambition, and his desire to prove himself as the greatest Viking of his time. One of his most famous early raids took place in 845 AD, when he sailed up the River Seine with a fleet of ships and attacked Paris.

The Frankish King Charles the Bald tried to stop Ragnar by assembling a large army, but Ragnar's forces were able to outmanoeuvre them. Legend has it that Ragnar even captured some Frankish soldiers, hanging them as a display of power and negotiating a massive ransom in gold for Paris's safety.

Another key part of Ragnar's legend involves his sons—Bjorn Ironside, Ivar the Boneless, and others—who became famous warriors in their own right. After Ragnar's death, his sons would continue his legacy, leading massive raids and invasions across Britain.

According to one version of the story, Ragnar eventually met his end in Northumbria. After being captured by King Ælla of Northumbria, he was thrown into a pit of venomous snakes as punishment for his raids. It's said that as he died, Ragnar uttered a famous line: "How the little piglets would grunt if they knew how the old boar suffers," referring to how his sons would avenge him.

Ragnar's life and death, whether purely myth or based in reality, came to symbolize the fearless and ruthless nature of the Viking warriors during the early raids on England and beyond. His legendary status endures in Norse mythology and history.

Appendix: Episode 3

The Fates of Ivar the Boneless, Ubba, and Halfdan

1. Ivar the Boneless

Ivar the Boneless was one of the most infamous Viking leaders and is often considered the mastermind behind the Great Heathen Army's invasion of England. Despite his reputation, the exact nature of his death remains uncertain.

Death and Legacy: According to the historical record, Ivar the Boneless disappears from chronicles after 870 AD. Some sources suggest he may have died of natural causes or disease after consolidating Viking power in England, while others speculate that he returned to Ireland, where a Viking leader named Ímar (who many scholars believe could be Ivar) died in 873 AD. This Ivar or Ímar is recorded as the founder of the Norse-Gael kingdom of Dublin, and his death is noted in the Irish annals as a significant loss for the Vikings.

Reputation: Ivar is remembered for his ruthlessness, strategic mind, and leadership in avenging the death of his father, Ragnar Lothbrok. He is frequently depicted in Norse sagas as cunning and brutal.

2. Ubba

Ubba was one of the most feared Viking leaders in England and another prominent figure in the Great Heathen Army. His role in the Viking campaigns was characterised by both raiding and battles against the Anglo-Saxons.

Death: Ubba is believed to have been killed in 878 AD during the Battle of Cynwit (also known as the Battle of Cynuit). According to Anglo-Saxon accounts, Ubba led a Viking force that besieged a hillfort, likely in Devon. However, he was defeated by a smaller Anglo-Saxon force, possibly under the command of Ealdorman Odda of

Devon. Ubba's death marked a significant blow to Viking morale. Some sources claim that his famous Raven Banner (a Viking flag associated with victory) was captured by the Anglo-Saxons during this battle.

Legacy: Ubba is remembered for his fierce leadership, and his death is often regarded as a turning point in the Viking campaigns in southern England.

3. Halfdan Ragnarsson

Halfdan was another major Viking leader and one of the prominent figures of the Great Heathen Army. His fate diverges from those of Ivar and Ubba, as he sought power in both England and Ireland.

Conquests in England: After the initial Viking campaigns in England, Halfdan conquered and became king of Northumbria in 876 AD. He likely ruled from York, a major Viking stronghold. His rule over Northumbria marked the beginning of Viking dominance in the region.

Expedition to Ireland: Around 877 AD, Halfdan led a Viking force to Ireland in an attempt to establish dominance over the Norse-Gaelic kingdoms. However, his campaign ended in failure, and he was killed during the battle near Strangford Lough in 877 AD, fighting against rival Viking factions. The Annals of Ulster mention his death, which left Northumbria without a Viking king for a short period.

Legacy: Halfdan's involvement in both England and Ireland left a significant Viking influence in both regions. His death marked the end of his ambition to control the Irish Norse-Gael kingdoms, but his earlier efforts contributed to the continued Norse presence in Northumbria.

Conclusion

- Ivar the Boneless likely died of illness or natural causes, either in England or Ireland.
- Ubba was killed in battle in 878 during the Battle of Cynwit, a significant Viking defeat.
- Halfdan Ragnarsson became the ruler of Northumbria but died in 877 during a failed campaign in Ireland.

Appendix: Episode 4

Alfred the Great – Extended Reference

Alfred the Great's Defence Against the Viking Invasions

Alfred the Great's defence against the Viking invasions is one of the most significant episodes in early English history. His leadership during this period not only ensured the survival of Wessex, the last Anglo-Saxon kingdom standing against the Vikings, but also laid the groundwork for the eventual unification of England.

Early Struggles Against the Vikings

When Alfred became king in 871, Wessex was under constant threat from the Great Heathen Army, a coalition of Viking forces that had already conquered large parts of England, including Northumbria, East Anglia, and much of Mercia. Alfred fought several battles against the Vikings early in his reign, with mixed results. Despite some victories, Wessex suffered heavy losses, and the Vikings continued to press their advantage.

In 878, the situation became dire. The Viking leader Guthrum launched a surprise attack during the winter, a time when military campaigns were usually paused. Caught off guard, Alfred and his army were forced to retreat. Alfred went into hiding in the marshes of Athelney, in Somerset. It was during this period, living in near obscurity, that Alfred regrouped and rebuilt his forces.

The Turning Point: The Battle of Edington

The marshes of Athelney provided a natural stronghold, and from there Alfred began planning a counterattack. He sent word to his followers, calling on the local militias (known as the fyrd) to gather in secret. Once he had amassed a sizable force, Alfred emerged from hiding and moved quickly to confront Guthrum's Viking army.

The two sides met at the Battle of Edington (also known as the Battle of Ethandun) in May 878. Despite being outnumbered and facing a fierce and experienced Viking army, Alfred's forces won a decisive victory. Guthrum and his men were forced to retreat to their fortified camp, where Alfred besieged them until they surrendered.

The Treaty of Wedmore and Guthrum's Conversion

Following the defeat at Edington, Alfred and Guthrum negotiated peace. The Treaty of Wedmore, agreed upon later in 878, marked the end of the conflict. Under the terms of the treaty:

- Guthrum agreed to convert to Christianity. Alfred became his godfather during the baptismal ceremony, and Guthrum took the Christian name Æthelstan.
- The treaty established a formal boundary between the Viking-controlled lands and Wessex. The Viking-controlled regions became known as the Danelaw, while Wessex retained its independence and control over the south and west of England.
- The Danelaw comprised the areas of eastern and northern England that had been conquered by the Vikings. It was governed by Viking laws and customs, and the boundary between the Danelaw and Wessex marked a division of influence between the Norse and Anglo-Saxon worlds.

Alfred's Defensive Reforms

Alfred did not rest on his victory at Edington. Understanding that the Vikings could return, he initiated several reforms to strengthen Wessex's defences:

Burhs (fortified towns): Alfred established a network of fortified settlements, known as burhs, across Wessex. These were strategically placed to protect key areas and could serve as rallying points for local militias.

Reorganisation of the fyrd: Alfred reorganised the Anglo-Saxon military system. Instead of relying solely on the fyrd (which consisted of part-time soldiers), he introduced a rotation system, ensuring that a portion of the army was always ready for battle while others could tend to their farms.

Naval defences: Alfred also built a fleet of ships to protect Wessex's coastlines from Viking raids. This navy is considered one of the earliest English naval forces, and it played a key role in defending against future Viking incursions.

Legacy of Alfred's Defence

Alfred's victory at Edington and the Treaty of Wedmore ensured the survival of Wessex and marked the beginning of the end of Viking domination in England. His leadership during this period earned him widespread respect, and his reforms strengthened Wessex militarily, economically, and culturally. Alfred's ability to unite his people, inspire loyalty, and adapt to the Viking threat is a significant reason why he is remembered as one of England's greatest kings.

Over the next few decades, the descendants of Alfred continued to reclaim lands from the Vikings, eventually leading to the unification of England under Alfred's grandson, Æthelstan, in the 10th century.

Guthrum

Guthrum (died c. 890 AD) was a prominent Viking leader and one of the key figures in the Danish conquest of Anglo-Saxon England during the late 9th century. He is best known for his role in leading the Great Heathen Army and for his later conversion to Christianity after his defeat by Alfred the Great at the Battle of Edington in 878 AD.

Early Life and Leadership

Guthrum's origins are not well-documented, but he was likely a Danish chieftain or king who arrived in England as part of the Great Heathen Army in the 860s. By 874, he emerged as one of the primary leaders of this Viking coalition, which had already conquered large parts of northern and eastern England.

Invasion of Wessex

In the mid-870s, after consolidating Viking control over Mercia and Northumbria, Guthrum turned his attention to Wessex, the last major Anglo-Saxon kingdom that had successfully resisted Viking domination under the leadership of Alfred the Great. Guthrum launched several attacks against Wessex, with a significant assault in 878 AD, where he caught Alfred by surprise and forced him into hiding in the marshes of Athelney.

The Battle of Edington (878 AD)

Despite being forced into hiding, Alfred regrouped and led a counterattack against Guthrum. The two sides clashed in the Battle of Edington in 878 AD, where Alfred decisively defeated Guthrum's forces. Guthrum and his army retreated to their stronghold but were eventually forced to surrender after a siege.

Conversion to Christianity

As part of the Treaty of Wedmore, which followed his defeat, Guthrum agreed to be baptised as a Christian, marking a significant moment in the Viking-Anglo-Saxon relations. Alfred served as Guthrum's godfather, and he was given the Christian name Æthelstan. This symbolic conversion helped secure peace between the two leaders and eased tensions between the Vikings and the Anglo-Saxons.

Establishment of the Danelaw

After his baptism, Guthrum and his followers withdrew to East Anglia, where Guthrum ruled as king. East Anglia became part of the Danelaw, the Viking-controlled territories in northern and eastern England, where Danish law and customs were observed. Guthrum ruled East Anglia until his death around 890 AD. During his reign, there was relative peace between the Viking settlers and the Anglo-Saxons.

Legacy

- He was a powerful Viking leader who nearly succeeded in conquering all of England.
- His defeat and subsequent conversion to Christianity marked a turning point in Viking-Anglo-Saxon relations.
- His rule over East Anglia as a Christian king established a long-lasting Viking presence in the region, contributing to the development of the Danelaw.
- The peace between Alfred and Guthrum helped solidify Alfred's control over Wessex and allowed for the gradual unification of England under Alfred's descendants.

Guthrum's life represents the complex relationship between the Vikings and Anglo-Saxons, with periods of intense conflict followed by diplomacy, cultural exchange, and adaptation.

The Legend of Alfred and the Cakes

The legend of Alfred and the cakes is one of the most famous stories about Alfred the Great, though it is more folklore than fact. It tells of a time when Alfred, after being defeated by the Vikings and forced into hiding in the marshes of Athelney, sought refuge in a peasant woman's home. The story is often used to illustrate Alfred's humility, patience, and eventual triumph.

The Legend

The legend takes place during 878 AD, when Alfred the Great was hiding from the Vikings in the marshes of Athelney, after Guthrum's Viking forces had captured much of Wessex, including Alfred's royal estate at Chippenham. While seeking shelter, Alfred supposedly entered the humble home of a peasant woman who did not recognise him as the king.

The woman, busy with her daily tasks, was baking cakes (small loaves of bread) over the fire. She asked Alfred to watch the cakes while she attended to other matters. However, Alfred, preoccupied with his thoughts about the Viking threat and the dire situation facing his kingdom, became distracted and neglected the cakes, allowing them to burn.

When the woman returned and saw the burned cakes, she scolded Alfred, unaware that she was chastising her king. According to the story, Alfred humbly accepted her rebuke without revealing his true identity.

Symbolism and Meaning

Humility: The story highlights Alfred's humility in accepting the peasant woman's scolding without asserting his royal status. It portrays him as a king who understands the struggles of his people, even during his lowest moments.

Patience and Perseverance: The tale is often interpreted as a reminder of Alfred's patience and perseverance in the face of adversity. Just as he neglected the cakes, Alfred's attention was focused on much larger issues—the survival of Wessex and his eventual victory over the Vikings.

Leadership in Tough Times: The legend reflects Alfred's resilience. After the events of the story, Alfred regrouped and eventually led his forces to victory against Guthrum at the Battle of Edington, marking a turning point in the Viking invasions of England.

Origins of the Legend

The story of Alfred and the cakes first appeared in a written form in the 12th century, several centuries after Alfred's death, in Asser's Life of Alfred and later in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. The legend was further popularised by medieval chroniclers such as William of Malmesbury. However, it is widely accepted that the story is more folklore than fact, likely emerging as a way to depict Alfred as a relatable, humble, and patient leader.

Appendix: Episode 5

Viking Place Names Worksheet

Reproducible worksheet for student use.

Part 1: Match the Suffix to its Meaning

Look at the Viking place name endings (suffixes) below. Match them to their meanings by drawing a line between them.

-by	-thorpe	-holme	-thwaite
-by		Church	Village or farm
-thorpe		Hill or mountain	Secondary settlement or farm
-holme		Village or farm	Island
-thwaite		Clearing or meadow	Clearing or meadow
-toft		Headland or promontory	Homestead
-kirk		Island	Church
-fell		Secondary settlement or farm	Hill or mountain
-ness		Homestead	Headland or promontory

Answers: Suffix Meanings

–by = Village or farm · **–thorpe** = Secondary settlement or farm · **–holme** = Island

–thwaite = Clearing or meadow · **–toft** = Homestead · **–kirk** = Church

–fell = Hill or mountain · **–ness** = Headland or promontory

Part 2: Fill in the Blank

Use the words in the box to complete the sentences.

> Words: church, hill, island, farm, settlement, stream, headland

The Viking word -by means a _____.

A place ending in -kirk was named after a Viking _____.

A place with -fell in its name was likely located on a _____.

The word -holme means _____.

-thorpe means a small or secondary _____.

The word -beck means a _____.

-ness describes a place on a _____ or promontory by the sea.

Part 3: Spot the Viking Place Names

Circle the Viking place names in the list below.

Grimsby · London · Whitby · Scunthorpe · Derby · Exeter · Lowestoft · Mablethorpe · Bath · Kirkby

Part 4: Create Your Own Viking Place Name

Make up a Viking place name using one of the endings (suffixes) from Part 1.

My Viking place name: _____

What does it mean? _____

Part 5: Viking Map

Find out where Vikings settled in England by looking at a map of the Danelaw. Mark some Viking settlements, like York, Derby, Scunthorpe, Skegness, Grimsby, Whitby, Scarborough, Lowestoft, Ormesby, Hemsby!

Viking Law and Order – Reference

Viking laws were based on customs and oral traditions rather than written codes, and the Thing was the Viking assembly where laws were discussed, disputes were settled, and decisions were made. It was a crucial part of Viking governance and community life, serving both as a court and a political gathering.

Key Points About Viking Laws and the Thing

The Thing:

- The Thing was a public assembly that met at regular intervals, where free men from the local community gathered to discuss and decide on legal matters, resolve disputes, and make political decisions.
- It was usually held in open-air spaces, often near a landmark like a hill or tree.
- Each region or community had its own Thing, and more important decisions were made at larger assemblies, such as the Althing in Iceland.

Law-Speakers:

- The laws were not written down, so law-speakers played a vital role. They were individuals with deep knowledge of local laws and customs, responsible for reciting them from memory at the Thing.
- Their role was critical in maintaining legal consistency and ensuring everyone knew their rights and obligations.

Community Justice:

- Disputes were typically settled through the Thing, where community members would present their cases, and the assembly would vote on resolutions.
- Rather than prison sentences, penalties were often financial, such as fines or compensation, known as weregild, which was paid to the victim or their family.
- In more severe cases, a person could be outlawed, meaning they were banished and no longer under the protection of the law, making them vulnerable to being killed by anyone.

Trial by Combat or Ordeal:

- In some cases, disputes could be settled through trial by combat or by ordeal (tests of endurance or physical trials) to prove guilt or innocence.

Inheritance and Property Laws:

- Viking laws covered inheritance and property disputes, ensuring land and wealth were passed down in families. Sons typically inherited land, but women had rights to inherit personal property.

Consensus and Participation:

- The Thing was democratic in nature, with free men allowed to voice their opinions and vote on decisions. It allowed the community to govern itself and ensure fairness through collective involvement.

The Viking legal system, with its use of the Thing and law-speakers, provided a structured and respected way to maintain order, resolve conflicts, and make decisions about the community's future. It emphasised fairness, compensation, and community participation.

Viking Religious Beliefs – Reference

Viking religious beliefs were rooted in Norse mythology, a polytheistic system with a rich pantheon of gods, supernatural beings, and legends that explained the natural world and human experiences. Their religion was deeply tied to nature, honour, and the cyclical nature of life and death.

1. Norse Gods and Goddesses

Odin: The Allfather and king of the gods, associated with wisdom, war, poetry, and magic. Odin sought knowledge and made great sacrifices, such as giving up an eye to drink from the Well of Wisdom.

Thor: The god of thunder, strength, and protection, known for wielding his hammer Mjölnir. Thor was a beloved deity for common people, as he protected both gods and humans from the giants (Jotnar).

Freyja: The goddess of love, beauty, fertility, and war. Freyja had a strong connection to death as well, receiving half of the warriors who died in battle to her hall, Fólkvangr.

Loki: The trickster god, associated with mischief, deception, and chaos. Loki played a crucial role in many of the gods' adventures but was also responsible for setting in motion events leading to Ragnarök (the end of the world).

2. Valhalla and the Afterlife

Valhalla: Odin's hall, where warriors who died bravely in battle were taken by Valkyries (female warriors who served Odin). In Valhalla, the slain warriors would feast, train, and prepare for the final battle of Ragnarök.

Fólkvangr: Freyja's hall, where half of the fallen warriors went. Like Valhalla, it was a place of honour for the brave.

Helheim: A realm ruled by the goddess Hel, where those who died of old age, illness, or misfortune would go. It was often described as a cold, misty underworld—not a place of punishment, but a shadowy, neutral afterlife.

3. Rituals and Offerings

Blót: Sacrificial rituals where animals, food, and sometimes humans were offered to the gods to ensure prosperity, victory, or fertility. The blood of the sacrifice was considered sacred and was often sprinkled on altars or idols.

Seasonal Festivals: Celebrations like Yule (winter solstice) and Dísablót (spring) were important for marking the changing seasons and asking the gods for good harvests and protection in the year ahead.

4. The Nine Worlds

The Vikings believed in a cosmology consisting of nine interconnected worlds, all held together by Yggdrasil, the World Tree. Some of the key realms included:

Asgard: Home of the gods, ruled by Odin.

Midgard: The realm of humans, essentially Earth.

Jotunheim: The land of the giants, who often opposed the gods.

Niflheim: The cold, misty underworld, part of Helheim.

Alfheim: The land of the light elves. These worlds were connected by Yggdrasil's roots and branches, symbolising the interdependence of all beings.

5. Ragnarök (The End of the World)

Ragnarök, the "Twilight of the Gods," was a key element in Viking belief, describing the prophesied end of the world. It foretold a massive battle where many gods would die, including Odin and Thor, and the world would be consumed by fire and reborn anew.

Jörmungandr, the World Serpent, would rise from the sea, causing massive floods, while the giant Fenrir would break free and kill Odin.

Ragnarök was both a destructive and regenerative event, signifying that death and rebirth were part of the natural order.

6. Magic and Seidr

Magic played a significant role in Viking religious practices. Seidr was a form of Norse magic practised by Völvas (sorceresses) and sometimes by gods like Odin and Freyja. It was used to see into the future, influence fate, or communicate with spirits.

Völvas held a powerful position in Viking society, as they could contact the spiritual realm and influence destiny.

7. Nature Spirits and Ancestor Worship

Landvættir: Spirits of the land, who protected the natural environment and needed to be respected for good fortune in farming and travel.

Elves and Dwarves: Mythical beings often associated with craftsmanship, fertility, and wisdom.

Ancestors: Reverence for ancestors was important, and burial mounds were often treated as sacred spaces where offerings were left.

8. Conversion to Christianity

By the late Viking Age (10th and 11th centuries), many Vikings began converting to Christianity, particularly in Denmark, Norway, and Iceland. The spread of Christianity was influenced by trading contacts, missionary activity, and political pressure from Christian kings and rulers in Europe.

In places like Iceland, the conversion was peaceful, with the Althing agreeing to adopt Christianity in 1000 AD.

However, even after converting, some Vikings continued to incorporate aspects of their old beliefs, blending Norse and Christian traditions.

9. Burial Practices

Ship Burials: High-status individuals, such as chieftains and warriors, were sometimes buried in ships or with ship-shaped stone outlines, along with goods they would need in the afterlife (weapons, tools, jewellery).

Grave Goods: Many graves included items for the deceased to use in the next world, such as weapons, tools, and food. Horses, slaves, or other animals were sometimes sacrificed to accompany the dead.

Viking religious beliefs were deeply connected to their daily lives, warrior culture, and natural surroundings. Their mythology and rituals reflected their understanding of the cosmos, honour, fate, and the inevitable cycle of life, death, and rebirth. While eventually supplanted by Christianity, the Viking belief system left a lasting legacy in Scandinavian culture.

Six Events in the Life of Sweyn Forkbeard

Print and cut out – one complete set per group.

Event 1

Rebellion Against Harald Bluetooth (c. 986 AD)

Context: Sweyn Forkbeard led a rebellion against his father, Harald Bluetooth, King of Denmark. Harald had Christianised Denmark, which likely caused tensions with the traditional pagan elements of the kingdom.

Outcome: Sweyn's rebellion forced Harald into exile in Wendland (modern-day northern Germany), where Harald died soon after, possibly due to wounds from the conflict. Sweyn took control of Denmark, establishing his rule.

Event 2

Viking Raids on England (late 990s–1013 AD)

Context: After becoming King of Denmark, Sweyn led numerous raids on England, taking advantage of Æthelred the Unready's weak and divided rule. Sweyn's forces, motivated by the wealth of England, raided coastal towns and monasteries.

Outcome: His Viking forces frequently ravaged southern England, gaining substantial wealth through plunder and Danegeld payments, which were bribes paid by Æthelred to stop the attacks.

Event 3

Battle of Maldon (991 AD)

Context: One of the first major Viking victories in this new wave of raids was the Battle of Maldon in Essex. Sweyn's forces, along with other Viking leaders, faced the Anglo-Saxon army led by Ealdorman Byrhtnoth who died in the battle.

Outcome: The Vikings triumphed, and this defeat for the English led to the first large payment of Danegeld (10,000 pounds of silver). The success of this ransom payment encouraged further Viking raids on England.

Event 4

St. Brice's Day Massacre (1002 AD)

Context: In an attempt to curb Viking influence in England, King Æthelred ordered the St. Brice's Day Massacre on 13 November 1002, where many Danes

living in England were killed. The massacre particularly targeted Danish settlers, including Sweyn's sister who was killed in the massacre.

Outcome: This massacre outraged Sweyn, and he responded with renewed vigour, launching devastating raids on England in retaliation. The massacre may have solidified Sweyn's determination to conquer England entirely, culminating in his invasion a decade later.

Event 5

Conquest of England (1013 AD)

Context: In 1013, after years of raids and vengeance for the St. Brice's Day Massacre, Sweyn launched a full-scale invasion of England. His forces quickly overran large parts of the kingdom, taking advantage of England's weakened defences and political instability.

Outcome: By the end of 1013, Æthelred the Unready had fled to Normandy, and Sweyn was declared King of England—the first Viking to hold the English throne. His conquest was relatively swift, as the English, demoralised and war-weary, offered little resistance.

Event 6

Death and Legacy (1014 AD)

Context: Sweyn Forkbeard died unexpectedly in February 1014, only months after being recognised as King of England. His death left a temporary power vacuum in England.

Outcome: Although Sweyn's rule was short, his son, Cnut the Great, continued his legacy by reconquering England and ruling over the North Sea Empire, which encompassed England, Denmark, Norway, and parts of Sweden.

Archaeologists' Notes – Viking Burial Ship

Print for use in Episode 6, Part 3. One copy per student or per group.

1. Inside the boat are the bodies of four people: a man, two women and an infant, together with a number of animals. Around and above the bodies, laid out together with them or deposited above them as the boat was filled with earth, were masses of objects.

2. In the prow a man and a woman lay on blankets covering the decking. The woman was aged about 45–50 when she died, arranged on her back with her right hand on her breast, ankles crossed and her feet pointing into the prow. Her

head was resting on a stone, like a pillow. She was expensively dressed, her clothes held together with silver jewellery. From her belt hung a knife and a key. To her immediate right was a bucket. Balanced across her knees, a weaving sword. A baby was wrapped in the woman's dress, bundled at her hip with her left hand resting on its head.

3. Lying head to head with the woman, arranged symmetrically with his feet pointing to the stern, was a man of unknown age. He had been placed slightly twisted, on his back but with legs flexed and bent to one side at the waist. Laid out around him were weapons: two axes, of which one was an antique; a throwing spear; a sheathed sword, its point precisely at his head, with two knives and a whetstone next to it; a shield (two more lay nearby); a quiver of arrows and therefore probably also a bow. A silver arm-ring lay above him. On his midriff lay an inverted frying pan. On the sword scabbard two spindle whorls had been carefully placed. A pot of German manufacture had been smashed and its pieces scattered over the man's body along with three glass beads, near a soapstone vessel. Two more of the latter were deposited at the man's feet. An iron dog chain was draped next to him, with a sickle somewhere nearby.

4. Amidships, a bridled horse had been killed and laid on the deck. It seems to have been decapitated and roughly dismembered, its limbs and body parts then placed back in approximately their anatomical positions. A single spur was placed on the mangled corpse.

5. In the stern of the boat was a second woman, apparently buried sitting up, either in a chair or hunched up against the rising end of the vessel. From her location and posture it is possible that the steering oar of the boat was resting in her hands. A whetstone and a bridle-bit leant against her feet, which touched the carcass of the horse. She was well-dressed in high fashion. Behind her was a shield. To her right, resting on the deck, another of those enigmatic "egg-shaped stones" and a weaving sword of iron. To her left, an unusual iron staff pinned down under a large rock. Somewhere near her was an axe. In the woman's lap was an imported bowl of bronze that had been scratched with runes, i muntlauku. The bowl contained some unidentified little metal objects, and the severed head of a dog. Its body lay across the woman's feet. One pair of its legs, perhaps detached, lay a little below the torso; the other legs were missing. Around the woman were also found fragments of wood and bark, pieces of sheet iron and objects of copper alloy; we do not know what they were. The iron staff might offer a small clue to the nature of the dead steerswoman, as it is of a kind identified as a tool of the sorceresses called a völur, and other female magic-workers, who feature extensively in the Icelandic sagas.

6. The whole burial was covered with earth and complex stone constructions, building up to a low mound. We also found patches of cremated bone and wood

mixed here and there in the deposit, hinting at further rituals about which we know nothing.

Viking Burial Rituals – Reference

Viking burial rituals were diverse and deeply tied to their beliefs in the afterlife, involving both burials and cremations depending on the region, time period, and social status of the deceased.

1. Burial Types

Cremation: In many Viking communities, especially during the early Viking Age, cremation was common. The body was burned, often on a funeral pyre, and the ashes were either buried or scattered. This practice was believed to release the soul and send it to the afterlife.

Inhumation (Earth Burial): By the later Viking Age, inhumation, or earth burial, became more common, especially for the elite. The dead were often buried in mounds or chambers, sometimes in wooden coffins or stone-lined graves.

2. Ship Burials

Viking society believed that a ship would carry the dead into the afterlife. The most prestigious burials involved placing the deceased in an actual ship, which was then buried or burned. The Oseberg Ship and Gokstad Ship from Norway are famous examples of such burials.

If a real ship wasn't available, smaller versions or stones arranged in the shape of a ship were used.

3. Grave Goods

Vikings were often buried with grave goods, items that they might need in the afterlife. These included:

- Weapons: Swords, axes, spears, and shields were common in the graves of warriors.
- Tools and everyday items: Farmers and craftsmen might be buried with tools, household goods, or even food.
- Jewellery and personal items: Wealthy individuals, particularly women, were often buried with fine jewellery, brooches, and other adornments.

4. Animal Sacrifice

Animals such as horses, dogs, and livestock were sometimes sacrificed and buried alongside the deceased. Horses were especially common in the graves of warriors, symbolising the means for travel in the afterlife.

Dogs were also buried as companions or protectors in the next life.

5. The Afterlife and Beliefs

Vikings believed in several realms of the afterlife, the most famous being Valhalla, where warriors who died heroically in battle were taken by the Valkyries to feast and fight until Ragnarök (the end of the world).

Another afterlife realm was Hel, ruled by the goddess Hel, which was a place for those who died of old age or illness. It was not a place of punishment, but rather a cold, shadowy realm.

Fólkvangr, the field ruled by the goddess Freyja, also received half of the slain warriors, showing that not all Viking beliefs focused on Odin or Valhalla.

6. Burial Mounds

Burial mounds, or tumulus, were often raised over the grave or cremated remains. These mounds could be small for ordinary people or large and elaborate for chieftains and kings.

The size and prominence of the mound reflected the status of the deceased, and they served as both a memorial and a marker of family or clan power.

7. Funeral Rites and Rituals

Viking funerals often involved complex rituals, including feasts and sacrifices. Rituals could include prayers, the chanting of sagas, and even animal or human sacrifice to accompany the deceased to the afterlife.

Völvas, or female shamans, sometimes played a role in these ceremonies, especially in high-status burials.

8. Burning the Ship

In some cases, the deceased was placed on a funeral ship, which was then set aflame and sent out to sea, symbolising the journey to the afterlife. However, this was likely a rare and special rite reserved for the elite.

9. Rituals for the Living

Funerals were not just for the dead but were important for the living, reaffirming the status of the deceased's family or clan and ensuring the proper passage of the soul. Feasting and storytelling often accompanied the burial rituals, ensuring that the memory of the deceased lived on.

10. Influence of Christianity

Toward the end of the Viking Age, with the spread of Christianity, burial practices began to change. Cremation became less common, and simpler, unadorned graves became the norm, especially as more Vikings converted to Christianity.

Appendix: Episode 7

Episode 7 – Timeline

Print for students to illustrate in the margin during Episode 7, Part 2.

865 AD	The Great Heathen Army lands in East Anglia.
866 AD	Vikings capture York (Jorvik).
871 AD	Alfred becomes King of Wessex.
878 AD	Guthrum's surprise attack; Alfred flees to Athelney; Battle of Edington; Treaty of Wedmore.
886 AD	Alfred recaptures London; the Danelaw is formally established.
899 AD	Death of Alfred the Great.
991 AD	Battle of Maldon; first major Danegeld payment (10,000 pounds of silver).
1002 AD	St. Brice's Day Massacre.
1013 AD	Sweyn Forkbeard declared King of England.
1014 AD	Death of Sweyn Forkbeard; Cnut begins bid for the throne.
1016 AD	Cnut becomes King of all England.
1017 AD	Cnut's coronation; marries Emma of Normandy.
1035 AD	Death of Cnut; his sons struggle to maintain the empire.
1042 AD	Death of Harthacnut; Edward the Confessor (Anglo-Saxon) becomes king.
1066 AD	Battle of Stamford Bridge (September); Battle of Hastings (October). End of the Viking Age in England.

The Battle of Stamford Bridge – 25th September 1066

Print for student reading in Episode 7, Part 3.

The day began in a way Harold Hardrada's Vikings did not expect. Camped comfortably on the eastern bank of the River Derwent, many of the Norse warriors were without armour, enjoying a brief respite from battle. But their peace was shattered by a stunning sight on the far bank—King Harold Godwinson and his housecarls charging toward them after a relentless four-day march from London.

The surprise was total. As Hardrada scrambled to rally his unprepared men, the Saxons surged forward, sweeping aside the Viking outposts on the western bank with ferocious speed. The Norsemen, caught off guard, rushed to defend the bridge, the only barrier between King Harold's vengeful army and their vulnerable main force.

The battle's fate teetered on a single Viking—a towering berserker who held the bridge alone, cutting down every Saxon who dared to challenge him. For a tense and bloody time, the Saxon advance was stalled, the bridge a bottleneck of fury. But one Saxon warrior, using clever strategy, crawled beneath the bridge with a long spear, thrusting it through a gap and finally bringing the berserker down. The way was clear.

The Saxon army poured across the bridge, slamming into Hardrada's hastily assembled shield wall. The air rang with the clash of steel and the battle cries of warriors locked in desperate combat. Though Hardrada's men fought bravely, the Saxon force pressed on relentlessly.

In the chaos, Harold Hardrada himself, the legendary Viking king, was struck down by an arrow, leaving his forces in disarray. Tostig, Harold Godwinson's own estranged brother, took command, but the tide had already turned.

The battle raged on, but it was clear the Vikings were doomed. Leaderless and disorganised, they fell under the relentless blows of the Saxons. Tostig and his guards were cut down, and with them, the last hope of Viking victory in England.

By the end of the day, the once-proud Viking army was annihilated, marking the end of their ambitions in England—and the beginning of a new chapter in English history.

Cnut and the Sea

The story of Cnut and the sea is often misinterpreted as a tale of Cnut the Great arrogantly attempting to command the tides to stop. However, the original version of the story portrays Cnut in a very different light, emphasising his humility and awareness of human limitations.

The Story

According to the account in Henry of Huntingdon's 12th-century chronicle, the story goes like this: Cnut, the powerful king of England, Denmark, and Norway, was often surrounded by flattering courtiers who constantly praised his greatness, saying that even the sea would obey him. To prove a point, Cnut had his throne placed on the shore and, as the tide rolled in, he commanded the waves to stop. Of course, the sea ignored his command and continued to rise around him.

Cnut then turned to his courtiers and made it clear that no human, not even a king, could command the forces of nature. He proclaimed that the only true power belonged to God, and he never wore his crown again as a sign of humility, placing it instead on a crucifix in reverence to God's supreme authority.

The Truth Behind the Story

Far from being an arrogant king, the story of Cnut and the sea is a demonstration of his wisdom and humility. He used the incident to teach his followers that even the most powerful rulers have limits, and that earthly power is insignificant compared to the divine power of God.

Cnut's rule was notable for his ability to balance power and diplomacy, and this story reflects his self-awareness and his understanding of his role as a king under God, rather than as an all-powerful figure.