

Examiners' report

GCSE

HISTORY B

(SCHOOLS HISTORY PROJECT)

**OCR Level 1/Level 2 GCSE (9-1) in
History B (Schools History Project)**

J411

For first teaching in 2016

Viking Expansion, c.750–c.1050

J411/31, J411/32 and J411/33

Summer 2025 series

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Introduction

Our examiners' reports are produced to offer constructive feedback on candidates' performance in the examinations. They provide useful guidance for future candidates.

The reports will include a general commentary on candidates' performance, identify technical aspects examined in the questions and highlight good performance and where performance could be improved. A selection of candidate responses is also provided. The reports will also explain aspects which caused difficulty and why the difficulties arose, whether through a lack of knowledge, poor examination technique, or any other identifiable and explainable reason.

Where overall performance on a question/question part was considered good, with no particular areas to highlight, these questions have not been included in the report.

A full copy of the question paper and the mark scheme can be downloaded from [Teach Cambridge](#).

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Viking Expansion, c.750–c.1050 overview

Viking Expansion, c.750–c.1050 is one of three period study units in the Component Group 3 World History GCSE paper. The focus of assessment for the period study is knowledge and understanding, and explaining and analysing events and periods. The paper has three compulsory questions and a choice of one question from two optional questions.

The period study requires candidates to show an ability to analyse evidence using second order concepts as well as displaying their ability to explain evidence in reference to the question.

To do well, candidates need to be able to present a historical summary of an area of content they have learned, offer an explanation in response to a historical question (e.g. explaining the causes or consequences of something), and recall and apply their knowledge to support and challenge a statement in an essay-style question. The focus is on AO1 and AO2 – knowledge and understanding of key features of the period and the ability to analyse and explain this material. These Assessment Objectives have equal weighting. The period studies are broken down into five sections, and questions are framed around these. Candidates who had a clear understanding of these chronological periods were able to deploy relevant material on Question 3, 4 and 5 more effectively.

In the 2025 session, most candidates were able to select and deploy their knowledge well on Question 3. In the essay-style questions, candidates opting for Question 4 often displayed impressive knowledge of both the Volga Vikings and the Vikings who settled in the British Isles and France, and were usually able to link this to this idea of success.

However, on Question 2, many candidates did not organise their answer historically, and lapsed into overly-descriptive answers about Viking settlement across the Atlantic. Many of these answers were also lacking in precise knowledge. Some got the settlements in Iceland and Greenland mixed up. Similarly, although Question 5 was less frequently answered; the candidates who opted for this essay tended to know little about Cnut's achievements, often getting him confused with earlier Viking invaders and the creation of the Danelaw.

Candidates who did well on this paper generally:	Candidates who did less well on this paper generally:
- recalled at least two valid answers for Question 1 - in Question 2, analysed Viking settlement across the Atlantic by organising their answer around a historical concept (most frequently: significance in terms of success/impact of settlement; reasons for success or failure; reasons why settlement was difficult; or comparisons between the different settlements, usually in terms of success/failure) – and they supported their answer with precise examples which showed they had studied this topic well - in Question 3, explained at least one reason why the Viking raids on Britain, Ireland and the Scottish islands were successful, 793–850 - effectively deployed a range of knowledge in the essay question, using precise evidence to support their answers (usually in Question 4).	- did not produce a valid answer to any part of Question 1 - in Question 2, took each Viking settlement across the Atlantic in turn (Iceland, Greenland, then North America) and described them, but did not consider how to organise and present their response as a historical analysis OR did not support their answer with a specific example - in Question 3, offered accurate reasons for the success of Vikings raids (e.g. choice of weak targets such as monasteries) but did not develop these with precise evidence; OR answered a different question (e.g. why monasteries had portable wealth or why Viking invasion/settlement was successful) - in Question 4/5, made accurate but generalised points which they were unable to support with specific evidence; or else gave precise evidence but did not explain how it helped to address the question being asked - in Question 5 particularly, were not able to recall much precise or accurate evidence relating to Cnut, usually getting him muddled up with other Viking invaders or rulers.

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Question 1 (a)

1

(a) Give **one** example of a religious belief held by Vikings.

[1]

This question was not problematic with the overwhelming majority of candidates picking up a mark. Frequently rewarded correct answers included beliefs about Valhalla, Ragnarök and a variety of Norse gods.

Question 1 (b)

(b) Name **one** ruler of the Viking Rus in Novgorod **or** Kiev between 860 and 1050.

[1]

Many candidates gave an incorrect answer to this question. They usually named Viking kings such as Harald Bluetooth or Cnut. Candidates who did pick up a mark usually named Oleg, with a few others naming Vladimir, Rurik, Yaroslav, Igor or Olga (as regent).

Question 1 (c)

(c) Name **one** change Harald Bluetooth made during his rule.

[1]

Most candidates picked up a mark here, usually by identifying how Bluetooth changed Denmark's official religion to Christianity. A few candidates cited the move of the capital from Jelling to Roskilde. Where candidates attempted the question but did not gain a mark, this was quite often because they knew about Bluetooth's reputation for 'connecting' or 'joining up' but could not remember what this related to, and some misconceptions came to light here. For example, many candidates wrote that he built a bridge between Denmark and Sweden, or that he united Denmark with Norway.

Question 2

- 2 Write a clear and organised summary that analyses Viking settlement across the Atlantic (Iceland, Greenland, North America).

Support your summary with examples.

[9]

On average, candidates fared less on well on Question 2 than they did in 2024. This was as a result of either producing a more descriptive answer or because specific evidence was missing from their response (or a combination of both).

Candidates who moved into Level 2 or Level 3 considered how to organise their answer historically, usually in one of the following ways:

- through examining the long-lasting impact of Viking settlement in Iceland (significance/consequence)
- via a comparison of the varying degrees of success of Viking settlement in this area, usually by comparing Iceland to one or both of the other settlements (diversity/consequence)
- by considering why Viking settlement was difficult or why it failed in Greenland and/or North America (causation)
- by considering why Viking settlement in Iceland succeeded (causation).

A few candidates attempted to explain why Vikings left their homelands to settle here, but often they did not have precise enough evidence about this to move beyond Level 1.

A high number of answers were rewarded at Level 1 only. Some of these were very detailed, with candidates offering lengthy descriptions of the three different settlements. However, they were often just narratives and not clearly organised enough to move into Level 2.

Alternatively, answers were placed in Level 1 because they were accurate but lacking precise evidence of the chosen concept (success, failure, significance, etc.). For example, they said things such as 'Greenland was too cold and icy.'

To move into Levels 2 and 3, answers needed to be both clearly organised in a valid historical way, and contain precise examples (one for Level 2 and two for Level 3). Typically, candidates whose responses were awarded at these levels drew on knowledge such as:

- **Significance of settlement in Iceland:** Vikings were the first large-scale settlers in Iceland and most modern Icelanders descend from them; they recreated Norwegian society (e.g. creation of the *Althing*) and the census of 1095 showed the population at around 50,000.
- **Comparison of levels of success (diversity):** Iceland was a long-term success (see above), while Greenland remained small, with just two settlements and the total population never exceeding around 4,000, with the Vikings eventually abandoning the settlement. Meanwhile, the North American settlement lasted only around 20 years and was likely just a seasonal camp or repairs base, as shown by the archaeological evidence.
- **Reasons for difficulties/failure (causation):** Greenland was highly reliant on imports of timber, grain and metal from the homelands and when this dried up (as drift ice blocked sailing routes to Europe, cutting off trade and supply links), its isolation and worsening climate made the settlement unviable. Some candidates drew on detailed knowledge of the stories about Freyis and contact with the indigenous peoples from the *Saga of Eirik the Red* to give a possible theory for the end of the settlement in Vinland.

Exemplar 1

2	Firstly, we can see a more successful settlement in Iceland. Although life was tough here, especially after the removal of the forests which made farming increasingly difficult, people were able to survive through means of hunting, fishing, and trading as they had an abundance of ^{availability to} other ^{use} resources such as walrus ivory. This made life in Iceland bearable as people were free of Scandinavian king's tyranny and could live in peace with relative equality - seen via the <i>Althing</i> where issues would be discussed in a democratic way. In comparison, settlements further west did not fair so well. In Greenland, conditions were very harsh (with only 2 settlements ever being established) with freezing winters and hard farming conditions, and in Vinland, no new resources were assessed and relations with local population were violent. These both failed because they were very distanced from Scandinavian homelands and had no opportunities attached to them, so Vinland lasted only a mere couple of decades, and Greenland was abandoned by the settlers in the 15th century AD.
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This is a good example of a response where the candidate has clearly organised their answer (around consequence/diversity) and provided specific examples to support it.

They begin by identifying Iceland as a successful settlement and support this by providing some specific detail (the success of the trade in walrus ivory and the development of the *Althing* to settle disputes). This places the response in Level 2. The second section then compares the success of Iceland to the failure of settlements in Greenland and Vinland. Again, they offer some specific evidence to support this, including the fact there were only ever two settlements in Greenland and these had died out by the 1400s. Meanwhile, Vinland lasted no more than a couple of decades. This takes the response into Level 3.

Assessment for learning



This question does not ask for just a description. To move beyond Level 1, it's important that candidates are clear about how to organise an analytical response in these types of questions. The organisation of the answer around a historical concept (such as change, continuity, causation, consequence, significance and diversity) is the driving force behind this question, as opposed to contextual knowledge alone - candidates should spend some of their time thinking about how to organise their response before putting pen to paper.

Question 3

- 3 Why were Viking **raids** on Britain, Ireland and the Scottish Islands between 793 and 850 so successful?

Explain your answer.

[10]

This question, on the whole, was answered well by candidates. The vast majority understood what the question was asking and were able to identify valid reasons for the success of raids during this period. The most popular responses credited by examiners were:

- The weakness/vulnerability of the chosen targets, particularly monasteries, which were often located in isolated, coastal areas, and were not well-defended. Candidates also referred to divisions between the English kingdoms and/or local chieftains in Ireland, which made it less possible to organise effective defences against raids.
- The design of the Vikings' ships (e.g. their speed, their symmetrical/double-ended design, the shallow draught) all made for effective hit-and-run raids.
- The strength of Viking warfare and tactics (e.g. use of the shield wall tactic, berserkers, and high-quality weaponry such as double-edged swords and battle axes).

There was a good number of answers which offered at least one full explanation, supported by precise evidence/examples, and these were rewarded at Level 4 (one explanation) and Level 5 (two explanations).

However, some candidates were unable to progress beyond Level 2 or Level 3 because they lacked specific detail to support their reason and/or were unable to link it to why the Vikings were successful.

Some candidates merely described raids, or else veered away from the question's focus slightly and offered lengthy descriptions of the kinds of goods which Vikings were able to steal from monasteries. Others merely described beliefs about Valhalla, etc. and then asserted that this made their raids successful. These kinds of responses were usually placed in Level 2.

At the lower end of the mark scheme, candidates tended to make accurate but vague assertions about 'good ships' or 'good tactics', which did not demonstrate the knowledge required. These responses were generally placed in Level 1. Some – but not many – answers misinterpreted the question and wrote about invasion or settlement as opposed to raiding. These were not credited.

Question 4*

4* 'The Volga Vikings were **more successful** than the Vikings who **settled** in the British Isles and France.'

How far do you agree?

Give reasons for your answer.

[18]

This was the more popular of the two essay questions and produced a wide range of responses in terms of quality. The content seemed familiar to most candidates and most had no problem getting to grips with what the question was asking.

A wide range of points was credited by examiners. Frequently credited points in favour of the statement included:

The success of the Volga Vikings:

- Control of major trade routes from Scandinavia to Constantinople and the Arab world.
- The establishment of trading towns and settlements such as Staraya Ladoga, Novgorod, and Kiev.
- The wealth they gained through trade in goods like furs, ivory, slaves, silk, and silver.
- Their raids on cities like Baku and Berda, and their influence in the Byzantine Empire, including roles in the Varangian Guard, which shows their status and integration.

Failures/limited success of Vikings who settled in British Isles/France:

- The Vikings in Normandy were less successful because they lost their Norse identity over time – adopting Christianity, the French language, and French culture – which some candidates argued means they did not leave a lasting Viking legacy.

In opposition to the statement, the following points were regularly credited:

The success of Vikings who settled in the British Isles and France:

- The successful invasion of the 'Great Heathen Army' and subsequent settlement of Vikings in what became the Danelaw.
- Successful trade and integration in Jorvik/England, with examples of the long-lasting impact made.
- In Normandy, successful integration and long-term impact, such as the influence on place names and the establishment of a powerful duchy.

Failures/limited success of the Volga Vikings:

- Failed attacks/raids, or lack of long-lasting settlement in some areas.

At Level 3 and above, candidates were credited for demonstrating specific historical evidence to support their points and using this evidence to address the question about success. Answers reaching Level 6 put forward four explained points, with at least one explained point about each group of Vikings identified in the question.

Candidates whose points were awarded at Level 2 usually had a lack of precise detail and/or did not use their knowledge to address the question of 'success'. Answers placed in Level 1 tended to make wide generalisations, such as the Vikings in the British Isles being successful as they 'gained lots of land'.

Occasionally, examiners saw responses, or parts of responses about the success of Viking raids in the British Isles and France (often repeating material from Question 3). This was not creditable as the question asked about the success of Vikings who 'settled' in the British Isles and France.

Exemplar 2

		I partly agree with the statement 'as the Volga Vikings saw great success in trading with the Arab world and Byzantine Empire'. However, the Vikings who settled in but the British Isles and France saw success as they gained control of land and left an impact.
		Firstly, the Volga Vikings saw success as they travelled to Constantinople to trade their own goods for resources they lacked in Scandinavia, in the rich markets and bazaars of the city. For example, they could get spices, olive oil, silks in Constantinople and they lacked these resources in their homelands. Additionally, they could gain wealth for their walrus ivory, furs and falcons.

at these markets as they were high in demand. On the other hand, the Volga Vikings also saw success through the Varangian Guard which was an elite bodyguard for the Emperor, which brought them great honour. In the British Isles and France, they didn't see similar opportunities to enhance their reputation in this way which suggests the Volga Vikings were more successful.

On the other hand, the Vikings who settled in England did see success through the establishment of the Danelaw. This was a result of the treaty of Wedmore between King Alfred and Guthrum which gave the Vikings the north and eastern regions of England. Here many Vikings settled, living in rural areas and farming, allowing them to have access to cultivable land they lacked in their homelands, and many Vikings followed here. The impact they made is evidence of their success as they intermarried, had children, and still today through genetic research into DNA in the area they occupied still has Scandinavian traces. Also, the English adopted the law from the Scandinavian customs of the 'thing' and names of places. Overall, the impact and control the Vikings had in the Danelaw as they assimilated into the customs suggests

they more successful.

However, in the Arab world, particularly Baghdad the Vikings saw success through trade here get again. They were able to trade for their goods like honey, amber and swords so goods like silver, spices and gold which they could use to melt down to make rings. Additionally, through archaeological evidence found at the Spillings Hoard which contains thousands of silver which is found to be Arab dirham it shows the vast amount of wealth they were able to obtain from trade in Baghdad. However, though they were able to have success in trade, they did not build a positive perception with the people as the chronicles describe their ~~disgust~~ disgust at their cleanliness and burial customs. Despite this, the vast amount of silver they obtained, suggests the Volga Vikings were more successful.

On the other hand, the Vikings were able to gain control of parts of France and assimilate into the culture, displaying their success. For example, Rollo the Viking leader was given control for a large area of Northern France in exchange for converting to Christianity, and loyalty to Charles the Simple. These minor concessions allowed the Vikings to have more

		success as they gained further control of land in Europe which was called Normandy, land of the north men. Here they assimilated into the population, married and settled well and had stability. Overall the longstanding impact of the Vikings who settled in France suggests they were more successful.
		Overall, despite the Volga Vikings gaining more wealth and honour in some areas they didn't make the longstanding impact the Vikings who settled in the British Isles and France did. The great impact here suggest there and legacy suggest the Vikings in Britain, and France had more success.

This is an excellent response which contains four fully explained points. Each point includes relevant and specific evidence which is clearly used to address the question. The candidate successfully covers both groups of Vikings named in the question – the Volga Vikings and those who settled in the British Isles and France. This places the response firmly within Level 6.

In the first paragraph, the candidate explores the success of the Volga Vikings in trading with the Arab and Byzantine worlds, and in enhancing their reputation through service in the Varangian Guard. These examples are precise and clearly linked to the question. This places the response into Level 3.

The second paragraph focuses on the Vikings in England, identifying the establishment of the Danelaw and detailing a range of significant impacts to demonstrate success. This pushes the response into Level 4.

The candidate then returns to the Volga Vikings, describing their trade in Baghdad and the wealth gained through silver, again linking this clearly to their success.

Finally, the candidate examines Viking settlement in Normandy, offering specific detail about Rollo's agreement with Charles the Simple, and the resulting control of Normandy. They explain how this led to successful assimilation, settlement, and long-term stability. This secures them Level 6.

The conclusion offers a clinching argument by comparing the short-term success of the Volga Vikings with the longer-term success of Vikings in Britain and France. This comparison is valid and clearly supported by the preceding content. As a result, the response is awarded the full 18 marks.

Question 5*

5* 'Cnut's greatest achievement was the conquest of England.'

How far do you agree?

Give reasons for your answer.

[18]

This was the less popular of the two essay questions and, on the whole, tended to be answered by less successful candidates. Candidates who did well on this question drew on content such as:

To agree:

- Cnut's conquest of England was complete and lasting. He defeated Edmund Ironside at the Battle of Ashingdon in 1016 and took full control after Edmund's death.
- He consolidated power effectively — for example, by marrying Emma of Normandy, strengthening his claim and gaining political legitimacy.
- He brought relative peace and stability to England after a period of war.
- The reforms Cnut introduced – such as new laws and tax systems – helped secure his rule.
- He achieved a good relationship with the Church in England.

To disagree:

- (Some of the points listed above could also be used to disagree with the statement, depending on how they were framed.)
- The establishment of an Anglo-Scandinavian Empire (which united England, Denmark, and later Norway under his rule) could be considered a greater achievement.
- His military campaign to take control of Norway in 1028 was an achievement beyond England.
- His marriage to Emma was successful in improving relations with Normandy and protecting England from external threats.
- He received recognition from the Pope and European leaders, which is evidence of political and diplomatic success.

However, there were many answers which did not progress beyond Level 2 or even Level 1 on this question. Overwhelmingly, this was because candidates did not have the knowledge required and fell back onto very generic and simplistic statements which lacked specific detail (e.g. 'he won battles and was a strong leader'). Some candidates got Cnut confused with Svein Forkbeard or even with Vikings from a much earlier period, linking him to the invasion of the Great Heathen Army.

Exemplar 3

5.		one sample Chut had many achievements during his reign. He often thought by many historians to be the greatest viking king and the most successful showing he has earned his name as 'Chut the Great'.
		Some people might agree with statement because of his fearsome conquest of England which was eventually successful. He was convinced by his brother the king

of Denmark to sail for England, after his father's death in ~~1012~~ Feb 1012, and to reclaim the throne. He set sail for England ~~in~~ with a fleet of 200 ships full of fearsome viking warriors. Upon his arrival he discovered that English lords had already called upon King Ethelred, who had escaped to Normandy, to come back and take the throne. Ethelred soon died however and was succeeded by his son Edmund. ~~When~~ Chut went to battle against Edmund and won, ~~mean~~ Edmund was made to sign a treaty which said that Chut was king of everywhere above the River Thames. However not long after Edmund died and by 1016 Chut was king of all England. This is one of Chut's greatest achievements as it shows his skill as both a warrior and a leader and was the start of his Empire.

However some might disagree with this statement and say that Chut's greatest achievement was the creation of his ~~Anglo Empire~~. Anglo-Scandinavian Empire. After his brother Harald died Chut personally sailed back to Denmark to secure the throne. He then later went to war against Olaf, the king of Norway,

		won, expanding his Empire even further. In addition to this he became the Overlord of Scotland and Ireland and his marriage to Emma (sister to the Duke of Normandy) meant to he had ties and influence as well as good trade deals with in France too. By his death in 1035 he had earned his title as Cnut the Great as he ruled over Norway, Denmark, England and parts of Sweden.
		In conclusion In addition, Cnut another of Cnut's achievements was the religious settlement he created in England and across his empire. He established re good relationships with the Christian church and earned their loyalty.
		✶ In conclusion, I disagree with this statement because although his conquest of England was a great he achievement he also had many other successful achievements during his reign.

This response was stronger than most for Question 5, and was credited with two explained points, earning a total of 12 marks.

Following a brief introduction, the candidate begins by providing context for Cnut's invasion, followed by a description of key events: the defeat of Edmund Ironside, the peace agreement which was reached, and Cnut's eventual accession to the throne. The response reaches Level 3 when this narrative is linked to the question through a focus on Cnut's military skill.

The next section makes a clear link to the question at the outset by arguing that Cnut's greater success lay in his creation of an Anglo-Scandinavian empire. This point is then supported with specific and relevant detail, which moves the response into Level 4.

The final paragraph is brief and limited. The candidate notes that Cnut had a good relationship with the Church, but this point is undeveloped and lacks supporting evidence. As a result, it is credited at Level 2 and does not raise the response to Level 5.

Assessment for learning



To be successful in Questions 4 and 5, candidates need to be able to show they have precise knowledge about the topic given. Without being able to draw on any specific evidence, candidates are unlikely to be able to advance their answers beyond Level 2.

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