

NUFFIELD PRIMARY HISTORY



EXPLAINING PAST EVENTS THROUGH DRAMA

EXEMPLAR: THE *THING* AND VIKING MIGRATION

This example comes from a Viking unit with a Year 3 class. Our aim was for the children to develop an understanding of why the Vikings left home and settled abroad.

The historical context

At the end of the 9th century, the Vikings of the west coast of Norway were ruled by sea-going warrior chieftains. Their society was made up of independent freemen who farmed the land, fished, traded, and engaged in piracy. As pirates, they preyed on shipping that passed up and down the coast of Norway.

The powerful Harald Finehair had become king of Vestfold in the north of Norway. He wanted to stop the west coast Vikings' piracy and extend his kingdom southwards. This threatened the west coast Vikings' existence. They took decisions about how to deal with the threat through the democratic medium of the *Thing*, a local assembly.

Structure of the drama

The strategy we chose to teach about this issue was a dramatic simulation. The class would represent the Thing, deciding what to do in the face of Harald Finehair's threat. We adopted a simple procedure for creating an active dramatic experience for the children:

- 1** The class of 30 is divided into ten families, three pupils to a family.
- 2** A 'newsflash' informs the families what is happening and how the situation is developing.
- 3** Each family then has to discuss what it should do in the face of the threat.
- 4** The *Thing* meets. A spokesman from each family presents its case.

- 5 The *Thing* then votes on what to do.
- 6 The next ‘newsflash’ is received.
- 7 Each family reconsiders its earlier decision.
- 8 The *Thing* votes again.

Preparing for the drama

The first step was to present the historical situation which the pupils would react to as Viking families. We briefed the children about life at the head of the west coast fjords: how each Viking community farmed, fished, traded, pirated, and took decisions through the *Thing*. With them we examined a map of Norway.

Having briefed the children, we were ready to begin the drama. We split them into their ten families. We pushed the tables to the side of the room, so that the children could form family groups with their chairs. For the *Thing*, the chairs would be formed into a large circle. Each family and its members would be able to say at the *Thing* what it wanted to do, and each family would have a vote. We decided to begin the drama in March 890, a time of year favourable for migration.

The drama unfolds

We handed out the ‘newsflash’ briefing sheet [see below]. In their families, the children read the information and animatedly discussed what they should do: flee, fight, or surrender. Then they formed a circle to represent the *Thing*. We chose Ellie, a natural leader, to be the chieftain or law giver. She controlled the meeting with a rod of iron. The *Thing* argued back and forth about how the community should react. Finally the issue was put to the vote. The results were:

Fight	14
Surrender	8
Migrate	8

We were looking at migration in the light of an increasing threat from Harald Finehair. We now announced a second ‘newsflash’ in the form of a message from a neighbouring valley that Harald had just attacked. The message contained dire warnings about what would happen if the community decided to fight Harald Finehair and was defeated.

We told the families that the *Thing* would meet again to reconsider its decision. The debate re-started. As the discussion proceeded, we fed in additional information about how Harald had treated valleys

that had fought him – the men were killed, the women and children enslaved, and their lands were handed over to Harald’s followers.

Each family in turn again said what it would like to do. There were loud protests, fatalistic comments, and even an argument that it would be better to die fighting and go to the Viking heaven than stay under Harald’s rule. The *Thing* finally voted. This time the result was:

Fight	0
Surrender	6
Migrate	24

Through drama, the children were actively thinking about the possibilities facing people in their historical context. They also grasped the complexity of the thinking and motives of some of the Viking migrants to Britain, and of the factors involved in change.

Nuffield Primary History project

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