

Section 1: Vikings in History



Who were the Vikings?



Explorers?



Invaders?



Settlers?



Craftsmen?

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Objectives

Cressida Cowell's *How to Train Your Dragon* books are really 'fantasy' books pretending to be 'history' books. However, even though some of the history in the *How to Train Your Dragon* books is not to be relied on, Cressida does actually do a lot of research. She uses this to inspire her storylines and to spark her imagination and peppers her stories with information drawn from every day Viking life (even though these facts may sometimes seem surprising or even barely believable). For instance, the swimming race in which the winner is the person to come last in *How to Ride a Dragon's Storm* is based on real history – such races really did take place.

Such historical facts are not only amusing but also tell us a lot about the Vikings, their culture and the realities of their daily life (in conjunction, of course, with the more well known historical facts about their explorations, battles, settlements etc.).

Cressida also uses a lot of exaggeration in her portrayal of characters and the Viking environment for humour and to add fun and colour to the stories. For example, the names of the characters in the books may be based on the Viking custom of giving nicknames but taken to an extreme. In Viking times names would be based on something a Viking did, how he looked or somewhere he lived. For instance, we have the Viking King Magnus Barelegs who wore a kilt instead of trousers, and Olav the Stout and Thorfinn Skullsplitter. In Cressida's books you have Stoick the Vast, Gobber the Belch, Norbert the Nutjob and so on – names that reflect the rather crazy Viking world which Cressida has created.

History and information about the day-to-day reality of life in the past undoubtedly provides lots of material to fire creativity. In this section children will explore who the Vikings were, how they communicated with each other and all about Viking life.

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Section 1: Vikings in History



Resources to use with this section

- Viking Timeline
- Viking Family Tree
- Viking Family Tree Activity Sheet (Easy & Hard)
- Viking Shield Activity Sheet
- Viking Rune Activity Sheet
- Viking Alphabet
- Viking Gruesome Facts

Who were the Vikings?

The Vikings came from Scandinavia. This is an area in north-east Europe where Norway, Sweden and Denmark are today. The Vikings conquered and settled new lands for about 300 years, from AD 800 to 1100. This is called the Viking Age.

The Vikings were great travellers. They explored Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, and the islands of the north Atlantic Ocean. Shetland, the Faroe Islands, Iceland and Greenland were stepping stones for their journeys, taking them further west.

The word 'Viking' was originally a verb, describing the action of seafaring, and so applies only to Scandinavians who were seafarers, not necessarily all Scandinavians.

Where did the Vikings Live?

There were no real towns in Scandinavia before the age of the Vikings. Instead, the landscape was dotted with farms and a few market-places. During the time of the Vikings, the first towns appeared. In the countryside, Vikings lived in longhouses. They were farmhouses that looked like barns or halls. The family lived at one end and their farm animals at the other. In the middle was an open fire used for cooking and for keeping the house warm.

Town houses were smaller than longhouses. Most were single-storey buildings, usually made from wood, wattle and daub and turf. Some parts were used as workshops where craftsmen could make their goods.



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What did the Vikings Eat?

Most Vikings were farmers and mainly grew cabbages, onions, beans and peas. The main crops were cereals, especially oats, barley and rye. Oats were used to make porridge. Barley and rye were made into a yeast-free bread. Meat came from pigs, sheep, goats and geese and also from deer, horses, seals and whales. It was roasted, boiled, stewed or made into sausages, then served with vegetables. Vikings near the sea ate fish, shellfish and seabirds and their eggs. Butter and cheese came from milk, and honey was used to sweeten food.

Vikings had two meals a day: the 'day meal' in the early morning, and the 'night meal' in the early evening. They used metal knives and wooden or horn spoons, but did not have forks.

What did Vikings Wear?



Viking women wore ankle-length dresses, over which were tunics held in place by shoulder brooches. Scarves and caps covered their heads. Men wore knee-length tunics and trousers, and leather or wool caps. Both men and women wore flat leather shoes or boots and woollen socks. In cold weather they wrapped up in warm cloaks of wool or fur. Rich Vikings had clothes made from expensive silk from China. Traders bought them at markets in the east. The wealthy also had gold and silver threads woven into patterns on their clothes.

A popular misconception is that Vikings wore helmets with horns on them. However, there is no evidence that Viking warriors wore any type of horns or wings on their helmets. The Vikings were often depicted with winged helmets and in other clothing taken from Classical antiquity, especially in depictions of Norse gods. This was done in order to legitimize the Vikings and their mythology by associating it with the Classical world. Viking helmets were conical and made from hard leather with wood.

The Vikings were actually quite fastidious about personal grooming. Among the most frequent artifacts unearthed in Viking Age excavations are a variety of tools used for personal grooming. The Vikings made soap as well, which they used to wash themselves and to bleach their hair, blond hair being especially valued in the Viking culture.

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How did the Vikings Travel?

The Vikings were great ship builders and travellers. Viking ships were made from planks of wood, held together firmly with metal pins called rivets. A trader's ship was called a knar. It was deep and wide with a big square sail. Its main purpose was to carry goods – although knars also carried people.

Viking warriors used longships. They are also known as dragonships, because a carving of a dragon was sometimes put at the front. They had a sail, but most of the time they were rowed by the men on board.

The Vikings didn't have maps and had to navigate in other ways such as by using landmarks to plot a course. Obviously, this becomes much more difficult when out of sight of land. Another method used was by depending on the instincts of birds. They took on board several ravens, releasing them one at a time as they sailed westward. If the raven flew back along the course from which it had come, the Viking ships continued due west. But when a raven flew a different way, the ships would change course, following its flight path in search of new lands.



The Vikings founded a settlement in North America almost 500 years before Columbus 'discovered' the New World. However, Vikings soon discovered that the lands were already inhabited by 'Skraelings' (probably Inuit), who were often hostile. After a few years, the colony in the New World was abandoned and the colonists sailed home. To encourage his fellow Norsemen to go to a large, snow and ice-covered island that he discovered in 982 AD, Eric the Red named it Greenland.

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How did the Vikings Live?

Vikings lived in longhouses made with wooden sides and turf roofs. These houses were often unfurnished apart from benches and many furs lining the interior for warmth. There was often a fire pit in the centre with a circle cut in the roof above. People slept around this fire pit for warmth. There are even some accounts of livestock being brought into the longhouse at night for warmth. The Vikings were a society that fished and farmed by raising livestock and working the land. What they farmed was used both for eating and for making clothing. They raised animals, including sheep, and grew crops such as corn, barley, beans, wheat, rye, carrots and turnips.

With no refrigeration, Vikings would preserve their meat for longer by salting and drying it or smoking it. They also dried fruits. While they sweetened foods occasionally with honey when it could be found, they did not have sugar. The Viking diet was very heavily made up of meat, grains and root vegetables.



Some people were slaves or 'thralls'. They had their hair shaved or close-cropped and wore simple white woollen clothes. Slaves did the hardest, dirtiest jobs. People could be born slaves. The child of a slave mother and father was a slave too, but the child of a slave mother and a free father was free. Many slaves were people captured in a Viking raid. Viking traders sold slaves in markets, but slave-trading in England was stopped in 1102.

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Viking Exploration

One of the first places for Viking settlements outside Scandinavia was Britain because it was close and it also had a large number of coastal towns and rivers which made it easy for Vikings to travel. The Vikings did not only travel by sea but also used rivers in order to access places that would usually take them much longer over land.

The largest Viking settlements were in Denmark, Iceland and York (shaded green patches). The Vikings chose York for its location central to the rest of Europe and its direct sealinks with Scandinavia. Where the Vikings settled they farmed the land and built houses from the materials they could find locally: wood, stone or mud. The Vikings made up rules for their settlements to prevent arguments over land, cattle or crops with heavy punishments for those who didn't follow the rules. The map also shows us that the Vikings did not only travel in and around Europe, but also travelled to places much further away such as Canada (Vinland), Russia and Central Asia. The Vikings travelled to these places to conquer new lands as well as to trade goods.



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Section 1: Viking Timeline



793

First invasion by the Vikings. They raided monasteries on the coast including Lindisfarne, off the coast of Northumbria.

821

Wessex becomes the Supreme Kingdom.

865

Great Viking Army from Denmark Invades England.

871

King Ethelred, the West Saxon king, and his brother Alfred, defeat the Viking army at the Battle of Ashdown (Berkshire).

886

King Alfred the Great defeats the Vikings but allows them to settle in Eastern England.

913

Edward the Elder recaptures Essex from the Danes.

926

Athelstan annexes Northumbria, and forces the kings of Wales, Strathclyde, the Picts, and the Scots to submit to him.

950

Vikings from Ireland, the Isle of Man and the Hebrides raid Wales, particularly the coastal monasteries.

954

Eric Bloodaxe, the last Viking King of Jorvik, is thrown out of York.

1001

Vikings land in America and establish a settlement.

1014

King Canute (Cnut) of Denmark becomes King of England.

1042

Edward the Confessor becomes King (A Saxon King).

1100

End of the Viking age.

794

First raids on Scotland and Ireland.

866

Danes capture York (which the Vikings called Jorvik) and make it their kingdom (land ruled by a king).

901

Edward the Elder takes the title "King of the Angles and Saxons".

937

Battle of Brunanburh: Athelstan defeats alliance of Scots, Celts, Danes, and Vikings, and takes the title of "King of all Britain".

924

Athelstan, son of Edward the Elder, becomes King of Wessex and effective ruler of most of England (to 939).

994

Olaf of Norway and Sven 'Forkbeard', son of the Danish king, lead an invading Danish army in an unsuccessful siege of London, and subsequently ravage southeast England.

980

New Viking Raids on England.

1066

Battle of Hastings occurred; William I crowned King of England.

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Where did the Vikings get their names?

The naming convention in the Scandinavian countries was to give a newborn the name of an honorable relative (usually recently dead) or of an heroic saga character. This made some names fairly common. To differentiate one 'Svein' from another a father's name (or, occasionally, the mother's if the father was unknown or had disowned them) would have 'son' (Svein) or 'daughter' (datter) appended to it and used as a name. Women generally did not change their names as a result of marriage.

A person would also usually pick up a nickname sooner or later. It could be for something he did, how he looked or where he lived. For instance, King Magnus Barelegs wore a kilt instead of trousers. When a complimentary nickname was given, friends would gather and have a party. Insulting nicknames were common and, unsurprisingly, unwanted by the individual so named (and never celebrated!).

Famous Vikings include:

Erik Bloodaxe - a ferocious Viking warrior, the son of Harald Fairhair (who had 20 sons), was king of Norway for a short time from 930.

Harald Hardarada - perhaps the fiercest Viking of all, Harald fought his first battle at just 15, fighting for his relative Olaf the Stout.

Olaf Trygvasson - was enslaved by pirates when only a child. Spotted by a fellow Swede, he was ransomed and released. He became King of Norway in 995.

Hastein - was known as a master of tricks and was a fearsome raider. The raid around the Mediterranean in 859-62 with Bjorn Ironside was his most famous adventure. He also led a raid of 80 ships up the Thames in 891.

Rollo - was made Duke of Normandy in 911. He is thought to have also been known as Hrolf the Ganger or Walker, so-called because he was so big no horse could carry him.

Ingvar the Far-Travelled - leader of the last great Swedish viking expedition, which pillaged the shores of the Caspian Sea.

Ivar the Boneless - though disabled and having to be carried on a shield, nevertheless conquered York.

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What Weapons did the Vikings Use?

All Viking men owned weapons and carried them at all times. A rich Viking would have a helmet, shield, chainmail shirt and a sword. Bows and arrows were used at the beginning of land battles and at sea, but were considered to be less honourable than hand weapons and most Vikings would fight with sword and spears. Axes were also used as a main battle weapon. The worst possible death for a Viking Chief was to die peacefully in bed.

The word 'berserk' is actually derived from a real tribe of Norsemen who called themselves 'Berserkers'. The word itself either stems from the Old Norse word 'bare-sark', as in 'bare of shirt' and refers to the Berserker's habit of going unarmored into battle.

At Viking victory celebrations, Vikings drank draughts of their enemies' blood out of drinking vessels fashioned from human skulls. The toast 'Skol!' may be derived from this custom.



Discussion Questions:

- How are the Vikings portrayed in *How to Train Your Dragon*? How are they similar to real Vikings in history? How are they different?
- How is the village of Berk portrayed in *How to Train Your Dragon*? Is it similar to a real Viking village? If so, in what ways?
- What parts of Viking life do you think you would enjoy most? Why?
- Are there parts of Viking life you can bring into your everyday life? What are they?

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The Viking Alphabet

The Vikings used letters called runes to communicate. The Viking alphabet is known as the futhark. It gets its name from its first six sounds (f, u, th, a, r, k). There were 24 runes in the first Viking alphabet, but later alphabets used just 16. All runes were made from short, straight lines as this made them easy to carve or scratch on to hard surfaces such as wood and stone.

Activity

- Imagine you were a Viking, what would a typical day be like? (Literacy, History)
- Write a story about 'A day in the life of a Viking'. (Literacy, History)
- 'Hot Seating' activity - have one child at the front of the room pretend to be a Viking and the other children ask questions about what it's like to be a Viking. (Speaking and listening)
- Make your own Viking shields using the activity sheet supplied. (Art)
- Act out a scene from Viking life in small groups. (Drama, History)
- Explore what Vikings ate and how they preserved food. (History)
- Discuss the Viking family tree. Compare it to Hiccup's family tree and create a basic family tree for Hiccup. (Literacy, History)
- Create your own family tree. In pairs interview your partner to ask them about their family and personal history, likes and dislikes etc. Come up with your own Viking name based on the interview and share with the rest of the class. (Speaking and listening)
- Make your name from Viking runes (paint on paper, clay or on to stones). (History, Craft)
- Watch the trailer for the *How to Train Your Dragon* film paying particular attention to the opening scenes, showing the Isle of Berk. What do you notice that is similar to what we have learnt about real Vikings?
- Hold an assembly on Vikings - a class presentation or year group or whole-school assembly. Depending on time and resources you could add costumes and props!

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Section 1: Viking Rune Activity Sheet



Write your name on this rune
using the Viking alphabet



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Family Tree Activity

A family tree is a diagram showing the relationships between people in several generations of a family. Bring in photographs of you and members of your family. These photos can include your parents and/or grandparents. Have a look at what physical features have been passed on to you. Even though some features may be similar in your family, each one of us is unique and special. Can you identify any physical features that were passed down through the generations?

Using the family tree form write down your own name, then the names of the members of your family, and then expand your tree by listing your grandparents.

You will need:

- Large sheets of paper or cardboard
 - Brown paper for the trunk of the tree
 - Green paper for the foliage of the tree
 - Red paper for the fruit of the tree
 - Scissors
 - Glue sticks
 - Pens/pencils
1. Cut out the shape of a tree trunk with some branches using the brown paper. Cut out some leaves using the green paper. Glue the tree and its leaves on to the large sheet of paper or cardboard. Alternatively, you might prefer to draw and/or paint the tree.
 2. Cut pieces from the red paper in the shape of apples. Each apple will have the name of a person in your family. Cut out enough apples for all of your family members.
 3. Write the name of each person in your family tree on to an apple. Next to the name, you can glue on a photo or drawing of that person.
 4. Glue the apples on to the tree on the same level of the tree as the person is on the family tree form.

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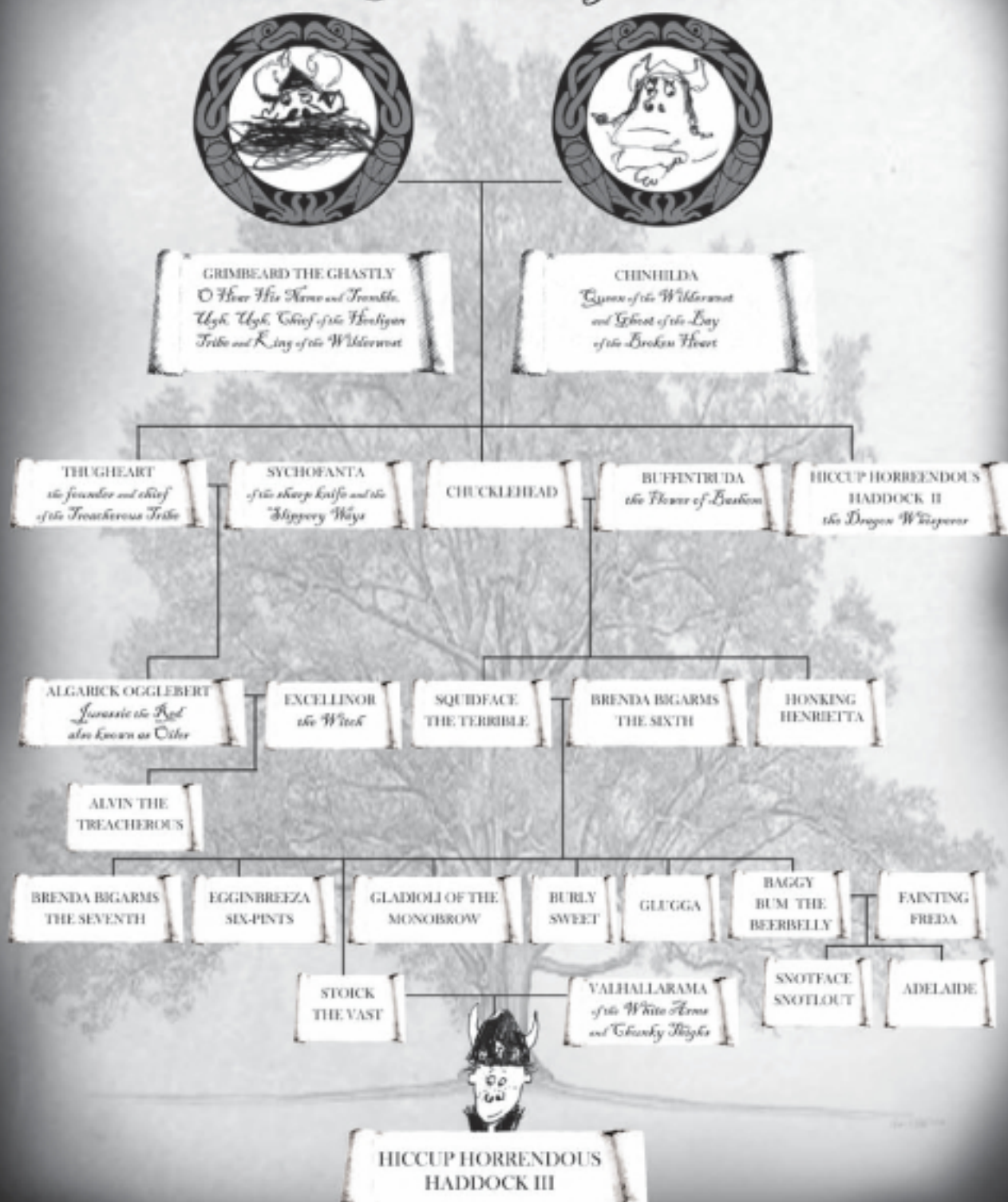
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Section 1: Viking Family Tree



Hooligan Family Tree



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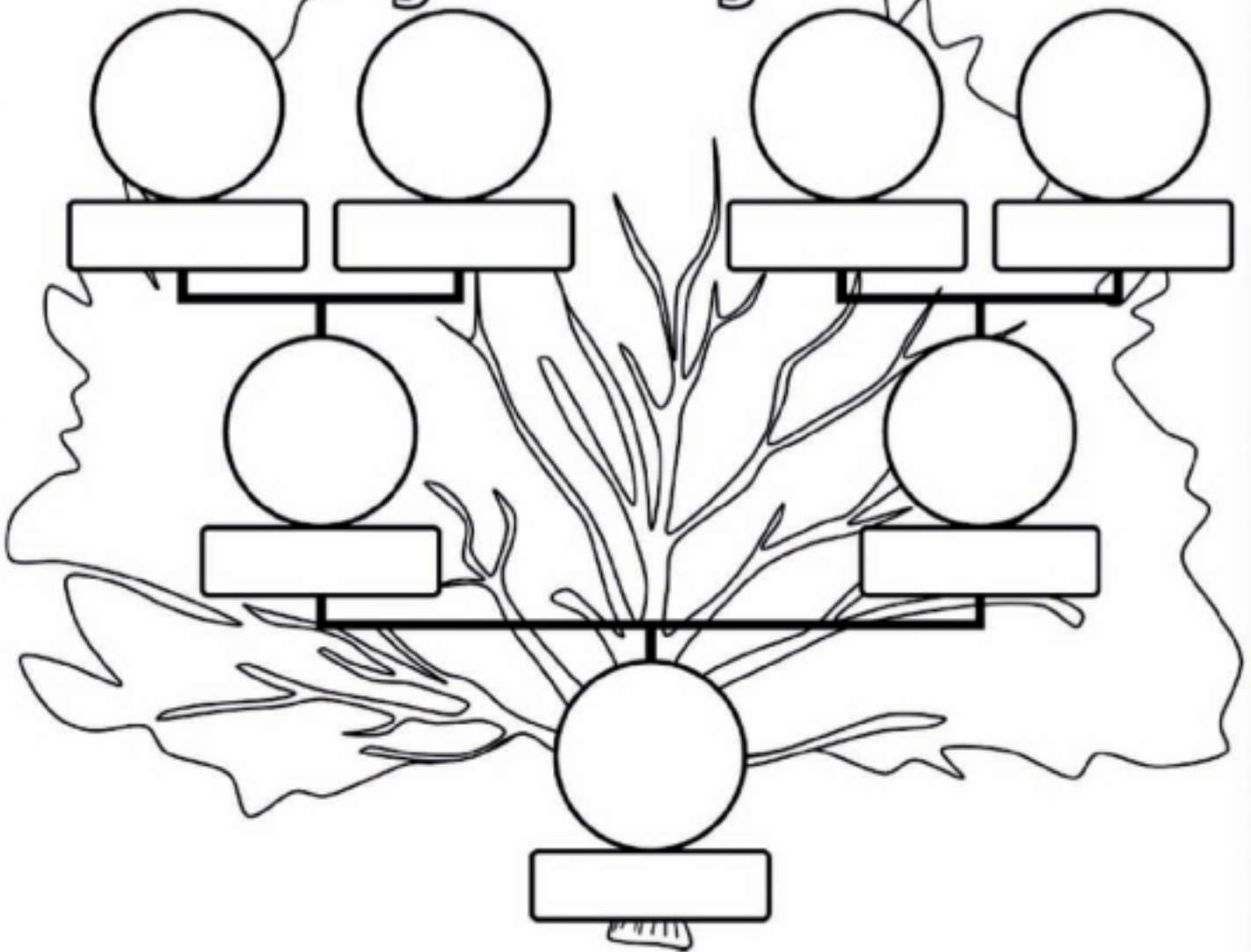
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Section 1: Family Tree Activity Sheet (Easy)



My Family Tree



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Section 1: Family Tree Activity Sheet (Hard)



My Family Tree



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Gruesome Facts About Vikings

The Vikings were a gruesome bunch. See how many of these Viking facts you know the answer to...

True or False?

Viking warriors wore helmets with horns on.

False – most wore plain leather or iron helmets. Only special ceremonial helmets may have been adorned with horns.

True or False?

Thursday is named after the Viking god Thor.

True

True or False?

Vikings so loved jewellery that even their horses wore it.

True – Vikings decorated their horses' bridles and harnesses with jewellery.

True or False?

Vikings used birds' foot bones as sewing needles.

True

True or False?

Vikings used whale bones for food containers.

True – they ate whale meat and used the blubber to make oil for fuel.

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Viking Quiz

Q. Which days of the week were named after Viking Gods?

A. The sky god and god of war was called Tyr in Scandinavia and Tiw in England. Tuesday is named after him. The top god was called Odin (Woden in England). Wednesday is Woden's day. Frigg or Freya was goddess of love and the home. Friday is her day.

Q. Which of these were invented in Scandinavia by Vikings or their ancestors:

- Skis
- Skates
- Snow-shoes

A. All of them

Q. What did the Vikings like to do in the snowy conditions?

A. The Vikings enjoyed snowball fights. They also skied, skated and sledged in the winter months.

Q. Which Viking King gave his name to modern Bluetooth technology?

A. Bluetooth is named after a tenth-century king of Denmark and Norway, Harald Bluetooth. Harald was known for uniting various warring tribes in Denmark and Norway. The technology is named after him as it is intended to unite various other technologies.

Q. Did the Vikings had a god of snowshoes?

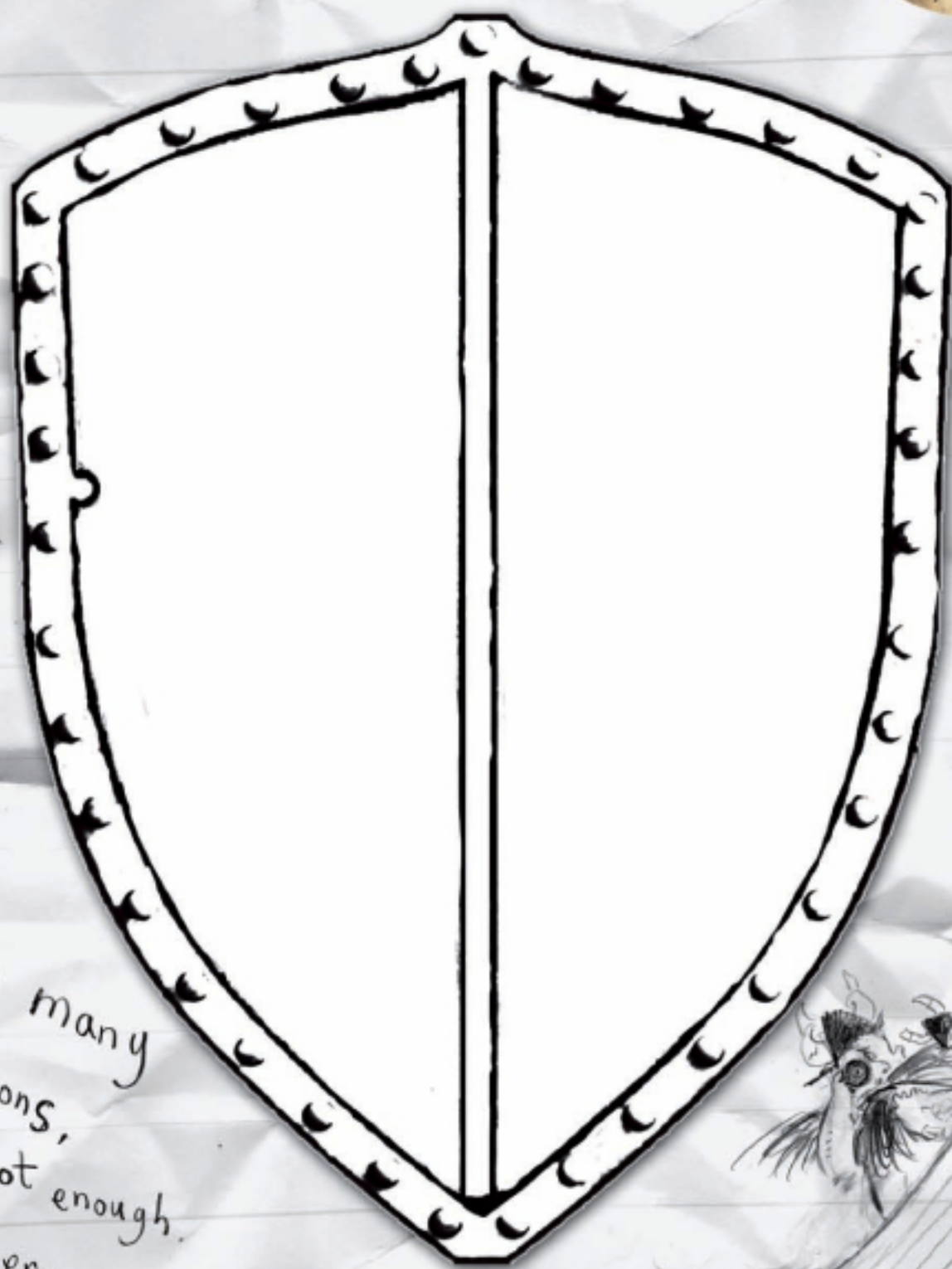
A. Yes. He was named Ull.

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Section 1: Viking Shield Colouring-in Activity



So many
questions,
and not enough
answers...

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