



## EDUCATION GUIDE

### All things begin and end as stories.

- Ragnar Lothbrok

#### Terms to Define

The following terms used in the *Vikings* series lend insights into the Viking past.

Arm Ring

Dark Ages

Fealty

Housecarl

Lindisfarne Raid

Longship

Runes

Shieldmaiden

Skald

Sunstone

Thralls

#### INTRODUCTION

The Vikings came barging on to the world stage at the end of the 8th century, taking to the seas over the course of three hundred years from modern day Scandinavia. On innovative vessels such as the longship, they swept through large sections of the world including parts of Western Europe, the Americas, the Mediterranean and Russia. Plundering communities and later building new societies, the Norsemen left a remarkable imprint on the world. This nine-part scripted series on **HISTORY**® looks at the Viking culture through the saga of Ragnar Lothbrok, a character based on a real historical figure.

The series follows Lothbrok's determination to conquer new places and acquire riches through seafaring raids to unknown lands to the West, against the wishes of local chieftain Earl Haraldson. What started as a simple desire for adventure became an epic quest for expansion and power. Using innovative ship building and navigational techniques, the Vikings pushed the boundaries of technology, opening up new connections and linking continents. Yet they also left behind incredible damage and destruction. This series explores the Vikings through the epic tale of one community, showing how and why Vikings continue to fascinate people worldwide.

#### CURRICULUM LINKS

*Vikings* is a scripted drama that gives viewers insights into aspects of Viking history, cosmology and exploration. It would be a great companion to courses on the Viking age, exploration and the Dark Ages. It is recommended for high school students over 18, college students and general adult viewers.

**PLEASE NOTE:** *due to violence, sexual content and intense imagery, we do not recommend this series for elementary, middle school or high school students under 18.*





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### DISCUSSION /ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Compare and contrast Ragnar Lothbrok and Earl Haraldson. What are their similarities and differences as leaders?
2. Describe Lagertha's role in this series. What does her character reveal about the role of women in Viking society? What surprised you about her character?
3. Viking innovations in shipbuilding and navigation were central to their ability to travel and conquer. Describe one or more of the following innovations: development of the longship, use of sun shadow boards, use of oars, and use of sunstones.
4. What were some Viking funeral practices? How did these practices connect to the Viking belief system?
5. How does the monk Athelstan change throughout the course of this series? What do you think his character represents in the series?
6. Describe the god Odin and his significance in Viking cosmology. Why is it relevant that Ragnar is said to be a descendent of Odin?
7. Describe the role of the "seer" in this series. What does he reveal about Viking belief systems?



### FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

1. **The Thing.** This series offers insights into Viking society, including the role of the assemblies known as the "Thing." Research the "Thing" and reflect on what you see in the series. Then, write a short essay about these assemblies and what they tell us about Viking law and custom.
2. **Viking Explorations.** This series provides an opportunity to spark research projects on Viking exploration. Where did Viking voyages take them, and what were the consequences? Visit <http://www.mnh.si.edu/vikings/start.html> to map some of the Vikings' journeys and write a short essay about one aspect of Viking exploration.



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### FURTHER EXPLORATIONS CONTINUED

**3. Sources of Knowledge.** The Vikings left few physical traces of their society. Until the turn of the 20th century, some of the best sources about Vikings were writings such as the *Poetic Edda*, a collection of Norse poems written after the Viking age. But in the past few decades, archeologists have located Viking burial mounds holding many artifacts, including ships in Gokstad and Oseberg, Norway. Research one of these poems, artifacts or archeological discoveries and write an essay on what they reveal about Viking history.

**4. Cast of Characters.** This series touches upon some important Viking figures, yet there are many more influential Viking leaders. Research any of the following people, or any other Viking leader of your choice, and prepare a visual or written presentation about this person and their contribution to the Viking age: Leif Ericson, Erik Thorvaldson, Harald Bluetooth, Ivar the Boneless, Guthrum.

### RECOMMENDED WEBSITES

Learn more about the Vikings series:

[www.History.com/shows/vikings](http://www.History.com/shows/vikings)

Learn more about the history of Vikings on History.com:

[www.History.com/topics/vikings](http://www.History.com/topics/vikings)

View a Vikings photo gallery:

[www.History.com/topics/vikings/photos#viking-heroes-and-homes](http://www.History.com/topics/vikings/photos#viking-heroes-and-homes)

The Viking Ship Museum:

[www.vikingeskibsmuseet.dk/en/](http://www.vikingeskibsmuseet.dk/en/)

### RELATED BOOKS

Ferguson, Robert. *The Vikings: A History*. (Penguin, 2009).

Fitzhugh, William F. and Elisabeth Ward, eds.

*Vikings: The North Atlantic Saga*. (Smithsonian Books, 2000).

Haywood, John. *The Penguin Historical Atlas of the Vikings*. (Penguin Books, 1995).

Jones, Gwyn. *A History of the Vikings*. (Oxford University Press, 2001).

Roesdahl, Else. *The Vikings* (Revised Edition.) (Penguin Books, 1999).

### Viking God and Mythology Descriptions:

**Odin** – The chief amongst the group of gods, he is the god of warriors slain in battle and also the god of curiosity. The all-seeing Odin sacrificed his eye at Mimir’s well so that he might see the future. Odin oversees everything that passes on earth from his throne and each night retires to Valhalla, the Hall of the Slain, where the great female warriors, his Valkyries, bring him the souls of brave warriors struck down in battle. Ragnar Lothbrok is said to be a direct descendant of the Norse god Odin.

**Thor** – Thor is stronger than any other God, and is the god of the common man. He rules the sky and governs thunder and lightning, winds and storms. When he wears his belt Meginjörð his strength is doubled and the world shakes as he walks.

**Freyr** – Freyr rules over the rain and the sun, and fertility and harvest. He is the god who brings peace and pleasure to the realms of men.

**Loki** – Loki is the trickster God, a shape-shifter, who both helps and hinders.

**Valkyrie** – Valkyrja is Old Norse for “Chooser of the Slain” and the Valkyries were female mythological beings that harvested slain warriors for Odin. Half of those who died in battle were selected by the Valkyries and taken to Valhalla where they feasted and prepared for the battle at the end of the world.

**Valhalla** – Valhalla is the Hall of the Slain in Asgard, where half those who die bravely in battle are brought by the Valkyries. In Valhalla the battle-fallen, along with the heroes of earlier ages and the great kings await the coming end of the world, Ragnarök, where they will fight alongside Odin. Valhalla has 540 doors that allow 800 men to leave at once and is roofed in golden shields.

**Ragnarök** – Ragnarök is the battle at the end of the world. During this battle the heroes who Odin has gathered in Valhalla will fight with him.