

Student Handout #3A – Overview of the Vikings

Instructions: Read this overview article on the Vikings. Underline ideas you think are particularly important. Try not to underline everything! What are the BIG IDEAS about the Vikings in this article? After you read, you will summarize each of the 8 paragraphs in 15-20 words each, and then use these summaries to create one summary for the whole article.

- 1) The Vikings are an interesting, and often misunderstood, group of people who changed European history in important ways. They are often shown as barbaric warriors who killed anyone who got in their way, but of course, the truth is a bit more complicated than that.
- 2) Even so, the Vikings were indeed fierce warriors. They first came to historical attention in 793 with a brutal attack on a monastery, a center for religious study and worship run by Christian monks, in England. They killed many people and stole many valuable objects, and this was just the first in a long series of Viking raids on coastal towns across Europe, and even into Asia Minor (the area joining Europe to Asia where Constantinople was).
- 3) Monasteries actually made great targets for the Vikings. At this point in time, the Vikings were still pagans and hadn't yet taken up Christianity, so Vikings didn't feel bad taking money from monks. Monasteries weren't well defended either, and monks had no weapons and weren't warriors. Also, monasteries often had valuable treasures that they stored, things with religious meaning to Christians, but not to the Vikings. Monasteries also housed lots of people and so were good places to get food and other supplies. Vikings tended to target any place they could find with a combination of poor defenses and valuable goods.
- 4) Viking raiders were often the younger sons from farming families. First sons inherited the land, so younger sons had to find their own way to survive. At the same time, many Viking leaders competed with each other for followers, and one way to get followers was to gather wealth to buy their loyalty, and the easiest and quickest way to gather this wealth was to take it from someone else. Farming wasn't too good in Scandinavia anyways, so it wasn't hard to convince young men to go look for better land in other places. At the start of the Viking era, there was no central Viking ruler, no invasion plan, and no Viking "army." There were many different Viking leaders across the span of Scandinavia looking to increase their wealth and power with raids, and they tapped into the many young Vikings looking for adventure and new lands.
- 5) The Vikings could be brutal, but their goal was not to kill everyone they met, but rather to find new places to live and trade, and also to take what they wanted, often by force. European towns on the coasts lived in fear of Viking raids, and sometimes tried to pay the Vikings not to attack. At the same time, some Vikings were traders and were looking for new products and markets. Others were

skilled artisans who worked in gold, silver, iron, and wood, making beautiful jewelry and other objects that could be traded. They did NOT, however, make or wear horned helmets!

- 6) One of the secrets to Viking success was the longship. Although farming opportunities were not great in Scandinavia, there were lots of opportunities for fishing and sailing. Scandinavia is surrounded by water and also full of fjords, long narrow inlets from the ocean or sea that travel inland for miles and miles. To travel, trade, and fish, the people of these lands had developed excellent ships and sailing skills over time. The longship was their masterpiece. These ships were light in weight, narrow, and fast. They were double-ended, meaning they could go both forwards and backwards. They were perfect for crossing the seas between Scandinavia and the European coast, and then for sailing up rivers inland to attack unsuspecting towns. Longships were propelled by long oars powered by strong Viking sailors, and in time the Vikings also used sails on these ships.
- 7) The first Viking raids were small and only made by a few daring groups, but over time, as more raids were successful, the number of raiders grew and even more longships were built to meet this demand. Viking raiders brought back slaves, new ideas, and new products to Scandinavia after their raids. Many Vikings in later years were converted to Christianity during their travels, often as part of treaty and truce agreements made with European powers.
- 8) The Vikings changed Europe, and they themselves were also changed, in this process. Christianity became the dominant religion in Scandinavia, and new trading and craft centers were developed that shifted the focus from raiding to trading. Local leaders were unified by more powerful kings, and united nations began to emerge over time as Viking leaders interacted with, and in some cases became, the leaders of mainland European nations as well as in the British Isles. Through this process, Scandinavia became more tied to Europe and it also began to function more like the kingdoms of Europe as well.

Now, on a separate sheet of paper, summarize each of the 8 paragraphs in 15-20 words. Try to focus in on the big picture for each paragraph. What is the larger, general idea beyond the details that they author wants you to take away?

Once you have a short summary for each paragraph, read across these summaries. Pull out the larger big ideas and summarize all of this information, again, using only 20-30 words this time, and no more than three sentences.