

Authors: Matthias Maluck, Luise Zander

Collected information for teachers

Topic: Vikings

The term “Viking” is often used in different occasions and is often directly associated with Hedeby and the Danevirke. Not all of them can be confirmed as scientifically accurate and the misuse of the phrase is also common.

The term “Viking” can be looked upon from two main perspectives: its use during prehistoric times (in the “Viking Age”) and the definition of the term “Viking” in modern research since the nineteenth century. In the first case, “Viking” refers to piracy in general and to Norse activities of warfare or trade. In the latter case, “Viking” refers to the historic period of the Viking Age and to people from that period. In this nomination “Viking” is used in the narrow sense for Norse people who went on “Viking” expeditions, meaning for trade, warfare, conquest, etc. The term “Norse” is used for all people who spoke an Old Nordic language and shared a common culture in the Viking Age. The modern use and thus the connection between the word “Viking” and the peoples of Scandinavia and the North Atlantic Islands is less than 200 years old. From at least the first half of the nineteenth century on, people from Sweden, Norway and Denmark identified themselves as “Scandinavians” referring to the old (mediaeval) Latin name (Scania) for the Southern part of Sweden. The term “Scandinavia” is therefore relatively well defined as the region where Sweden, Norway and Denmark are situated. In modern research, during the last two centuries the word “Viking” has become more commonly used as a generic term for all people from Northern Europe who went on expeditions for warfare and trade during the Viking Age. The reason for the popular use of a term such as “Viking” is that it is almost always easier to use to refer to people from Northern Europe in the Viking Age instead of talking about Danes, Norwegians, Swedes or Icelandic peoples.
