



# VIKINGS

**A simulation of the culture and contributions  
of the medieval Norse, 800–1100**

BILL LACEY, the author of *VIKINGS*, has written over 20 simulations and interactive learning units for Interact since 1974. Most recently he wrote *GREEKS* and co-authored the *GREAT AMERICAN CONFRONTATIONS* and *GREAT AMERICAN LIVES* series. Bill is also the Interact historical editor of both the *GREAT HISTORICAL ERAS* and the *WORLD HISTORY TRIALS* series. He has taught high school history for over two decades in Fountain Valley, California, where he uses the materials he creates or edits. Bill pursues the Good Life by committing himself to his family in Huntington Beach, by dedicating himself to teaching, and by having several hobbies: running, puttering around the home, and dreaming of adding screen-writing to his busy life.

Copyright ©1991

**Interact**

10200 Jefferson Boulevard  
Culver City, CA 90232-0802  
[www.teachinteract.com](http://www.teachinteract.com)  
ISBN 978-1-57336-128-6

**Samples are provided for evaluation purposes. Copying of the product or its parts for resale is prohibited. Additional restrictions may be set by the publisher.**

All rights reserved. Only those pages of this simulation intended for student use as handouts may be reproduced by the teacher who has purchased this teaching unit from **Interact**. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording—without prior written permission from the publisher.



## Introduction

## PURPOSE - 1

# Why study the Vikings?

VIKINGS was written to give social studies teachers yet another series of clever strategies with which to teach their subjects. Increasingly, school board and curriculum committees realize the wisdom of having students involved in their own education through debates, trials, panels, historical re-creations, and simulations—strategies which guarantee interaction.

Interactive and cooperative materials of this nature have not always been available for teachers of World and European History as much as for their counterparts in United States History. This simulation on the Vikings will hopefully fill a small void as will others in this Interact world history series: GREEKS, ISLAM, CHRISTENDOM, and RENAISSANCE.

The period of the Vikings is not a shot in the dark, or as one historian has phrased it, “a bolt out of the blue”—a reference to their blitzkrieg raiding style. Indeed, the Norse should be more than a fascinating footnote in history for several reasons.

First, these hardy Scandinavian people have been misunderstood to a point of being maligned, if not by scholars, at least by a gullible public. While they did plunder, kill, and create havoc in the structured and religious European world (a monk’s plea: “Oh, Lord, protect us from the wrath of the Northmen”), they were in fact more than a crazed horde of murderous barbarians. Their contribution to western civilization, while not equal in any way to the Hebrews or Greeks, is significant and thus worthy of students’ study—even if for only five to seven days of class. It is important, then, to clear up the Viking’s image as history’s “bad boys” and make the historic record more accurate.

Second, once the myths about these “salt-water bandits” are exploded, students can sort out the real Viking legacy. Since few of us have ever penetrated this veiled myth, we have not seen the hard-working, progressive farmers and traders the Norse men and women were, living life like the rest of Medieval Europe, except that they ate better food, were cleaner, and in most cases, spoke up on their own behalf among their countrymen, including kings. One could deduce that participatory democracy was possibly advanced enough to ensure every Viking’s right to manage his own destiny. While this deduction might be an exaggeration, the majority of Europeans of this time mostly groveled before corrupt monarchies and waited for death’s liberation. Another reason to spend a week with the Vikings is their contribution to world literature. In spite of (or because of) a rich and colorful pagan religion, Viking poets and story-tellers glorified heroic gods and goddesses



## PURPOSE - 2

in works which have endured majestically to this day. Coupled with literature is their achievement in art, especially in their decoration of jewelry, their furniture, and their long ships. This same artistry and skill help make Scandinavian furniture popular today.

But probably the most important reason to study the Vikings is their legacy on the seas and in seagoing technology. Were there ever better sailors in all history? These men continually crossed cruel oceans to explore, discover, and settle areas the rest of Europe thought to be imaginary and forboding places on mythical maps.

In their wanderings, the Vikings did the following:

- discovered Greenland and North America;
- penetrated the interior of Russia and founded a vast trading empire from Novogorod to Byzantium and beyond;
- sailed into the Mediterranean Sea and opened up markets with both the Italian city-states and Moslem North Africa; and
- settled northwest France, became “Normans,” and in 1066, crossed the English Channel to conquer, rule, populate, and influence England for centuries.

In many ways, the Norse legacy might be likened to a shot of adrenalin in the bloodstream of a European world awakening from the Dark Ages' lethargy. Therefore, we all must rid ourselves of the stereotypical Viking marauders myth, for the Norse actually spent 90 percent of their time as creative, democratic farmers and herdsmen. Dispelling such a myth from young minds is a worthy goal.





## OVERVIEW - 1

# What happens each Phase?

In this unit your students participate in activities which help them understand and appreciate a misunderstood and unappreciated medieval people—the Vikings, Norse, or Northmen. Actually, Norse is the most proper use since most of the time they were not *i viking*, or sea wandering. The simulation will get your students involved firsthand in the adventures and culture of the Norse. All learning styles will be used—tactile, kinesthetic, auditory, and visual. After a pre-phase introduction during which students survey a brief Student Guide, they join one of three groups (**SVs**, **DVs**, or **NVs**—see below) and choose a personal Viking name. They are then ready to begin the gauntlet of phases that make up Vikings.

1. **Phase 1: Becoming a Viking** (1–2 days) Your new Norsemen and Norsewomen read over a brief history of the Viking people and their role in western civilization. Next, they receive a handout detailing the achievements and adventures of either the Swedish-Vikings (**SVs**), Danish-Vikings (**DVs**), or Norwegian-Vikings (**NVs**). Their first challenge is to take a test over the general history and their own nation's specific history. After an explanation of the simulation's point system, NORSEMARKS are awarded to those who proved themselves worthy as an individual and as a member of a separate Scandinavian nation. Last, they read a handout on HOW TO BE A VIKING and are told to go home and search for an appropriate costume they can wear during the simulation.
2. **Phase 2: The Vikings' World** (1–2 days) Having acquired some knowledge about their Norse identities, your students next need to grasp the enduring achievement Vikings made to world geography and the extent of their trading empire. As they work on a map, they learn of the Norse commercial network which was a rectangle of some 6,000 miles by 12,000 miles. Students meet the rivers, medieval cities, trade routes, goods and services of this era; they also chart Viking explorations in North America, Asia, and the Mediterranean. Key economic concepts become clear in the phase and for the best-drawn maps and accurate cartographers, NORSEMARKS cascade into the various groups' coffers.
3. **Phase 3: Viking Challenge Projects** (Optional—number of days will vary) If you decide to do all, or most, of the phases of Vikings, this phase could fit nicely in between Phase 1 and Phase 2 and would give your young Vikings an opportunity to work on unit projects. Working either as individuals, in pairs, or as an entire nation (e.g., Danish-Vikings), they can do one or more of the following:



## OVERVIEW - 2

# Democratic Vikings!

- decipher the mysterious runes the Norse used to write their language;
- write skaldic poetry;
- make Norse jewelry; or
- help construct and decorate a Viking dragonship.

Their finished products can be showcased during the simulation's ending activity—FEASTING A DEAD HERO. The completed longship will be put to use in Phase 5's ACTING OUT A SAGA. Whether or not you have your students use this phase will depend on time and students' interest.

4. **Phase 4: Meeting of the Althing** (2–3 days) Having learned that the Vikings were much more than pirates and barbarians, students enter a phase in which they explore the Norse contributions to participatory government. The Viking Althing was like our national Congress in some ways, but more like a supreme court in other ways. First, students read a handout to learn what the Althing was, the extent of its duties, and how it actually functioned, including the punishments it meted out to transgressors who came before it. Next, the appointed lawspeaker, defendant, oath-takers, and accusers face six interesting and challenging cases. Using clearly written guides, participants follow an agenda just as the Norse would have followed in an identical conclave 900 years ago in Iceland, where, incidentally, the Althing *still* meets! Those who come before the lawspeaker create in-depth characters as they embellish their versions of what happened in each case. Will the defendant be found guilty and lose his hand? Or will the accuser win and be awarded three pigs?
5. **Phase 5: Acting Out a Saga** (2–3 days) As students learned in the Viking history handout, Scandinavians relived stories of their heroic deeds because these tales were written down as sagas. The sagas glorified the Viking Age by describing the adventures, honor, revenge, blood feuds, and death of their predecessors. Your modern Vikings will now take up a new adventure: preparing and acting out a thrilling saga of their own nation—Sweden, Denmark, or Norway. Led by a jarl or chieftain, the three groups take a fairly brief prepared saga, plan their version on a saga script sheet, and then act out scenes, using simple props and a narrator. Spectators will be treated to the adventures of Leif Eriksson's discoveries, the Swedish colonization of Russia, and the Danish pillaging and settlement of France. Your students will thus easily grasp the essence of the multifaceted and complex Viking of that time—part civilizer, part explorer, part barbarian. NORSEMARKS are awarded for outstanding and memorable performances.



## OVERVIEW - 3

- Phase 6: Feasting a Dead Hero** (1 day) This last phase is a culminating activity celebrating the Viking spirit through skaldic poetry, jewelry, runic inscriptions, and oaths to the recently deceased Viking jarl en route to Valhalla (the Viking heaven). A memorable addition to the celebration can be food from Scandinavian recipes brought by students on one particular day at the end of the unit. If you like, acting out the sagas can be the centerpiece of feast day. Another option on this day might be a detailed review of the information and concepts learned during the simulation. In such a case, you could give a test the next day.

In all, your student Vikings will uncover the truths about one of history's most fascinating and rugged peoples by being *actively involved*. They will work cooperatively in groups, giving short speeches to defend and prosecute their countrymen, constructing and decorating, composing poetry, sharpening their map-making skills, deciphering an ancient language, and dramatizing the essence of a saga. Their interest and intellect will both be captured. And maybe at the end, some of your Ragnars or Olgas may even embody that adventuresome spirit which at the same time thrilled and scared those who shared their era with the Vikings!





## SETUP DIRECTIONS - 1

1. **Understanding the simulation:** The adventure your students are beginning will, in many ways, be an adventure for you. First of all, do not be overwhelmed by the size of this notebook. Take enough time to go over its contents rather thoroughly. Doing so will allay your fears and get you excited about what is ahead. Second, as you read, start considering right away which of the several activities and information sheets you think you will want to use. Reflect upon your student's age/abilities and your time constraints. **Note well:** *You do not have to do all of the activities in VIKINGS' 10–15 teaching days or periods.*



2. **Decisions about time:** After studying the unit's activities—and particularly its OVERVIEW CHART found later in this introduction portion—decide between the two following approaches:

- **Using portions with your unit on the Middle Ages:** Decide upon how many teaching days you can give VIKINGS and then reread all phases and activities you would like to use to supplement your existing unit. Particularly recommended are MEETING OF THE ALTHING, ACTING OUT A SAGA, the map assignment, COMPOSING SKALDIC POETRY (homework?), and the brief history in the Student Guide essays. The students could even take on Norse names for a few days.
- **Using the entire simulation:** Using all of VIKINGS is time well spent if your course can afford it. In some states studying the Middle Ages occupies considerable time. In such a case here's a chance to use a detailed simulation to enhance your course. Students will carry away knowledge and *experiences* they will long remember. Of course, feel free to extend or reshape your unit with your own ideas (e.g., see the videos in the filmography later on), audio tape recordings, field trips to museums, or outside speakers you have available. Of course, include your own traditional text assignments if possible.



*In California, the HISTORY/SOCIAL STUDIES FRAMEWORK recommends that middle schools study the middle ages during several months' teaching.*

3. **Duplication:** Having made your decisions about time, first duplicate only these items which are common to all phases or are needed in the simulation's introductory segment:

- THE VIKING ROSTER: *(one per class)*
- Student Guide: *(class set)*
- NORSEMARKS BALANCE SHEET: *(class set)*
- **(Optional)** Illustrations—pages 1:17 through 1:20 *(class set)*



*Students will love to study and color these illustrations!*

4. **Grouping the students:** You decide how to place students into one of the three nationality or ethnic clusters (**SVs**, **DVs**, or **NVs**). THE VIKING ROSTER sheet is provided for this task. *Balance the*



## SETUP DIRECTIONS - 2

# How should I evaluate?

*capable, average, and less capable students within each group. If some students are of one of the three Viking ethnic clusters, honor these “roots” and make a few special placements. Letting students choose their own groups is not recommended.*

- Room arrangement:** Use your imagination to decorate your room to resemble a Viking village (Birka, Sweden?) in the 11th century. Butcher paper decorated with designs (see the graphics throughout this simulation for ideas) would be most appropriate. For the Althing and feast phases, perhaps a set of risers could be brought in to elevate certain persons. Since your students are meeting most of the time in large (10–15) groupings, you should move desks into three distinct classroom areas. Loyalties to these factions could be enhanced by a group motto or handshake/salute ... or by banners (“**Be the NV of all Vikings**” or “**Take a liking to a Swedish-Viking**” or “**Danish is more than a sweet roll**”).
- Leadership in each group:** You select your three best students to be jarls or chieftains of each group. They should be able to inspire, lead, compute honestly, and guide their charges through the various activities. One of these three could be chosen as law-speaker during the Althing phase. Recognize that the success of this simulation may hinge on your choices for jarls.
- Grading and NORSEMARKS:** Students should keep their own points earned during the simulation on personal copies of the NORSEMARKS BALANCE SHEET. Periodically, you and the jarls could monitor these sheets. (Consider collecting them every three days.) Possible grading option: base 50% of their unit grade on a test, 25% on their own evaluation of what they accomplished, and 25% on their balance sheet—*verified* by their jarl. What goes on these balance sheets?

• Costume/portrayal during VIKINGS	10
• Viking challenge test	25
• Viking’s world map	5–10
• Role in Althing cases	10–20
• Deciphering the Runes	10–15
• Skaldic poetry	10
• Role in group’s saga	10
• Decorating objects/projects	10–20
• Simulation self-evaluation	out of 50
• Test/Final Viking Challenge	out of 80

200–250 points possible





## SETUP DIRECTIONS - 3

Keep track of both individual and group-earned NORSEMARKS. To compute points for groups, add up all individual points on a given challenge. Then divide by the number in each group. Track the competition by nation on the chalkboard or large sheets of paper. (Other assignments from your textbook, etc. may be put on same NORSEMARK system.) Finally, you could honor and recognize the high NORSEMARK earners (exemption from cooking?) at the FEASTING A DEAD HERO.

- 8. Notifying parents:** Perhaps the week before you start VIKINGS, you should send a brief note or letter home to parents telling them of their student's upcoming challenges and experiences in the simulation. Send along a calendar-grid sheet and a Student Guide asking them to help wherever they can, especially with challenge projects or cooking Scandinavian foods for the FEASTING A DEAD HERO phase. In addition, a handy mom or dad could help whip up a Viking costume with a sword and helmet. (**Remember:** Vikings didn't wear horns like the stereotyped opera divas.) Linkage with home will help make the whole enterprise at school easier.

Dear parent,  
We are beginning a unit on the  
VIKINGS of many years ago.  
Very possibly your student has  
already informed you about how  
we are ...

