Name: _____ Date: _____

Vikings Did Not Wear Horns

Reading level 9 (5th grade) · 540 words

Picture a Viking. You are probably seeing a helmet with two big horns that curve up on both sides. Here is the surprise. Nobody has ever dug up a Viking helmet that looks like that. Not one. So where did the picture come from, and what did a Viking really wear? To find out, we will visit Norway, then Germany.

Start with the farm. One day in March of 1943, a farmer named Gunnar was getting ready to build a house for his parents. He knew a big burial mound stood on his land, and he had no plan to touch it. But the ground next to the mound had to be leveled, so he began to dig there. Soon, things began to appear in the dirt.

Pieces of old metal came up out of the ground. The next day, a local historian phoned the university in Oslo to tell them. Experts came and found a grave from the Viking Age, about a thousand years old. It held a sword, a shield and pieces of chain mail. It also held a helmet.

The helmet came out in nine pieces, and the experts put it back together like a puzzle. It is a round iron cap made from four plates, with a guard that curves around the eyes and nose. It is not fancy. It has no horns at all. Today it sits in a museum in Oslo, and anyone can go look at it.

Why does one plain helmet matter so much? Because there are almost no others. Only five Viking helmets are known, and only two could be put back together. That makes the plain helmet from Gunnar's farm a rare treasure. We do know that Viking stories talk about helmets again and again, but never about helmets with horns.

Horned helmets did exist, though. They were just much older. Two bronze ones were found in Denmark in 1942, only a year before Gunnar's. They came from the Bronze Age, long before any Viking. In the 1800s, diggers found more old horned helmets. Those turned out to be older than the Vikings, too. Horns, it seems, keep turning up in the wrong century.

Now go to Germany. In 1876, a costume designer named Carl Emil Doepler dressed the singers in a huge opera by Richard Wagner. Some of his costumes had horned helmets. He is widely credited with starting the myth. No horned Viking helmet has ever been dug up to back it up. A picture from a stage slipped into history.

Doepler may not have invented it all. Writers in ancient Greece and Rome described northern warriors with horns, wings and even antlers on their helmets. Artists in Scandinavia drew horns on Vikings in the 1800s, too. Still, horns would have been a poor idea in a fight: they could catch on a branch or a shield.

So the next time you see a Viking with horns, ask who drew him, and when. One answer is a

stage in Germany in 1876. The better answer is a round iron cap in a museum in Oslo, found by a farmer who was digging. The Vikings probably did wear helmets. They just did not wear the ones in the pictures.

Questions

1. How did Gunnar find the Viking grave?

A. He was digging next to a burial mound to build a house
B. He was looking for gold
C. He was reading a map

2. What was special about the helmet found in Norway?

A. It was round and plain, with no horns
B. It had two big horns
C. It was made of gold

3. Why is the Gjermundbu helmet so important?

A. Almost no other Viking helmets could be put back together
B. It was the biggest one
C. It was painted red

4. What does the word myth mean here?

A. A false idea many people believe
B. A kind of helmet
C. A Viking ship

5. How did the horned Viking picture spread?

A. Artists and a stage costume maker in the 1800s made it popular
B. Vikings drew it themselves
C. Farmers dug up horned helmets

Words to know

helmet: head armor
costume: dress-up clothes
opera: sung play
myth: popular false idea
museum: place showing treasures

Answer key: Vikings Did Not Wear Horns

1. A. He was digging next to a burial mound to build a house
2. A. It was round and plain, with no horns
3. A. Almost no other Viking helmets could be put back together
4. A. A false idea many people believe
5. A. Artists and a stage costume maker in the 1800s made it popular