

Collin Libassi

Lesson: The Vikings and Vinland

Length: 90 minutes

Context:

This lesson plan is designed for a 10th grade world history class at Woodside High School. My topic of choice is the medieval Vikings, with their discovery of North America as the ultimate content lesson to teach towards. While most students at least have some vague ideas of who the Vikings were, I was disappointed to discover almost all of them have never even heard the names Erik the Red or Leif Eriksson. I never expected 10th graders to know much about these men, but the fact that these names were completely new to them shows that American knowledge of New World discoveries leaves much to be desired. The Vikings do make an appearance in the Virginia SOLs, but the textbook Woodside uses hardly mentions that they even existed.

The text I have chosen is a New York Times article on the Old Norse site at L'Anse Aux Meadows, Newfoundland. Using schema theory to build up knowledge before the students read this article is essential considering that they do not even know who the main characters are in the Norse discovery of the New World. I doubt many of the students have more than a vague idea of where Newfoundland is, nor do they likely have much concept of the timeframe in which the Viking voyages to this land took place. Considering that most of the academic world seems to be very slow in realizing that we have almost certainly located Leif Eriksson's homestead and have compelling evidence to suggest that his term "Vinland" refers to the Gulf of St. Lawrence, I would not expect that my students would know anything at all about these issues. This lesson plan then will attempt to build up enough knowledge so that the Times article will actually make sense.

To begin building up knowledge, I will read the children's book *Smelly Old History: Vile Vikings* to the class just like an elementary school story time. The book is short enough that it can be read and the pictures displayed in relatively short amount of time. Yet it is also substantial enough that it provides valuable background knowledge on old Scandinavian society that their textbook lacks. From here, I will lead students through a map labeling activity and an anticipation guide that will hopefully give students a good idea of the larger context to which the Vinland article relates. Overall, this lesson applies schema theory primarily by building up knowledge that students lack; what knowledge they already possess is likely confined to images of Minnesota Vikingsesque Northmen in horned helmets. The Vinland article would make little sense to them if they did not first have an idea of who the Vikings were and where they traveled. By first identifying Leif Eriksson, Erik the Red, Old Norse society as a whole, the debate over locating Vinland becomes a much more accessible topic.

Objectives:

By the end of this lesson students will be able to:

- Identify several medieval sites settled/visited by Scandinavians
- Locate the probably site of the Viking settlement of Vinland
- Describe different aspects of old Norse society, including raiding, exploration, craftsmanship, farming, trade, and religious mythology

SOL Objectives:

WHI.9: The student will demonstrate knowledge of Western Europe during the Middle Ages from about 500 to 1000 A.D. in terms of its impact on Western civilization by:

d) sequencing events related to the invasions, settlements, and influence of migratory groups, including Angles, Saxons, Magyars, and Vikings.

Resources:

Children's book *Vile Vikings*

Wikipedia article on Viking Age

Power point map of Northern Hemisphere and Viking travels

Anticipation Guide

NY Times Vinland article

Activities:

1. Story Time: ~ 20 minutes

Begin by having students ask the class to come up with a few words or phrases to describe Viking life. List any of these descriptions on the board, and tell them that the class will return to evaluate some of these descriptions after the story time. Next, read the children's book *Smelly Old History: Vile Vikings* as a story time activity. If the class size permits, have the students gather together on the floor or in chairs as the teacher reads the book and displays the illustrations. Sections that may be skipped include "Grave Remains," "Viking Vermin", and the poem "Vile Vikings."

2. Describing the Vikings: ~ 5 minutes

After reading *Vile Vikings*, return to the descriptions. Ask if they have any descriptions to add, or if they feel any of their previous descriptions need adjustment. Especially note any stereotypes that may have been adjusted after reading the book.

3. Scandinavian exploration and settlement: ~ 20 minutes

Now that the class has formed general ideas of what Viking life was like, pass out Wikipedia synopsis of the Viking Age. Have volunteers read each paragraph aloud. After the class has done this, ask them to skim back over the paragraphs and state any places the text mentions that the Vikings either settled or visited. Write these places on the board, then give each student a blank map of the Northern Hemisphere. Open a power point presentation document the same blank map. As you view the show, each time you hit enter a new dot will appear on the map showing a place the Vikings visited and giving the place name. One by one, go through the places written on the board, having students label their maps according to the one on the power point.

[though I am well aware of the dangers of using Wikipedia for teaching purposes, I chose this source because it was a more concise presentation of the information I wanted than other sources. After checking with other sources, I am convinced the information is accurate and appropriate to use in class]

4. Anticipation Guide: ~ 10 minutes

Give each student an anticipation guide for the article that they will be reading shortly. The guide lists 5 statements about the Vikings, and students must write whether they agree or

disagree with the statement. This may be done on an entire class level if desired. If so, then the teacher would read each anticipation statement aloud and ask the class if they agreed or disagreed. Allow anyone with an opinion to explain why they agree or disagree. Then the class will take a vote on the question, and write the vote tallies on the board.

5. Vinland Article ~ 25 minutes

After filling out the anticipation guide, give each student a copy of John Noble Wilford's article in the New York Times, "Ancient Site Offers Clues to Vikings in America." They will each read the article to themselves. Make sure students know that they should be referring back to the anticipation guide while reading so that they keep in mind the questions that they will have to readdress after the reading.

6. Reevaluate the Anticipation Guide ~10 minutes

When they have finished reading the article, students will return to their anticipation guides and reevaluate each of their answers, again marking whether they agree or disagree with the statement. For each statement, they must provide a sentence or two explaining why they have kept the same answer or changed answers, citing specific evidence from the text that led them to those conclusions. This may also be done with an accompanying class discussion of each statement. The teacher would again ask students to state whether they agree or disagree with the statements after they have read the article. Classmates may still disagree with each other, so encourage any volunteers to explain their reasoning. Again, take a class vote and write the tallies on the board, asking the class to note how the vote totals may or may not have changed after the reading.

Assessment

The anticipation guide will also serve as the assessment strategy. After students have read the article, they must go back to the assessment guide and reevaluate their answers. For each answer, they must give a sentence or two explaining why the text either confirmed or challenged their previous answers.

Bibliography

Dobson, Mary. *Smelly Old History: Vile Vikings*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Wilford, John Noble. "Ancient Site Offers Clues To Vikings In America." *The New York Times*. 9 May 2000, sec. F, p. 1, column 5. Lexis Nexis.

Wikipedia. 23 October, 2007. "The Viking Age."

Viking Age Synopsis:

Geographically, a "Viking Age" may be assigned not only to the Scandinavian lands (modern Denmark, Norway and Sweden), but also to territories under North Germanic dominance, mainly the Danelaw, which replaced the powerful English kingdom of Northumbria and the Isle of Man. Contemporary with the European Viking Age, the Byzantine Empire in the Balkans and Anatolia, heir to the Eastern Roman Empire, experienced the greatest period of stability (circa 800 – 1071) it would enjoy after the initial wave of Arab conquerors in the 7th century.

Viking navigators also opened the road to new lands to the north, west and east, resulting in the foundation of independent kingdoms in the Shetland, Orkney, and Faroe Islands, Iceland, Greenland, and L'Anse aux Meadows, a short-lived settlement in Newfoundland, circa 1000 A.D. Many of these lands, specifically Greenland and Iceland, were likely discovered by sailors blown off course. Greenland was later abandoned because its few "green" spots disappeared due to climate change. Vikings also seized and destroyed many villages and territories in Slavic-dominated areas of Eastern Europe. The Persian traveller Ibn Rustah described how Swedish Vikings, the Rus, terrorized and enslaved the Slavs. In Athens, Greece, Swedish Vikings wrote a runic inscription on the Piraeus Lion.

During three centuries, Vikings appeared along the coasts and rivers of Europe, as traders generally, but also as raiders when opportunity allowed, and even like Turgesius, as settlers. From 839, Varangian mercenaries in Byzantine service, notably Harald Hardrada, campaigned in North Africa, Jerusalem, and other places in the Middle East. Important trading ports during the period include Birka, Hedeby, Kaupang, Jorvik, Staraya Ladoga, Novgorod and Kiev. Generally speaking, the Norwegians expanded to the north and west to places such as Iceland and Greenland, the Danes to England and France, settling in the Danelaw (northern England) and Normandy, and the Swedes to the east. These nations, although distinct, were similar in culture, especially language. The names of Scandinavian kings are known only for the later part of the Viking Age, and only after the end of the Viking Age did the separate kingdoms acquire a distinct identity as nations, which went hand in hand with their Roman Catholicization. Thus the end of the Viking Age (9th – 11th century) for the Scandinavians also marks the start of their relatively brief Middle Ages.

There is archaeological evidence (coins) that the Vikings reached the city of Baghdad, the center of the Islamic Empire and their considerable intellectual endeavors. In 921, Ibn Fadlan was sent as emissary on behalf of the Caliph of Baghdad to the itabar (vassal-king under the Khazars) of the Volga Bulgara, Almis. The Bolgar King had petitioned to the Caliph to establish relations. He asked to have someone come teach him Arabic and the Qu'ran and pledge allegiance to Hanafi rite of the Sunni Muslims. The Caliph promised to send money to build a fort on the Volga, but the transaction never occurred. The Norse regularly plied the Volga with their trade goods: furs, tusks, seal fat to seal boats and slaves (notably female slaves; this was the one time in the history of the slave-trade when females were priced higher than males). However, they were far less successful in establishing settlements in the middle east, due to the more centralized Islamic power, namely of the Umayyad and, later, Abbasid empires.

Anticipation Guide:

True or False:

1. People from Scandinavia were called Vikings
2. Vikings were fearsome raiders, much like pirates
3. Viking settlements were more barbaric less advanced than other European communities
4. The Vikings were the first to visit what is now the United States
5. The Vikings found grapes at a settlement which they called Vinland.

Vinland Article:

http://www.lexisnexis.com/us/lnacademic/results/docview/docview.do?risb=21_T2326519353&format=GNBFI&sort=RELEVANCE&startDocNo=1&resultsUrlKey=29_T2326519356&cisb=22_T2326519355&treeMax=true&treeWidth=0&csi=6742&docNo=9

The New York Times

May 9, 2000, Tuesday, Late Edition - Final

Ancient Site Offers Clues To Vikings in America

BYLINE: By JOHN NOBLE WILFORD

SECTION: Section F; Page 1; Column 5; Science Desk

LENGTH: 2070 words

DATELINE: L'ANSE AUX MEADOWS, Newfoundland, May 4

A spring snow fell all night and all day and buried the land down to water's edge. Drifts piled high against the walls of the sod houses. The mind's eye could see the place as it was 1,000 years ago when Vikings, led by Leif Ericson, first wintered here while exploring the coasts of a country they called Vinland.

Here, at the northern tip of Newfoundland, is what archaeologists agree is the first and still only authentic site of Viking settlement in North America, 500 years before the voyages of Columbus. The ruins of eight houses and workshops, some with their thick walls and pitched roofs meticulously restored, will be a focus for this year's millennial commemoration of all things Viking.

"This settlement has led us to Vinland, at last," said Dr. Birgitta Linderroth Wallace, an archaeologist with Parks Canada who has studied the site for years.

The excavations have not only confirmed elements of truth in the sagas of the seafaring adventurers from Norway and the rest of Scandinavia who crossed the North Atlantic and, for a brief time, tasted the berries and grapes in North America, their Vinland. They have also inspired new scholarship revising the legendary image of the Vikings.

Yes, they were feared warriors who plundered the coasts of Europe and the British Isles, especially between 750 and about 1050; the term Viking, strictly speaking, refers only to men who went on raids.

But they were also farmers and herders at home and no less sophisticated in arts and invention than other medieval Europeans.

They were successful ship builders who engaged in ever-widening trade, east to Russia and south to Rome and Baghdad. In their Iceland colony at the end of the 10th century, these people created the first democratic parliament. Their further western expansion brought about the first tenuous contact between the Old World and the New.

These new interpretations of the Vikings and their Norse descendants are illustrated in an exhibition, "Vikings: The North Atlantic Saga," which opened recently at the National Museum of Natural History in Washington and will run through Aug. 13. It will then move to the American Museum of Natural History in Manhattan in October.

Recent research is described in detail in the exhibition's elaborate companion book, published by the Smithsonian Press, and a new translation of the Norse sagas has been issued, appropriately, by Viking Press.

Dr. William W. Fitzhugh, the exhibition's principal curator, said that as travelers and traders the Vikings were "catalysts that transformed European societies," and as explorers they took the first steps to "reconnect human populations into a single global system." They were presumably the first Europeans to lay eyes on descendants of the people who had long before migrated into the Americas, where one branch of humanity had lived unknown to the other.

Sometime at the end of the 10th century, halfway between today and the birth of Christ and Rome's heyday, Ericson set out from the Greenland colony in a sturdy longboat with a soaring prow and a large square sail. Another seafarer, drifting off course, had sighted land to the west, and Ericson went to see for himself.

According to the sagas, Ericson's party first headed northwest across Baffin Bay and came upon a rocky coast they called Helluland, present-day Baffin Island. Then they sailed south, hugging the shore, to the wooded place they named Markland, probably Labrador. Finally, they entered a shallow bay and waited for high tide to bring them ashore to a green meadow. Here at L'Anse aux Meadows, they established a base camp, their beachhead in Vinland.

"Some people think this site is Vinland itself," said Tamara Ricks, acting supervisor of the National Historic Park here. "But it really was the gateway to Vinland. Over a period of about 10 years, we think, several Viking parties probably spent three to five years in total here, wintering over, hunting and fishing and repairing their boats."

Vinland proper, scholars conclude, lay to the south along the coasts around the Gulf of St. Lawrence, in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. Of Vinland, Adam of Bremen wrote in 1070, "There grow wild grapes." Climate studies suggest that grapes never grew in Newfoundland, but probably did grow in Nova Scotia.

If there was any doubt that Vikings traveled to these southern coasts, it was dispelled when archaeologists found butternuts, a white walnut, buried in the ruins here. The closest place where butternuts grow is New Brunswick.

And until the discovery of this site, the very fact of a Viking presence anywhere in North America was questioned as possibly little more than a myth, like trolls and elves. Then along came Helge Ingstad and his wife, Dr. Anne Stine Ingstad, an archaeologist.

An Arctic explorer in the Norse tradition, Mr. Ingstad followed a hunch and an Icelandic map from the 1670's, which identified a place on the north coast of Newfoundland as "Promontorium Winlandiae." After scouting out other coasts, he arrived at the small fishing village here in 1960. He asked a fisherman, George Decker, if there were any strange ruins in the vicinity. In an interview in Washington, where he attended the opening of the Viking exhibition, the 100-year-old Mr. Ingstad of Oslo, still keen of mind, recalled the moment.

"Yes, follow me," he said Mr. Decker told him.

"Decker took me west of the village to a beautiful place with lots of grass and a small creek and some mounds in the tall grass," Mr. Ingstad remembered. "It was very clear that this was a very, very old site. There were remains of sod walls. Fishermen assumed it was an old Indian site. But Indians didn't use that kind of buildings, sod houses."

For the next eight summers, Mr. Ingstad and his wife, now deceased, and an international team of archaeologists excavated the site. Their first reports of discovery were not believed. Then they came upon remains of a blacksmith shop, he said, "one of our most important finds." In the middle was a huge flat stone for the anvil, with charcoal and lumps of iron scattered about. A few of the pieces had been forged into nails. This was the earliest evidence of iron processing in North America.

The Ingstads uncovered the outlines of eight houses, three of which were where the people lived, perhaps 25 to 35 in each long dwelling. Built in the style of Icelandic houses, the walls were six feet thick, two layers of sod with a layer of gravel in between for drainage. The roofs were made of turf laid over a timber frame. Radiocarbon analysis dated the artifacts at between 980 and 1020 -- the time of Ericson's and subsequent expeditions.

The Ingstads' work "proved that Norsemen, Vikings if you will, actually were in America 500 years before Columbus," Dr. Fitzhugh said.

In later excavations, Dr. Wallace, of Parks Canada, uncovered even more artifacts confirming the site's Viking origins. Geochemical analysis of pieces of jasper, used to make sparks for starting fires, revealed trace elements found only in Greenland or Iceland. In the ground outside one of the houses was a bronze pin with a ring head, in a Norse style and probably made in Britain. The Vikings used such pins as fasteners for their cloaks.

Among the 800 artifacts archaeologists also found soapstone oil lamps, a bone needle and more iron nails. Some of the smaller houses appeared to be workshops for carpenters and weavers. A

spindle whorl attested to work with textiles, and since Vikings considered this women's work, at least some of the expeditions must have included women.

The absence of evidence of any barns, Dr. Wallace said, indicated that this was not a farming settlement, but a base camp for the Vikings as they surveyed the region for likely places for more permanent occupation.

In an essay for the exhibition's companion book, Dr. Wallace wrote, "The silent ruins of the L'Anse aux Meadows site tell a fascinating story of the people who built them, when they were there, what they did and why they were there."

This week's heavy snow on the restored houses evoked a vision of the Vikings' first winter here: Labrador, their Markland, is barely visible across the strait leading from the Atlantic Ocean into the Gulf of St. Lawrence. A small fishing boat rests on a wooden stand. Fish hang drying on a rack. Firewood is stacked near the entrance to the long house. Smoke, rising through a roof hatch, is swept away in the stiff wind.

Inside, people lounge on benches facing a fire for warmth and cooking. They sharpen knives and axes, carve pieces of wood and mend clothing, garments of wool from home and animal skins from their travels. By the light of a soapstone lamp in a corner, someone fingers the ring head of the bronze pin, calling up memories of Europe.

All the while, they spin stories of seas they have sailed and places they have found, stepping stones of land across the North Atlantic, first the Faeroe Islands northwest of Scotland, then Iceland and Greenland, now here at the gateway to Vinland. Someday their tales would be written down as the Norse sagas. The ones about Vinland would scarcely be believed, at least not until the discovery of these ruins.

Serious Viking exploration of Vinland probably lasted little more than a decade. After Ericson's single expedition, his role as Vinland explorer was assumed by Thorfinn Karlsefni, who once led a party of 160 men and women in three ships. They stayed three years, and his wife, Gudrid, gave birth to a boy, Snorri, presumably the first European born in America.

One of the advantages of the L'Anse aux Meadows camp, scholars say, was its safe distance from native Indians. But at other settlements, the Vikings had several bloody encounters with the Indians, whom they called Skraelings, a derogatory Old Norse word meaning wretch. In a time before gunpowder, the Vikings with spears and axes held no arms advantage over the Indians with bows and arrows, and the Indians outnumbered them.

"Internal conflicts as well as attack from the natives eventually led to their departure," concluded Dr. Gisli Sigurdsson, a Norse scholar at the Arni Magnusson Institute in Reykjavik, Iceland.

"We have been to the Moon, but we haven't yet established bases there," Dr. Wallace said. "The same was the case for the Norse and Vinland."

Long afterward, though, Vikings from Greenland repeatedly visited the shores of Labrador for timber and food. Archaeologists have found Norse artifacts, including spun yarn, there and on northern Baffin Island. Since neither the early Eskimos nor their immediate Inuit successors spun yarn or worked wood by sawing, nailing and mortising, Dr. Patricia Sutherland of the Archaeological Survey of Canada said, the artifacts pointed to extensive contacts with the Greenland Norse for several centuries. Beginning this summer, Dr. Sutherland will conduct new studies of these artifacts and search for more in the Canadian Arctic.

But archaeologists hold out little hope of finding another Viking camp like L'Anse aux Meadows. Some previous finds have turned out to be misleading or bogus. A Norse penny minted in the late 11th century turned up at an Indian site in Maine, but it is generally thought to have gotten there by trade. A stone tower in Newport, R.I., once hailed as Viking, was actually built in the 17th century. Both Minnesota's Kensington Stone, bearing Norse writing, and Yale's Vinland Map are now widely judged to be modern fakes.

By the early 15th century, the Norse also had to abandon Greenland. After centuries of relative warmth, which had favored North Atlantic travels, the global climate took a frigid turn, and the colony's trade with Norway declined sharply.

The era of Viking marauding had long since passed. To some scholars the Norman invasion of England in 1066 was the last great Viking raid; many Normans were descended from helmeted Vikings who had earlier seized their land. And now the era of Viking western expansion had also ended. All that was left were the sagas, and ruins of some sod houses on a bleak Canadian coast.

Writing of the Vikings who had to give up their Vinland dreams, Dr. Sigurdsson said, "You spend the rest of your life boasting of the great time you had with your mates when you spent the summers sailing across the seven seas and finding new and previously unheard of lands, just like the Icelandic sagas tell us."