

Historica Canada Education Portal

Vikings

Overview

This lesson is based on viewing the [Heritage Minute, "Vikings."](#) Five hundred years before Columbus set foot on the islands of the Caribbean, Norse settlers were living in what is now a part of Canada. Proof of this Viking settlement was discovered in 1961.

Aims

Students will hone their critical thinking skills by discussing how the Vikings and the First Nations are portrayed in the "Viking" Heritage Minute. Students will do further research about the Norse to increase their depth of understanding about these people.

After getting to know the Vikings through their written mythology, students will use their knowledge to speculate how history would have been different had the Vikings established a successful settlement in Newfoundland.

Activities

1. Norse Life

Students are often fascinated by the Vikings. A little extra study can help them get beyond the usual stereotypes of the Norse that we often see.

- Divide the class into groups to do more research on the Norse. Groups may study Viking ships and their construction, their voyages and conquests, their art, their complex mythology, and life in their communities in Scandinavia, Iceland, and Greenland.

- Groups can share their research in presentations, displays, and sessions with other groups.

- Students might also collect examples of how Vikings are portrayed in advertising, comic strips, etc.

2. The Vikings and the "Skraelings"

Take some time to look "behind" the Minute for a critical assessment of the portrayals in the vignette.

- Watch the Minute together and discuss its plot. Students may have differing ideas about what actually occurs in this rather abstract dramatization.

- Before you watch it again, ask students to watch for particular things. How would you describe the mood of the film? How are the Vikings and their attackers portrayed? Do you feel any sympathy for people in the film? For whom?

- After watching the Minute again, discuss the questions together. If

students find the Minute mysterious or "spooky," discuss how the filmmakers create that feeling. If students found themselves sympathetic with the Vikings, discuss how the film created those sympathies.

- The native people who attacked the Viking settlement are never shown in the Minute. How does that affect the viewers understanding of them? If you were a native person would you think that the portrayal is "fair"? Or does it reinforce ideas about "hostile" Natives and heroic discoverers?

- You may want to follow up by having students explore the situation from both points of view, as Norse settlers from across the ocean and as native people who see the arrival of the strangers to their own territory. How would the different people explain their feelings, hopes, and fears? Their responses may take the form of a discussion, a written exercise, a structured role-play, or debate.

3. Literature and Lore

Older students can learn about the Vikings by means of the myths and their writings.

- As part of a unit on mythology, have students read Norse myths. Students may speculate about what the myths suggest about the Norse way of life and the beliefs they lived by. Comparison with the better known Greek and Roman myths may help them identify differences.

- Students may also read translations of the Norse sagas. Some of them are very beautiful. The Vinland sagas not only tell about the exploration and attempts at settlement of North America, but they were the text that Helge Ingstad used to find the ruins at L'Anse aux Meadows.

4. Speculative History

What if the Vikings had succeeded in settling the Americas?

- Once students have learned something about the way the Norse settled parts of Britain, France, all of Iceland, and parts of Greenland, they may speculate on the kinds of relations they would have established with the Native people of North America, the pattern that their exploration would have taken, and the kind of law, industry, and commerce they would have created.

- Have groups of students create their own history of "Norse America." They should create colourful characters and important events in the fictional history of the Vikings settlement of the continent. Encourage students to be imaginative, yet plausible with their histories. They may wish to mix real events in the rest of the world with the responses and involvement of their invented Norse American society (or societies!).

Resources

- [Heritage Minute: Vikings](#)

- [The Canadian Encyclopedia - Norse Voyages](#)
- [The Canadian Encyclopedia - L'anse aux Meadows](#)