



DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR MEDIEVAL WEEK 8:

The Vikings

- Explain who the Vikings were— seafaring raiders and conquerors who came from the Scandinavian and Jutland Peninsulas, mainly from territories that now belong to Norway, Sweden and Denmark. The Viking Age of 793 – 1066 was the era when these north-men raided and conquered territories all over coastal Europe and beyond.
- Review some possible reasons why the Vikings suddenly started raiding coastal Europe in the late 700s:
 1. Some say that the Vikings were a warlike people who craved battle and conquest.
 2. Some say that the Vikings wanted to block Charlemagne from defeating and Christianizing them as he had done their neighbors to the south, the Saxons (see Chapter 7).
 3. Some say that the Vikings grew so numerous that frigid Scandinavia, with its short growing season, could no longer feed them all.
 4. Some say that Scandinavia’s climate suddenly grew colder than before, making it difficult for the Vikings to raise enough food.
- Review the progression of Viking tactics:
 1. At first, the Vikings kept their raids close to the coast. Their longboat crews swept in swiftly, stole everything of value— including slaves and women— and then swept out just as quickly.
 2. Later, the emboldened Vikings sent larger raiding parties, followed by invasion armies. In time, the Vikings began to settle down in new territories their armies conquered for them.
- Explain why monasteries like the one on Lindisfarne Island provided easy targets for early Viking raids— because such monasteries were rich, isolated and little-defended. Christian thieves avoided monasteries, considering them too holy for plunder. To the non-Christian Vikings, though, holiness was no defense.
- List some of the territories Vikings harried and/or conquered during the Viking Age (Companion p. 146). These include Scandinavia’s neighbors Ireland, Scotland and Russia, as well as Russia, Normandy, the Danelaw and finally all of England.
- Give your students a look ahead. Explain that in the 900s, an uncommonly large, strong Norseman named Rollo the Viking will conquer the French coast of the English Channel— a region the Franks will rename “Normandy” after its north-men, or Norman, conquerors. Finding himself unable to defeat Rollo, the Frankish king will instead grant him noble status as the Duke of Normandy. In the Norman Conquest of 1066, Rollo’s descendants will cross the English Channel and conquer England.
- Make sure your students know where the word “berserk” comes from. It derives from *berserker-gang*— a sort of trance that came over Viking warriors, causing them to fight like wild animals.
- Ask your students to imagine living in a Viking Longhouse with their whole extended family, from grandparents to grandchildren.
- Review the practice of community inspections, which the Vikings had in common with some Greeks, Romans and other early cultures:

Any infant born to a Viking family had to pass a community inspection to prove that he or she would strengthen, not weaken, the community. If the community judged a child to be deformed, disabled or sick, then the community would not waste food on that child; it was left to die. If, however, the community judged the child to

be healthy and strong, then the family fed the child, gave him a name and sprinkled him with water. With these rituals, the newborn Viking earned a share of his family's inheritance and became a full member of the Viking family.

- Review Psalm 139:13-16, which reads:

"For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be."

Ask your students: In your opinion, does the practice of community inspections seem needlessly cruel—as if the Vikings were playing God, deciding who lived and who died? Or were such practices made necessary by the unforgivingly cold, harsh environment where the Vikings lived?

- Review the two main Viking ship designs, the longboat and the knarr (Companion p. 149 – 150).
- Describe the Viking practice of arranging their dead aboard ships, lighting the ships afire and then sending them out to sea (Companion p. 150).
- Review the Norse Mythology from Companion pp. 151 – 155; most children love these myths. Explain that the written form of most Norse myths first appeared in a pair of books called the Eddas, written in the 1200s. In oral form, however, most Norse myths are far older.
- Make sure your students know the best-known Norse gods: Odin, Thor and the mischievous Loki.
- Make sure your students know what Valhalla is— a victory hall where half of the warriors who died glorious deaths in battle went to live in the presence of Odin. Life at Valhalla was filled with great hunts and battles to test the warrior's strength and skills. Any warrior who died in these battles was revived by nightfall, when the feasting and celebration began again.
- Make sure your students know what the Ragnarok was—the terrible battle at the end of the world.
- Review the seven days of the week and the gods for which they were named (chart on Companion p. 155).
- Impress upon your students how very difficult it must have been for the Vikings to find far-off islands like the Faroes, Iceland and Greenland, which lay across hundreds of miles of trackless ocean. Review some of the theories people have offered to explain the Vikings' incredible ability not only to find these islands the first time, but also to keep coming back to them again and again (Companion pp. 156 – 157).
- Ask your students to imagine what it might have been like to board a Viking explorer's longship and sail out into the distance, not knowing whether one would find land or not.
- Review the Vikings' westward progress across the Atlantic:
 1. Around 874, a Viking named Ingólfr Arnarson established the first permanent settlement on Iceland—which the Vikings found to be (a) rich with fish and other food, and (b) full of good, unclaimed farmland.
 2. Around 986, a Viking named Eric the Red established the first long-term settlement on Greenland.
 3. Around 1000, Eric the Red's son Leif Ericsson first caught sight of some part of North America, probably Newfoundland. Leif's colony on Newfoundland, which he called Vinland, lasted only a short time before a native people called the Skraelings drove the Vikings off.
- Make sure your students know how Eric the Red convinced Viking settlers from Iceland to join him on Greenland— by claiming that Greenland was green, not ice-covered as it really was.
- Explain why Vinland failed— partly because of the hostile Skraelings, and partly because its parent colonies on Greenland had too many troubles of their own to support a new colony.

Church History in Brief

The Eastern Church and the Western church argued over more than just icons. They also argued over what kind of bread they should use in the Lord's Supper, whether or not priests should marry and how they should word the Nicene Creed. Their biggest argument of all was over the pope's authority: The Western church felt that the pope should have authority over all Christians, wherever they lived; but the Eastern church saw no reason why the pope should be more powerful than the patriarch of Constantinople.

Eventually, these arguments split the church. The Western church became the Roman Catholic Church, and the Eastern Church became the Eastern Orthodox Church. These divided churches have never come back together.

- Make sure your students know what the East-West Schism was— the permanent split that developed between the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church in 1054.
- Review some of the differences between East and West that led to the East-West Schism (Companion p. 159):
 1. East and West disagreed over whether or not they should use leavened bread— that is, bread prepared with yeast— in the Lord's Supper.
 2. They disagreed over whether or not they should allow their priests to marry.
 3. They disagreed over icons (religious images) and relics (objects that had belonged to dead church heroes).
 4. They disagreed over the proper way to hold a church service— what to say, what to read and what to sing.
 5. They disagreed over the *filioque*.
- Make sure your students know what *filioque* means: it is Latin for “and from the Son.” Review the difference between the Nicene Creed in its original version, without the *filioque*, and its new version with the *filioque*:

Without the *filioque*, the Council of Constantinople's version of the Nicene Creed read: “I believe... in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and together glorified.”

With the *filioque* added, the creed read: “I believe... in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father and from the Son, who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and together glorified.”

Explain why the difference between these two versions became so important:

The Western Christians who added the *filioque* liked the phrase because it reinforced an important Christian doctrine: the divinity of Jesus Christ. According to the rest of the Nicene Creed, Christ the Son is of the same essence as God the Father, co-equal with God. Why not then say that the Holy Spirit, who is also co-equal with God, issues from both Father and Son? The *filioque* was a strong statement of faith in the idea that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are three parts of the same God. Anyone who didn't like the *filioque*, Western Christians argued, was probably an Arian who didn't believe that Jesus Christ was God (see Chapter 2).

Eastern Christians disagreed. Part of their disagreement was over manners: Eastern Christians felt that it was inexcusable for the West to add a phrase to such an important creed without approval from a church-wide council. Furthermore, Eastern Christians disliked what the *filioque* said about the Holy Spirit. To them, the phrase demeaned the Holy Spirit by making the Spirit seem like a lesser God than the Father and Son.

Make sure your students know that the West's insistence on adding the *filioque* to the Nicene Creed was a major cause of the East-West Schism.

- Explain the other major cause of the East-West Schism: differences over papal authority. To Western Christians, the Pope was the heir of St. Peter. Westerners believed that as keeper of the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 16:19), the Pope was the final, infallible authority over the entire Christian world. Eastern Christians, on the other hand, never accepted the idea that the Bishop of Rome stood above all other bishops.
- Review what happened between Pope Leo IX and Patriarch Michael I, head of the Eastern church, in 1054:
 1. First, Pope Leo sent his favorite secretary, Cardinal Humbert, to Constantinople, where the cardinal commanded the patriarch to submit to Rome's authority.
 2. When Patriarch Michael predictably refused to submit, Cardinal Humbert stormed out of the church. He later returned with a sealed papal bull excommunicating Michael from the church.
 3. Instead of denying its patriarch Holy Communion, as the papal bull commanded, the Eastern church wrote a bull of its own excommunicating Cardinal Humbert.
- Make sure your students know the result of the East-West Schism: a centuries-long split between East and West that is still going on today.

Churches that followed Constantinople became known as Eastern Orthodox churches; while churches that followed Rome became known as Roman Catholic churches. In the future, all Christian churches that traced their roots back to Constantinople— including Greek Orthodox churches, Russian Orthodox churches, Syrian Orthodox churches and many others— would be called Eastern Orthodox.