

MELTING POT

Food and Identity in the Age of Vikings

New educational resources for primary schools:

A taste of forthcoming releases.

“What can food remains tell us about how Vikings lived?”



This scheme of work and supporting educational materials arises from a major archaeological study undertaken at the University of York, called *Melting Pot*. The study compares fragments (sherds) of pots from the Viking Age (793-1066 AD/CE), dug up across sites in Yorkshire and Lincolnshire, where Scandinavians settled alongside Anglo-Saxons and others in what was known as the Danelaw. The aim is to see how people expressed their identity through the foods they cooked and ate.



Arts & Humanities
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The Viking 'Danelaw'

Credit: Ariel196 [CC BY-SA 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>)], from Wikimedia Commons

How might this archaeological research help teachers?

The archaeologists are comparing these Danelaw sherds with similar ones from sites in London, information about pottery in southern England (where few Vikings settled) and a Viking site in Denmark. The sherds are being carefully examined for evidence of:

- how pots were made
- how they were used in Viking cooking
- what Vikings ate
- how their diet varied, depending on where they lived and in what kind of settlement
- what types of food were probably produced locally
- what goods may have been imported through trading patterns.

Melting Pot is committed to sharing its cutting-edge research with schools, especially those teaching "**The Viking and Anglo Saxon struggle for the kingdom of England to the time of Edward the Confessor**" in the National Curriculum for History at Key Stage Two.



A Victorian statue of the Saxon king, Alfred the Great, who famously defeated the Vikings. However, many Scandinavians stayed in England, and settled in the Danelaw.

Credit: Neilalderney123 [CC BY-SA (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.0/>)], from Flickr

How will the research be presented for practical use in schools?

Using the research from the project, the scheme of work will be presented as individual lesson plans (in MS Word documents), with supporting resources in an accompanying PowerPoint for ease of use. Each lesson will be organised around an historical enquiry question, converting particular content into an interesting or intriguing problem pupils to solve, rather than simply providing historical facts. For example, the content heading "Viking food" can be replaced with the question "How do we know what the Vikings ate?".

Starting to sound practical- may actually save me time!

Learning objectives and outcomes will focus on particular concepts and processes that shape how National Curriculum History is taught as a discipline in schools. For example, the enquiry question "*How do we know what Vikings ate?*" focuses on the archaeological evidence, in the form of artefacts and food remains.



The scheme of work will consist of two initial lessons on the Viking period created to be taught in succession. The first question "*What can broken pots tell us (or not tell us) about what Vikings ate?*" will focus on analysis of archaeological sherds that show some - but not all - of the kinds of food that Viking people ate, and how they cooked.

The second question "*What can Viking pots and food reveal about how they lived?*" will show how the evidence from sherds dug up from different sites shows similarities and differences in diet and cuisine across regions settled by Viking people, about their farming methods, about how pots were originally made by craftspeople brought from what is now France, and how this adds to existing knowledge of Viking patterns of trade and movement.



A reconstructed Viking longship, built using Viking-Age techniques, and based on archaeological evidence

Credit: Geir Are Johansen [CC BY-SA 2.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0>)], via Wikimedia Commons

What else will the scheme of work cover from Key Stage Two History content?

It will also allow archaeological evidence from the Viking Age to be compared with evidence of food and diet in three contrasting locations over the same period of time (roughly from the beginning of the ninth century through to the end of the eleventh century AD or Common Era). These are taken from the requirement for Key Stage Two National Curriculum History to study one of three options to provide "*contrasts with British history*"

"Early Islamic civilisation, including a study of Baghdad in c. 900 AD"

"Benin (West Africa) c. 900-1300 A.D."

"Mayan civilisation (Central America) in c. 900 AD"

But why would I want to compare the Vikings directly with any of this other content? Teachers don't have to.



No but you could. Pupils are supposed to "make links within and across periods" so why not help them compare how people lived in the same period through handling archaeological and other evidence?



How does Baghdad around the year 900 contrast with British History?



The extent of Islamic power in the Early Middle Ages (mid-8th Century AD/CE)

Credit : Khateeb88 [CC BY-SA 3.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>)], from Wikimedia Commons

In 960 AD/CE, Baghdad was the wealthy capital of a powerful Islamic caliphate, a Muslim empire stretching from Morocco to Central Asia. It was ruled by the Abbasid dynasty and was a major centre of trade. Goods were brought from across and beyond the Muslim world, including food stuffs and culinary ingredients. Surviving cook books indicate the sophistication and variety of recipes and ingredients available to the wealthy elites of Baghdad, often served on beautifully made pottery.



The River Tigris flowing around the modern city of Baghdad in Iraq.

Credit: Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff from Washington D.C, United States [CC BY 2.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>)], via Wikimedia Commons

The scheme of work will cover two optional enquiry questions:

The first: "*How do we know what people ate in Baghdad in 900?*" will analyse surviving cookbooks and recommendations about diet from Muslim doctors for evidence of what the rich consumed. It will also consider the limitations of these written sources, and what other available evidence might tell us about the diet of ordinary people.

The second enquiry question is "*What does the food eaten in Baghdad in 900 reveal about living there then?*" This will help pupils to draw conclusions about divisions in society in the city, about the extent of trading patterns and farming practises, about what people understood about eating healthily, and about the impact of religious belief (for example the absence of pork and pig breeding because of Islamic restrictions on both).

How does Benin in the period between 900 and 1300 contrast with British History?

This sophisticated kingdom flourished in part of what is now Nigeria. Despite leaving no written records, much has been preserved about the culture of Benin through oral tradition and magnificent artefacts. The diet of the people was varied as a result of productive local farming being supplemented with bush meat and fish. Benin can be studied as an example of a complex society that demonstrates what African civilisation was able to achieve prior to European exploration and colonisation.



Location of the kingdom of Benin

Credit: Martin23230 [CC BY-SA 3.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0>) or GFDL (<http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/fdl.html>)], from Wikimedia Commons



Bronze plaque from post-medieval Benin

Credit: S Ashby, courtesy British Museum

The first question "*How do we know what people ate in Benin between 900 and 1300?*" focuses on the available evidence for what people living in Benin ate, and the limitations of what that evidence can tell us.

The second question is "*What can food reveal about how people lived in Benin between 900 and 1300?*" This will look at what pupils might infer from Benin's food about how society was organised, about farming and trading patterns, and about what was important in Benin society.

How does Mayan civilization in 900 contrast with British History?



Extent of Mayan civilization, c. 900-1300 AD/CE

Credit: TimeMaps (<https://www.timemaps.com/history/mexico-central-america-1215ad>)

Mayan civilisation straddled Central America, where it lasted for several hundred years, and left behind ruined stone structures, a wealth of artefacts, and the only complete system of writing developed among early peoples of the area. Precise evidence about the Mayan way of life managed to survive the later Spanish conquest, and shows a society partly governed by religious practices, including both human sacrifice and the use of bitter-tasting chocolate as a ritual drink.



A Mayan 'cylinder' pot depicting ritual and sacrifice

Credit: Walters Art Museum [Public domain, CC BY-SA 3.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0>) or GFDL (<http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/fdl.html>)]



The first question "*How do we know what Mayan people ate?*" focuses on evidence for the variety of foods grown, including a focus on maize, the specific use of the cocoa bean to make a bitter version of what we now know as chocolate, and also foods collected via hunting and trade.

Under the second question "*What can food reveal about how Mayan people lived around 900?*", pupils look at what they might infer from Mayan food and pottery, learn about how their society was organised, about farming and trading patterns and about the role of religion.

Cocoa pods ripening on a cacao tree.

Credit: Medicaster, Public Domain.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Cocoa_Pods.JPG

And finally...

The scheme of work rounds off with pupils using their prior learning to compare and contrast the Vikings with one other civilization of roughly the same period (or more than one).

The first question “*How (and why) was the Viking way of life similar and different to people living in Baghdad or Benin or Mayan civilization around 900?*” will allow pupils to carefully compare what they have learned about each society, and begin to offer explanations for their conclusions.

The second question “*Can we say which civilization was more “advanced”?*” will set the pupils the task of devising a *top trumps* game, comparing the Viking way of life with at least one other society they have just studied. In so doing, pupils will explore the reasons for scoring aspects of a society within a particular category (e.g. diet), and even challenge the assumption of what it might mean to be “advanced”.

I like the idea that planning and resources are “off the shelf” but will they help motivate my pupils to learn?



We hope so. The learning activities are meant to be both fun and challenging. Above all we hope that they help pupils to think, speak, read and write in the same kind of way that historians and archaeologists do!



Lessons will include the following kinds of activities:

A) excavating sherds of Viking pots and other archaeological finds (or replicas of them) from dig boxes, using trowels, gloves and toothbrushes.



Credit: A Wrenn

B) Preparing and tasting Viking food based on archaeological evidence.



Credit: S Ashby

C) Sorting cards marked with details of different societies on to Venn diagrams, depending on whether a characteristic of a society is shared with another one or not.



Credit: A Wrenn

There will be background information for teachers on all the research the materials are based on, and best of all you will be able to teach as much or as little of the scheme of work as you wish, tailoring it to suit the needs of your school.



Contacts and Further Information

Please check back here for more details as our tools are released!

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