

Unit 4: Anglo-Saxons & Vikings in Britain

← Anglo-Saxons & Scots in Britain

790CE – 1066CE

Medieval Britain →

Period Overview

The Anglo-Saxon period has been broken into two parts in the National Curriculum, differentiating between the periods before and after the main Viking invasions. Several Viking raids took place during the 8th Century, with increasing numbers towards the end of the century. The period is often considered to have begun with the raiding of Lindisfarne in 793. Vikings were largely from Denmark, Norway and Sweden and it is not known for certain why they began to raid other lands and settle in places such as England. Within a century Vikings had taken over large parts of the land in northern England, although failed to over-rule the large kingdom of Wessex. By 884, after years of battles, a treaty was agreed that left Vikings ruling over 'Danelaw' in the north of England.

Life in Saxon & Viking Britain

Vikings have traditionally had a fierce reputation as invaders and for violent attacks. While these are not entirely unfounded, there is certainly evidence that some attacks – including that at Lindisfarne in 793. The Vikings occupied much of north-eastern England, including their stronghold of York. We now know that the city was a busy place with up to 15,000 inhabitants. Gradually as the Vikings spread, in between skirmishes with Saxons elsewhere in England, the Viking farming, language and laws spread across the north and east. Traditional Viking families had men working the land, with a wife taking care of the home and of the family valuables. Clothes and housing were not dissimilar from those in the rest of England. There was little furniture in the single-room homes and certainly no bathroom – most families used a cesspit for discarding waste. When they first arrived, most Vikings followed pagan religions, but soon converted to Christianity as they became settled in England. With some invasions in the 10th Century, invaders were bought off with silver, known as *Danegeld*, which was raised by taxing locals. The *Danegeld* land tax became permanent.

Changing Times

After years of small-scale attacks and invasions, and the commencement of the main attacks in 793, Viking incursions continued into the 9th Century. In 865, a substantial army was raised to conquer England, known in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle as the Great Heathen Army. The Army landed in East Anglia and reached York by the following year. Over the next 10 years the Vikings took over more land, leading to Wessex as the only unconquered kingdom. Battles between the two groups continued until the Battle of Edington, at which King Alfred (the Great) defeated the Vikings. Consequently, the Treaty of Alfred and Guthrum was agreed which essentially separated England into parts ruled by the Saxons and by the Vikings. The two populations co-existed, although not without on-going battles, until 954. In this year, Eric Bloodaxe – king of the Vikings – was killed, perhaps as part of an internal Viking feud, from which time the Saxon king, Eadred took control of the kingdom. Following this period, a series of Saxon kings ruled, interrupted by the reign of Danish king Sweyn and later Cnut and his grandsons, before Edward the Confessor.

Possible Enquiry Questions

- Where are English people from?
- Are all English people immigrants?
- Where does our town's name come from?
- Were Vikings really brutal invaders?
- What is the Anglo-Saxon chronicle?
- Who was the last English king?

Key Individuals

- **King Alfred** – King of Wessex from 871 to 899, defended Wessex from the Viking conquest
- **Athelstan** – First King to unite English kingdoms, 927
- **Guthrum** – King of the Vikings in Danelaw at the time of the treaty with the Saxons
- **King Cnut** – King of England, Denmark and Norway between 1028 and 1035
- **Edward the Confessor** – penultimate Saxon King of England (before Harold II who lost at Hastings)



Nested bracelet from Silverdale Viking Hoard⁴

What have the Vikings ever done for us?

The English language was greatly affected by the invasions of the Vikings, in particular through town and village names in the north and east of England.

It is also thought that Vikings may have been the first Europeans to have explored the Americas, around 1000.

The Vikings also were responsible for the world's now oldest parliament – the Tynwald – in the Isle of Man

Big Concepts

The battles between Saxons and Vikings provide an interesting study in the nature of **treaties** and other agreements and accords.

The Tynwald **parliament** also presents a good example of changes to democracy and national leadership.

The spread of the Vikings, including Norse Men who later became the Normans who then invaded England in 1066, presenting an opportunity to consider the role of **migration** in the developments of civilizations.

Places to Visit:

Many local museums will have information and artefacts from the Saxon & Viking periods
Possible visit sites include:

- [Jorvik Centre](#), Yorkshire
- [Murton Park](#), Yorkshire
- [Tatton Park](#), Cheshire
- [Butser Ancient Farm](#), Hampshire
- [West Stow Anglo-Saxon Village](#), Suffolk

Timeline of Key Events:

All dates below are approximate:

- 787 CE** First Scandinavian raids
- 793 CE** Viking attacks on Lindisfarne
- 842 CE** Viking raids on London
- 865 CE** Great Heathen Army invade
- 878 CE** Battle of Edington
- 927 CE** Athelstan unites English kingdoms
- 950 CE** Vikings from Ireland & Isle of Man raid the west coast of Wales
- 991 CE** Battle of Maldon leads to the first payments of Danegeld
- 994 CE** Danish attack on London fails
- 1000 CE** Vikings reach Newfoundland
- 1013 CE** King Sven of Sweden lands and becomes King of England
- 1016 CE** King Cnut becomes King of England
- 1042 CE** Saxon Edward the Confessor returns to become King of England
- 1066 CE** Edward the Confessor dies, leading to several contenders claiming the throne. Harold Godwinsson becomes King, but is killed by William the Conqueror at the Battle of Hastings

Broader Context

- Decline of the Mayan civilization
- Byzantine rule in Southern Europe
- Charlemagne crowned Holy Roman Emperor, 800
- Baghdad becomes largest city in the world, 800
- Ghana Empire is established, 830
- House of Wisdom in Baghdad established, 830
- Treaty of Verdun signed, dividing the Carolingian empire in western Europe, 843
- Schism between eastern and western churches, 863
- First use of gunpowder in battle in China, 919

Further Information:

- BBC Vikings: <http://bit.do/bbcviking>
- BBC Viking Quest: <http://bit.do/bbcvg>
- British Museum: <http://bit.do/bmviking>
- Primary Homework Help: <http://bit.do/phhviking>
- Early British Kingdoms: <http://bit.do/ebk>
- Fun Facts: <http://bit.do/ffvikings>

⁴ Nested bracelet [<http://bit.do/vhoard>] image by Ian Richardson is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic License. The licence can be viewed at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0>