

# Cleanliness - Did Vikings Take Baths?

*The Vikings have long had the reputation of being filthy, wild animals. Even in modern day films the Vikings are usually portrayed as dirty savages. However, close examination of the facts seem to dispel the myth of the filthy Viking.*

## Challenging misconceptions -

It's important to remember that most of our accounts of the Vikings come from Christian writers. A Viking writer would not be likely to give an account of the general cleanliness of his people as a whole. The Christian writers were writing about a fearsome group of pagan people who were ravaging Europe. A Christian writer would have had a strong bias to present the evil pagans in the worst light. To this day it is the writings of these Christians which give us the impression that Vikings were physically powerful, terrifying, and dirty savages. (This is not unlike the Roman habit of portraying Hannibal as a great and gifted military commander because it made the Roman victory more impressive. While there is no doubt Hannibal was masterful general, he did make more than one strategic error.) The reality of what a Viking was seems to be very different than conventional wisdom.

## Cleaning tools and hygiene products -

What we do know from the excavation of Viking burial mounds is that personal grooming tools are some of the most common items found. Items such as razors, tweezers and ear spoons have been found. In fact combs seem to be the most common artefact found from the Viking Age. We also know that the Vikings made a very strong soap which was used not only for bathing, but also for bleaching their hair. Vikings bleached their hair as it seems blonde hair was highly valued in the Viking World.

## Smelly Saxons -

We also know from the accounts of the Anglo-Saxons that the Vikings who attacked and ultimately settled in England were considered to be 'clean-freaks', because they would bathe once a week. This was at a time when an Anglo-Saxon might only bath once or twice a year. In fact the original meaning of Scandinavian words for Saturday (laurdag / lørdag / lördag) was 'Washing Day'.

## 'Scrubbing up well' -

A later writing often credited to the Abbot of St. Albans reports that "thanks to their habit of combing their hair every day, of bathing every Saturday and regularly changing their clothes, were able to undermine the virtue of married women and even seduce the daughters of nobles to be their mistresses."

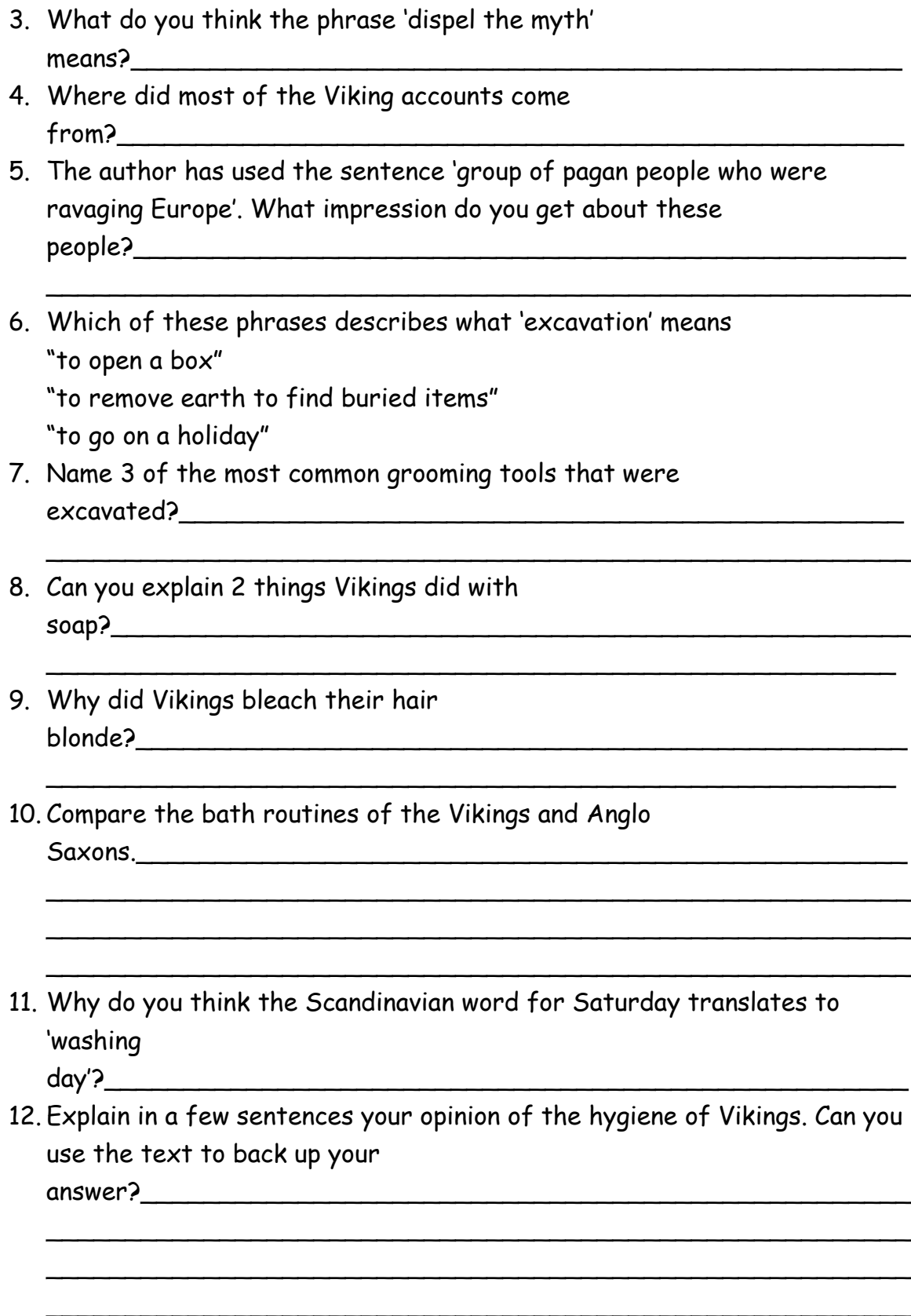
## 'Cleanliness is close to godliness' -

There are also writings describing the cleanliness of the Vikings in the East. The Arab writer Ibn Rustah comments on their cleanliness. The comments by another Arab writer Ibn Fadlan are a little misleading. He notes that he is disgusted by the Vikings all sharing the same bowl to wash their faces and blow their noses. However, Ibn Fadlan does say that they do this each morning. This confirms that they did wash each morning at a time when European Christians did not. Ibn Fadlan was likely disgusted because cleanliness was actually a ritualistic requirement of the Muslim faith and addressed within the Koran. However, the Viking approach to communalism would not have appealed to a member of the Islamic faith.

### **QUESTIONS:**

1. What is the heading of this report? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. What reputation have Vikings got? \_\_\_\_\_



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3. What do you think the phrase 'dispel the myth' means? \_\_\_\_\_
4. Where did most of the Viking accounts come from? \_\_\_\_\_
5. The author has used the sentence 'group of pagan people who were ravaging Europe'. What impression do you get about these people? \_\_\_\_\_
6. Which of these phrases describes what 'excavation' means  
"to open a box"  
"to remove earth to find buried items"  
"to go on a holiday"
7. Name 3 of the most common grooming tools that were excavated? \_\_\_\_\_
8. Can you explain 2 things Vikings did with soap? \_\_\_\_\_
9. Why did Vikings bleach their hair blonde? \_\_\_\_\_
10. Compare the bath routines of the Vikings and Anglo Saxons. \_\_\_\_\_
11. Why do you think the Scandinavian word for Saturday translates to 'washing day'? \_\_\_\_\_
12. Explain in a few sentences your opinion of the hygiene of Vikings. Can you use the text to back up your answer? \_\_\_\_\_