We call the period from 750 until 1100 CE (Common Era), the Viking Age. 350 dynamic years when life in Scandinavia underwent fundamental change. Contacts between Scandinavia and distant parts of the world became more frequent and more substantial.

Much of what we now call Viking Age culture was created in the meeting between the norrænir menn (north men) as they called themselves, and other groups.

The book THE VIKING WORLD, is based on the namesake exhibition at the Swedish History Museum and presents some of the unique objects displayed there. We invite the reader on a journey through power and inequality in Viking Age society and through the revolutionary transition from old customs, forn siðr, to Christian faith.

Historiska

ISBN 978-91-89176-71-3

THE VIKING WORLD

Historiska

The sea walls, and the Wave-Borne
Bears bright froth o'er the red wood,
Where gapes the Roller's Brown Ox,
With mouth gold ornamented.

(The poet Torleif fager writes about the waves, from Snorri Sturlason's Skáldskaparmál.)

THE VIKING WORLD

Welcome to the Viking World. Based on the exhibition at the Swedish History Museum in Stockholm this book will provide fascinating stories about power and inequality. About the dramatic transition from the old customs and traditions, known as forn siðr, to Christian beliefs. About stunning craftwork and about the farmstead at the heart of the clan. About journeys to the East and to the West, about life, death, fascinating rituals and everyday life.

VÄRLDENS STÖRSTA VIKINGAUTSTÄLLNING

VIKINGARNAS VÄRLD

THE VIKING WORLD

Enligt vikingatidens mytologi samlades de fornnordiska gudarna till ting under världsträdet Yggdrasils krona. I utställningen kan du följa grenverket till människorna och deras värld – genom de 350 år vi kallar för vikingatiden.

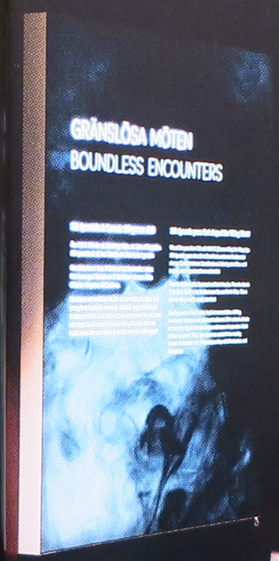
Kom med och utforska fascinerande historier om makt och ojämlikhet. Om gården i ättens centrum. Om den omvälvande övergången från forn sed till kristen tro. Om bländande hantverk. Om resor i öst och väst, om liv, död, vardag och skrämmande ritualer.

Välkommen!

In the Viking Age the Norse gods would gather for a formal meeting or "thing" under the world tree, Yggdrasil. In this exhibition you can follow the branches out to see the humans and their world – across the 350 years we call the Viking Age.

Come along and discover fascinating stories about power and inequality. About the farmstead at the heart of the clan. About the dramatic transition from the old customs and traditions, known as Forn Sidr, to Christian beliefs. About stunning craftwork. About journeys to the East and to the West, about life, death, daily normality and terrifying rituals.

Welcome!



Historiska

The Viking World – a publication from the Swedish History Museum in Stockholm
The content has been retrieved from the museum's exhibition The Viking World, which opened in June 2021.

All material from the exhibition is available digitally on **vikingar.historiska.se/en**

Texts:
Gunnar Andersson, Senior Curator
Antje Wendt, Curator
Florent Audy, Curator

Editor:
Lasse Hedman, Text Editor
Susanna Rappe George, Museum Educator

Text editing:
Katherine Hauptman, former Museum Director
Susanna Rappe George, Museum Educator

Photos and illustrations:
Ola Myrin, Photographer
Jens Mohr, Photographer
Helena Bonnevier, Photographer
Erik Lernestål, Photographer
Maja Sten, Illustrator

Graphic design:
Cecilia Undemark Péterfy, Graphic Designer

Publisher:
Åsa Marnell, Museum Director

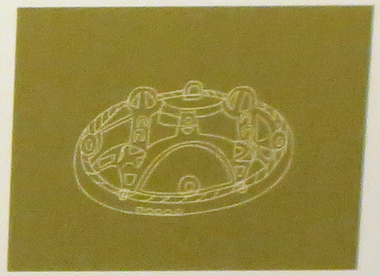
Exhibition sponsor:
MuseumsPartner

Printing:
Åtta.45 Tryckeri AB, 2022

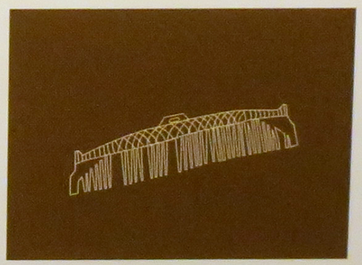
ISBN: 978-91-89176-71-3

TABLE OF CONTENTS


8. Boundless meetings


16. Family and hierarchy

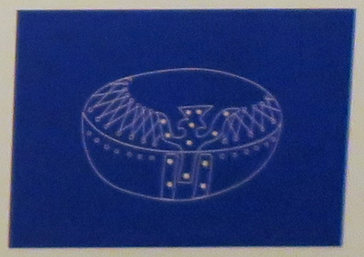

26. Divine craftwork


36. Midgard


46. Belief and traditions

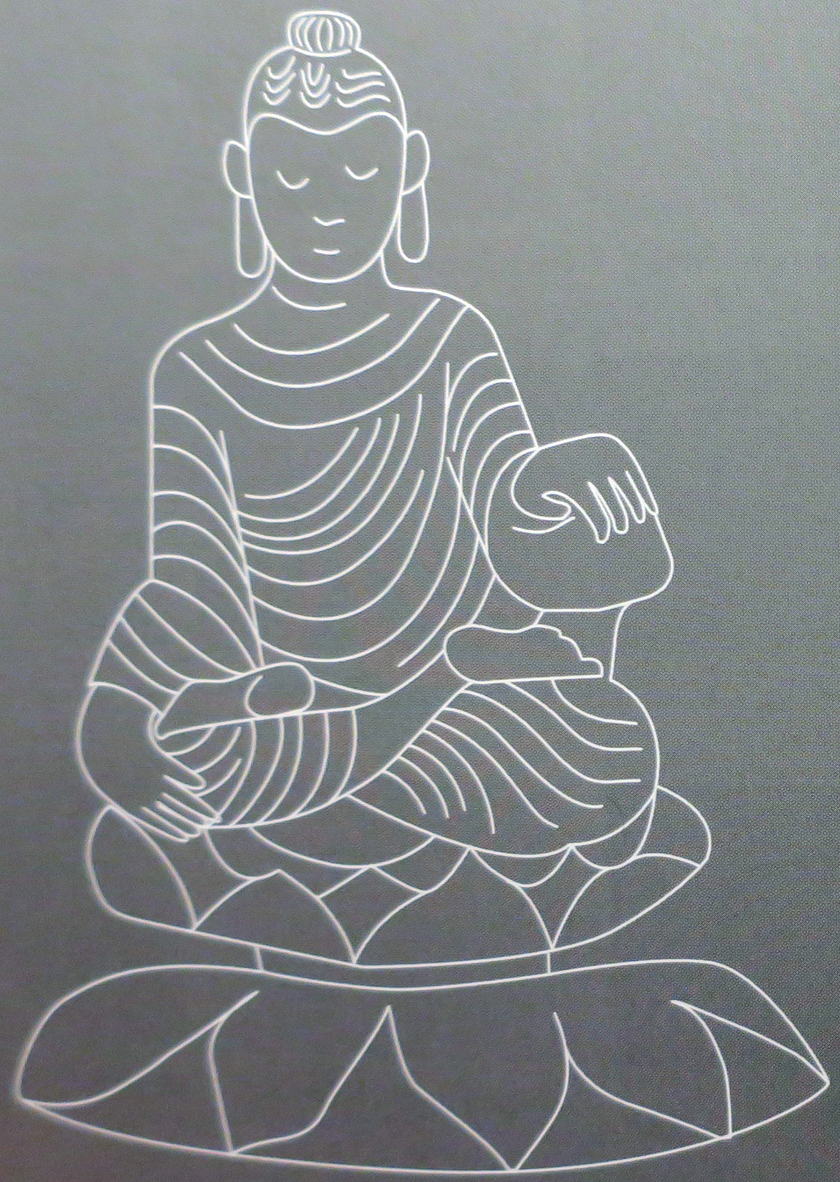

58. The living and the dead


70. Waterways


78. Trading and raiding


86. Town-like centres


92. Christian monuments



BOUNDLESS MEETINGS

350 DYNAMIC YEARS THAT SHAPED THE VIKING WORLD

We call the years from 750 until 1100 CE (Common Era), the Viking Age. 350 dynamic years when life in Scandinavia underwent fundamental change. Contacts between Scandinavia and distant parts of the world became more frequent and more substantial.

From the Middle East to Greenland and North America. From the islands in the North Atlantic to the Mediterranean Sea and North Africa. This is how the Viking world is usually described.

Meetings across cultural borders inspired ornamentation, clothing, construction techniques and patterns of settlement. Both cultural artefacts and everyday objects took new designs and means of expression. Much of what we now call Viking Age culture was created in the meeting between Norse people and other groups.

The Viking Age – a recent invention

In the year 793, Norse people attacked a monastery on Lindisfarne in Northumbria, in modern-day England. Almost 300 years later, in 1066, the Norwegian King Harald Hardrada fell at the Battle of Stamford Bridge outside York, also in modern-day England.

These two events have long been considered the beginning and the end of the Viking Age. A term which was invented by Scandinavian archaeologists during the 19th century.

Delimiting an era so precisely mainly reflects how the period was defined in Great Britain and on the continent of Europe. But the Norse people were travelling to other countries long before 793. They brought new goods and knowledge home with them. Plundering probably did take place during these early trips, but there are no written sources telling of it.

Nowadays we know that the Viking Age may be defined differently depending on what phenomena we focus on. For this reason the Viking Age is now viewed as a longer period than when the term was first coined.

The sources for what we know

The sources for what we know about the Viking Age are mainly written and archaeological. They must be evaluated, analysed and interpreted. The researchers' views and interpretations of the sources have changed over the years.

A third source – which is both written and archaeological – is the runic inscriptions on stones and objects. Even though the inscriptions are short, some can tell us about family relationships and inheritance disputes. They also provide an insight into peoples' thoughts about the spiritual world.



Bishop's staff and crozier. Bronze with gilded handle and blue glass inlays. The motif is two scenes from the Bible story about Jonah in the belly of the whale. The decoration is in Irish style, which indicates that the staff comes from the British Isles. Settlement find, Helgö, Ekerö Parish, Uppland. Object number: 108113_HST

Bronze Buddha statuette. The Buddha is sitting on a throne shaped like a double lotus flower. The statuette was made in the late fifth or early sixth centuries, probably in the Swat Valley, on the border between modern-day Afghanistan and Pakistan. How it ended up in Scandinavia we do not know. Settlement find, Helgö, Ekerö Parish, Uppland. Object number: 108113_HST

Written down centuries later

The written sources which talk about the Viking Age are divided into the Old Norse and non-Old Norse literature.

The Old Norse accounts of conditions in Scandinavia were written several hundred years after the events they describe. It was another age. Christianity had broken through and now dominated ideas about the spiritual world. Despite that, these accounts are of great importance for our picture of the Viking Age.

The Old Norse sources are from the western parts of the Nordic region. More is written about the Viking Age people in modern-day Iceland and Norway than about conditions in eastern and southern Scandinavia.

The non-Old Norse sources contain contemporary accounts, written by missionaries, historians and so on. But that does not mean that they are more factual or that the authors actually witnessed what they write about. When those who met the Vikings recount various events the descriptions are often critical of the Norse people.



Pendant. A so-called "Thor's hammer pendant" of silver. The loop has a bird of prey face with pronounced beak, slightly protruding eyes and pronounced eyebrows. The pendant is a stray find from Skåne, thus giving it the moniker "The Skåne hammer ". We do not know how it was found, but other Thor's hammer pendants were part of hoards, in other words not grave finds. We do not know who wore it or in what circumstances. It was probably made in southern Scandinavia or northern Germany. Object number: 106659_HST

Sometimes Viking – sometimes not

The word Viking appears both on runestones and in the written sources. We do not know exactly what it means. The term is often used to describe a situation or activity. Someone could "go on a viking" meaning going on a trading trip or raiding expedition.

Other formulations suggest that it was possible to switch into and out of the roles of Viking, farmer or travelling merchant. The sources show that women and children and youths went along on the journeys. Could it be that a large proportion of the population were sometimes Vikings?

Many kinds of objects were brought to Scandinavia. Sometimes from Viking trips, sometimes from transactions between people from near and far when they met in trading centres.

Glittering golden hoard of silver

The silver hoard from Vårby is impressive in its scope and its quality. It contains objects from many parts of the then known world, with Scandinavian, Western, Eastern and West Slavic origins.

The hoard can tell us a lot about the Viking Age. Among the shimmering gold objects are both male and female coded jewellery and mounts.

The hoard was found in 1871 by a boy named Otto Ludvig Jonsson, who was 14 years old at the time, near to the homestead of Vårby in Huddinge, immediately south of Stockholm. He found it in a pit which was covered by brushwood and branches by a large boulder. As a reward for finding the 1.5 kg hoard he was given 250 Swedish crowns, the equivalent of about SEK 16,000 at 2021 values.

The hoard consists of silver objects, many of them wholly or partially gilded. The dates on the coins which were reformed into pendants suggest that the hoard was buried in the middle of the 10th century. The youngest coin was minted in 937– 938.



Ring. Finger ring of silver with glass stone. The stone has an inscription in Kufic Arabic which may signify "for Allah" or "to Allah". The ring probably originates from an area within the Islamic caliphate but may also be from another Arabic speaking region in the Middle East. Grave find, Birka, Bj 515, Adelsö Parish, Uppland. Object number: 106842_HST



Round brooch. Gilded bronze and decorated in the Borre Style. The moulded brooch consists of an upper and lower tab. On the upper tab is a large cross with ends shaped like facemasks. In the space between is an openwork decoration of gripping beasts who have their heads turned towards the centre of the cross. The middle is filled with similar ornamentation. Part of a hoard find, Vårby, Huddinge Parish, Södermanland. Object number: 106697_HST

Ring-headed pin. Silver. The ring itself has thick, flattened ends. The bent pin has a hexagonal cross-section and is decorated with stamp ornamentation in the shape of triangles and squares. The brooch is part of a large hoard find, Digeråkra, Barlingbo Parish, Gotland. Object number: 107236_HST

The hidden silver hoards of Gotland

Over 700 silver hoards have been found on the island of Gotland, an area where the greatest number of hoards have been discovered.

The Sigsarve hoard, from the parish of Hejde, has a total weight of over 6 kg making it one of the largest hoards unearthed.

The hoard consists of both intact and intentionally deformed objects. It also contains 1,391 coins as well as small pieces of jewellery and metal rods which have been cut up.

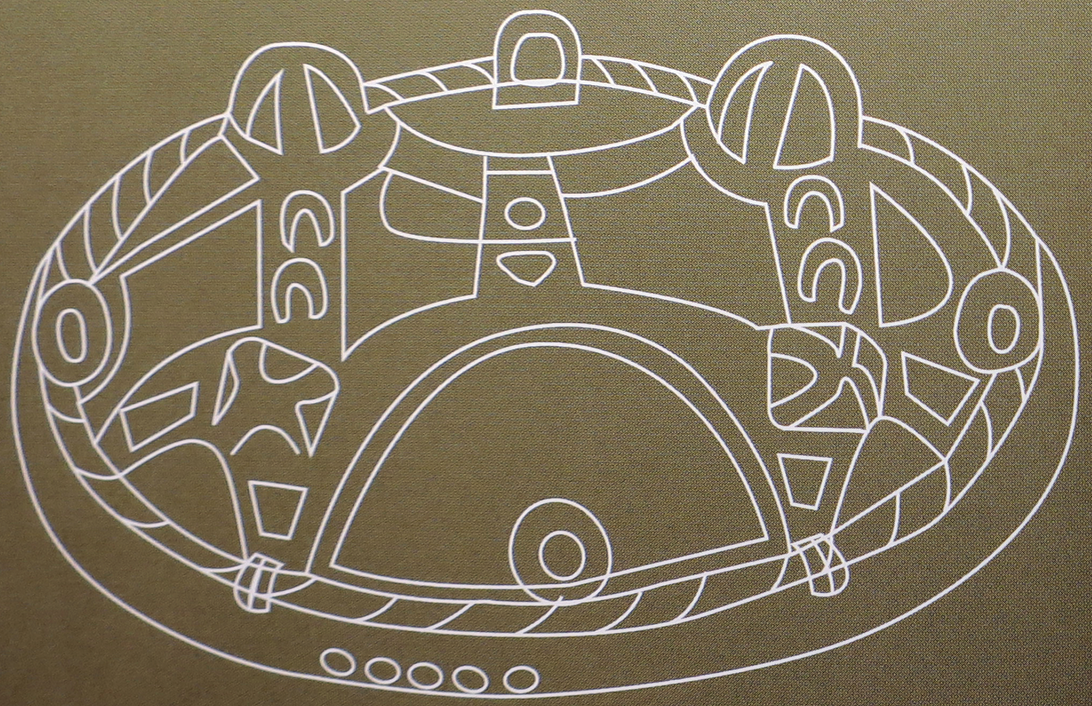
The majority of the jewellery was probably manufactured in Scandinavia while other objects originate from the East. Over half the coins are Islamic, and the others are English and German with a small number being Byzantine. Only one of the coins is Scandinavian/Swedish – minted for the Swedish king Olof Skötkonung.

The hoards found on Gotland and in other places are probably just some of those deposited during the Viking Age. Numerous others are still in the ground.

Over the years researchers have put forward various interpretations regarding the buried silver and precious metal deposits on Gotland. Some stressed that the hoard finds were financially important for the owner and therefore the key to achieving power in society. The debate has also centred around whether the silver was plundered or was used as payment for services and in trade. Another important question is why the hoards were buried and left in their hiding place.

Belt mount. Gilded silver, niello floral decoration with relief. Along the edges runs a single row of dots. Part of a hoard find, Sigsarve, Hejde Parish, Gotland. Object number: 106726_HST





FAMILY AND HIERARCHY

A SOCIETY CENTRED AROUND RELATIONSHIPS

Society was hierarchical and its members were valued differently. The major difference was between the free and the unfree. But even within these groups, individuals were ranked based on class, kin, sex and place of origin.

At the very bottom were the unfree, the thralls. The unfree could advance in the hierarchy and free individuals could lose their rights. There was a certain degree of social mobility.

Kin relationships and support from other allies was important. For the free, kinship was counted both on the father's and the mother's side. When marrying, both partners retained their extended family.

How people were buried reflected their social circumstances and status in life, as well as the nature of male and female norms. The graves also inform us about the choices and strategies of the survivors. They could choose to highlight or tone down different aspects of the life and deeds of the deceased.

The choice of objects in the grave and the rituals carried out was often guided by the need for the survivors to cement alliances or establish new contacts. Therefore, the design of the grave often offers a picture of relations in society, and not just a reflection of the life of the buried individual.

A hard life with room for caring

Living conditions were tough for both the free and the unfree. Wear-and-tear injuries on the back, joints and teeth plus traces of healed fractures in arms and legs are common in skeleton finds. Parasitic and bacterial infections, with consequent long-term diarrhoea and anaemia, were also common.

Few people lived beyond 60. Many men died before their 45th birthday. Women often died even younger, between the ages of 25 and 30, often as a result of complications linked to pregnancy and childbirth.

There was health and medical care. Skilled people could carry out fairly advanced operations. Grave finds reveal that there was also space for those who were dependent on others for their survival. This might entail people with different injuries. Less visible physical conditions are impossible to trace by means of archaeology. It is a myth that aged people and those with reduced physical capacity were thrown from a precipice.

Ambátt and þræll

The thralls, the unfree in society, did not have the same rights as free people. But there were different statuses and rights also among the unfree.

Ambátt and þræll were the collective names for female and male thralls respectively. The nature of the work they did influenced their status. An unfree could be promoted to bryti, a kind of foreman or steward responsible for the farm and other unfree people, while others were slaves engaged in heavy physical work.

A decisive factor for the status within the group of thralls was whether the individual had been captured in battle or was born into the farm community. The latter had greater freedom than thralls who were taken in battle.

Trading in thralls was profitable. Arabic chroniclers describe slave-hunting Scandinavians on journeys East towards Gardariki in modern-day Russia. Finds of neck irons and other types of shackles show that slave trading was carried out in Birka on the island of Björkö in Lake Mälaren. The island of Brännö on the West Coast of Sweden is mentioned in the Old Norse literature as one of the largest slave markets in Scandinavia.

Thralls also appear in Old Norse mythology. Best known were the giantess sisters Fenja and Menja. They ground gold for King Fróði in his giant, magic mill Grótti.

Inequality before the law

The inequalities in Viking Age society are clearly apparent in the oldest Scandinavian laws. The laws were written down in the 13th century, but parts of the texts go back to older, verbally transmitted laws. The laws stipulated how different people were valued.

There was no equality before the law. The value of a person's life was based on who the person was. The value could be translated into a fine, a so-called mansbot – penance or literally "man price." It cost less to kill or assault a person of low rank than a person of high standing.

Exchange of ideas, goods and services

The environment in which aristocratic men and women lived was a kind of cultural melting pot. They met and socialised with like-minded people from large parts of the then known world. As well as goods and services, they exchanged ideas and customs.

This influence from outside Scandinavia can be seen in personal objects such as jewellery and belt trimmings. Sometimes even clothes and the way of dressing shows what part of the world was considered significant and which the aristocracy liked to be associated with.

Women's graves reflect complex roles

Jewellery and equipment in the graves of wealthy and aristocratic women reflect the complex roles these women had, or were expected to have if they had lived longer. These women lived and operated in a mixture between the private and the public, and between the Scandinavian and the continental.

Many of the objects in the graves of women show that they performed a variety of tasks. Their function was partly to maintain the traditions and tell people about customs, partly to update customs and ideals and perhaps even norms.



Brooch. Gilded bronze box-shaped brooch, with silver inlay decorated with niello. The decoration is openwork. Grave find, Stora Ihre, Hellvi Parish, Gotland. Object number: 108042_HST


SLÄKT OCH HIERARKI
FAMILY AND HIERARCHY
De flesta män var bönder

Only half lived past the age of ten

It is estimated that only half of all children lived past the age of ten. The other half died early due to injuries and sickness. Many of the children who died at the age of five or older were given their own grave.

The children joined in everywhere and contributed to the work on the farm, to the best of their ability. But in the myths, selected children sometimes took on a special role and were described as small adults with supernatural powers.

Several child graves contain the same kind of objects as the graves of adults – though often of smaller size. This suggests that gender roles and norms applied to children at an early age.

The key – a symbol of responsibility

A free woman might be mistress of the house and, together with the master of the house, be responsible for the farm and the family. This role was denoted by one or a number of keys that she would wear, hanging from straps or chains on her clothing.

Many of the keys are skilfully ornamented with no sign of wear, which suggests that they were symbolic rather than functional.



Key. Hook key with oval, openwork shaft hanging on a tool brooch with chains. All parts made of bronze. Stray find in a farm field, Duss, Bro Parish, Gotland. Object number: 107663_HST

Brooches, beads and needle case. Grave find from Birka, Bj 550, Adelsö Parish. Object numbers: 106588_HST, 529520_HST, 558651_HST, 107551_HST

Power and wealth were put on display

Well-off, free women wore a lot of their social capital highly visible on their clothes. Power and wealth were to be displayed. This was particularly important in the context of burials.

Rich women could wear lavish needle cases and chains made of silver, rather than the more usual bronze. Their traditional oval brooches were gilded or silver gilt and covered with continental European ornamentation rather than Scandinavian designs.

Most men were farmers

In the Old Norse sagas the idealised image of a man involved war, hunting and riding. But most free men were not warriors, they were farmers. In everyday life the only weapon they needed was a knife or an axe, which were also important tools. Likely few owned their own horse. Weapons and horse equipment are unusual grave finds.

It was the free men who had the right to bear arms. And – like certain free women – they had the right to make their voice and that of their family heard at the thing, a gathering for making laws, administering justice and carrying out administration. But no one was allowed to come armed to the thing.

The male ideal also included paying attention to one's appearance. The men's beards would be well-groomed and round the waist they might wear a belt, finely ornamented with bronze details.



Pendant. Small silver pendant representing a walking man with sword in hand and a long-shafted axe over his shoulder. Grave find, Klahammar, Överselö Parish, Södermanland. Object number: 1370416_HST

Warriors were highly valued

Many free men owned and carried weapons. But far from all were, or identified themselves as, warriors. Society was violent and the ideal of a warrior was highly valued. This is clear from the mythological tales of Odin and Freya in their roles as divine military leaders, in the Old Norse family and heroic sagas, in the Skaldic poetry and from the names of people and places.

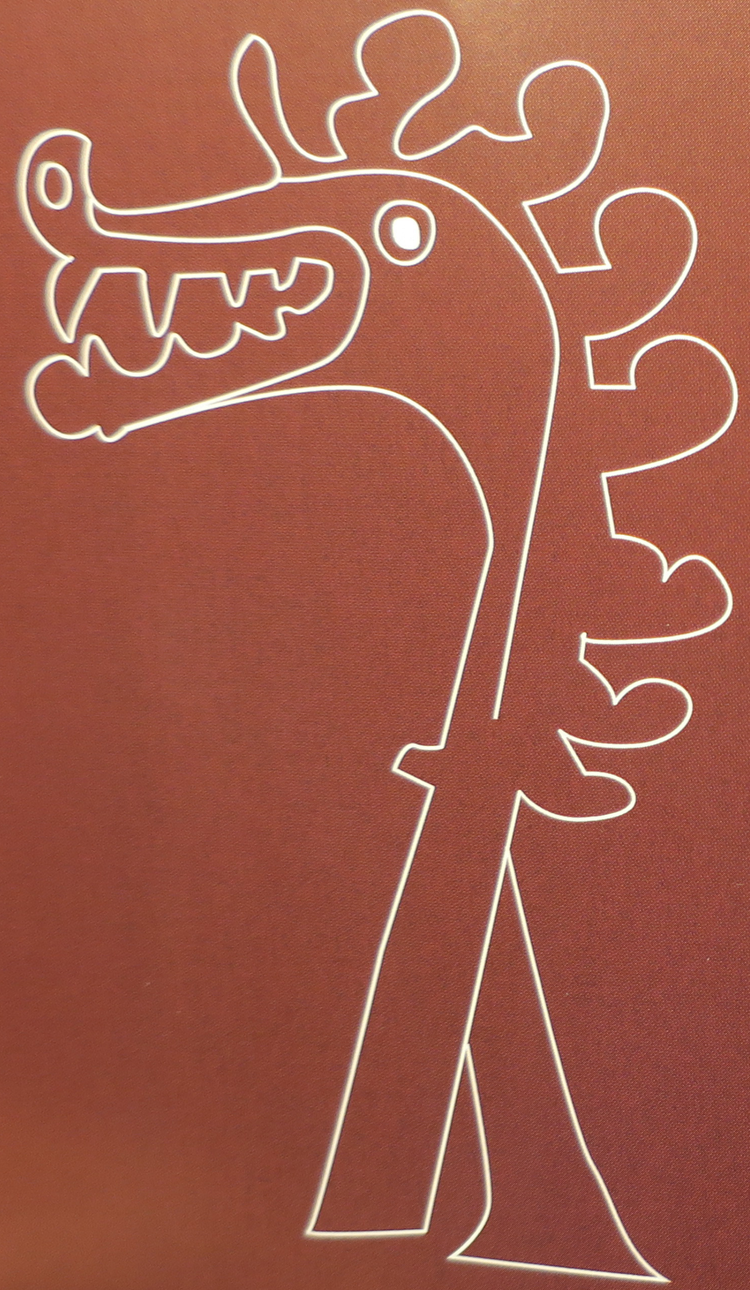
The weaponry of the warriors included both offensive weapons and defensive equipment. Offensive weapons include swords, choppers, axes, spears and bows, while the defensive equipment includes round shields and sometimes protective chain mail. They may have had helmets, but these are very rarely found in the graves of warriors. A few fragments which might have been part of helmets have been found in Scandinavia.

In addition to the weaponry in the graves of warriors, there would often be one or two horses, equipped with harness, saddle and stirrups.

A warrior might also be part of the personal retinue of a king or powerful leader. Warriors were expected to be loyal to their lords but might also be hired mercenaries. Many signed up as armed guards on trading expeditions.



Stirrups. Iron stirrups. Grave find, Birka, Bj 581, Adelsö Parish, Uppland. Object number: 561205_HST



DIVINE CRAFTWORK

A GREAT VARIETY OF CREATION WITH DIFFERENT MATERIALS

During the Viking Age craftspeople worked in a variety of different materials; textiles, metal, wood, bone and antler, leather, glass and clay. Their great skills were built on knowledge handed down over centuries.

Their craft was associated with rituals. In the Prophecy of the Seeress in the Poetic Edda it is written that the Aesir carried out smithwork, in the sense of ”created”. The gods were seen as craftspeople. Does that mean that, conversely, craftspeople could be seen as gods?

Our knowledge of the early mediaeval guilds indicates that both men and women were occupied in craftwork – weaving, sewing and smithing.

Objects changed form and function

Products from other geographical and cultural areas were considered fascinating. Crafted objects were redesigned. Many products from far away took on a new meaning.

One clear example is the three-foil brooch. This was originally a male-coded object used to embellish a baldric. Within Viking culture it became a woman's brooch, which the craftspeople decorated with Scandinavian animal ornamentation.

Other examples show how silver coins and/or belt fittings became a part of sets of beads, how Scandinavian jewellery and brooches were made from melted down silver objects and coins, and how Arabic weights became end-knobs on penannular brooches.



Pendants. One large and twelve smaller silver pendants with floral decoration. Grave find, Bj 606, Birka, Adelsö Parish, Uppland. Object number: 785734_HST

Viking Age art – stylised animals

Objects, furniture, and buildings were decorated in styles typical for the Scandinavian region. The most common motif was a stylised animal, sometimes in combination with a human-like face.

The model for this style was animal ornamentation on the continent during the 5th and 6th centuries. From the 8th century it occurs almost only in the Nordic region.

The principal was that the animal would be taken apart, tied together, and intertwined in a more or less complex pattern.

There are six Viking Age styles: Oseberg/Broa, Borre, Jelling, Mammen, Ringerike and Urnes. Each style was named after the place where objects decorated in that style were first found. The styles develop chronologically but overlap each other, without any definitive borders between them. Mixed forms are common.

High quality goldsmithery

Artisans used their artistic skill to create elegant necklaces, bracelets, brooches, strap mountings and buckles out of gold and silver. These artefacts gave status to leaders and aristocrats and the goldsmithery was also present in rituals. Many of the products were of such high quality that they are difficult to copy, even today.



Brooch. Bronze penannular brooch, with niello silver plates. The ring is flat, somewhat tapered at the ends which are bent upwards in the shape of stylised animal heads. Found during "railway excavation", Roma monastery, Gotland. Object number: 120463_HST



Iron ore for weapons and tools

Metal was extracted from bog iron ore, red earth and other materials containing iron in charcoal-fired smithing hearths. The conversion to steel, or from steel to edged and bladed weapons was not just a question of technology. It was seen as changing the world created by the gods. So the craftspeople had to master rituals controlling the powers of the world.

This aspect of the craft explains why residual products from the fabrication process were sometimes placed in graves and why smithwork is often found in ritual contexts.



Axe. Iron axe with three-foil peg on the blade and at the neck, resembling floral decoration. Found in an agricultural field, Rommunds, Gammelgarns Parish, Gotland. Object number: 120502_HST

Ornamented everyday implements

Wood was the raw material for buildings, ships and boats. But household utensils, tools, beds, chairs and benches were also made from wood.

Using axes and saws, hammers, chisels and knives these skilled carpenters and joiners decorated these objects or attached metal fittings.

Remarkable tools in wetland

In 1936, as a farmer dug in the marshland of the Mästermyr mire on the island of Gotland, a spectacular find was made. A find which provides knowledge about the craftspeople and craft skills during the Viking Age. In a well-preserved wooden chest, with an iron chain wrapped around it, were a large number of various tools.

There has been much speculation about how the chest ended up in the mire, by all indications in the latter part of the 11th century. Two possible explanations are that the chest sank when a boat capsized or when a sled went through the ice in the wintertime. If one of these theories was right, someone would most likely have rescued the well-equipped tool-box.

The equipment would doubtless have had a high value, both financially and socially. Not least in view of the social standing of the craftspeople. But perhaps something happened in connection with the accident which caused the toolbox to be left at the bottom of the lake. Or was the deposit intentional and in fact a valuable wetland offering, deliberately submerged in the shallow lake?



Tool chest. Bog find from Mästermyr, Slite parish, Gotland.
Object number: 107095_HST

Weaving – associated with the Norns

Textile craftwork was highly developed and fabrics and clothes were important goods for trade. Colourful tapestries and covers were woven with vertical looms from natural dyed wool and linen.

Using weaving tablets and small weaving combs, patterned tablet-woven bands were made from silk and silk yarn, imported from what we now call Asia.

Weaving was also the domain of the three Norns, namely Urd, Verdandi and Skuld, who decided the destinies of all living beings by spinning the threads of life.

Different objects made of bone and antler

Animal bone, and antler from elk or deer were raw materials for a number of different objects. Implements such as needles, whorls, weaving tablets, bone ice skates along with household utensils and tools, such as spoons were made from bone and antler.

Inventive craftspeople also used other types of bone material, for example whalebone or elk teeth to make gaming pieces. Luxury fittings were made from materials such as walrus bone and tusk.

Recycling of bronze and silver

Bronze casters and silversmiths made jewellery and other objects and decorated them with animal ornamentation. The raw materials were very often discarded bronze objects or silver coinage, which were melted down, recast and shaped into new precious objects.

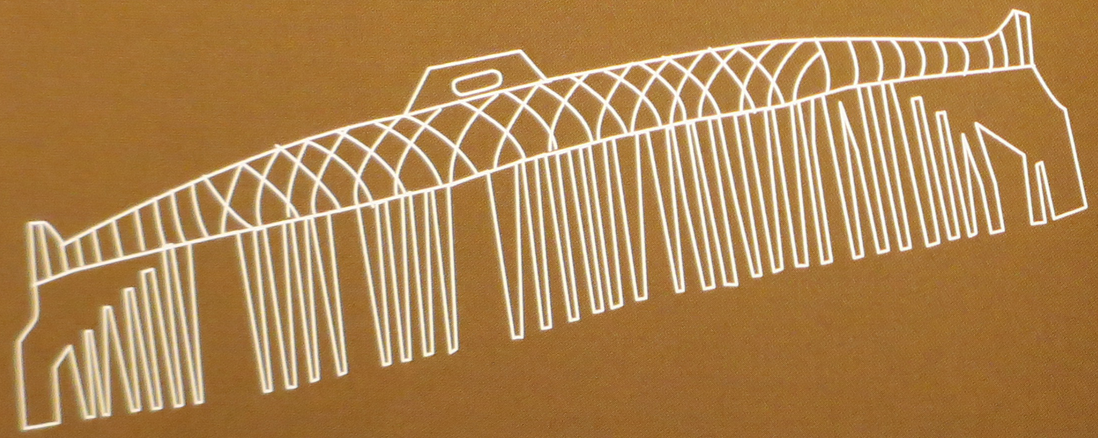
Bronze casting was also steeped in ritual. Just as smithwork, waste from casting was sometimes deposited in pits in ritual contexts.



Dragon head. The dragon head of lead/tin alloy was intended as a pinhead on a dress-pin. Found in the harbour area, Svarta Jorden, Birka, Adelsö Parish, Uppland. Object number: 3003373_HST



Cushion. Fragment of a patterned cushion or pillow with partially preserved stuffing. The fabric has traces of dye, including red and dark blue/black and patterns in red and blue. The weave is fragile and the stuffing has not been investigated further. Grave find, Birka, Bj 739, Adelsö Parish, Uppland. Object number: 617938_HST



MIDGARD

THE FARMSTEAD WAS THE FOUNDATION OF IDENTITY

The farmstead was important for those who lived from agriculture. Belonging to a farmstead which had been owned by the same extended family for generations was in many ways the basis of people's identity. And it lent legitimacy to the position of the family in society.

The importance of the farmstead is shown clearly in the mythology, with Midgard, where the humans lived, surrounding the home of the gods, Asgard. In the Prose Edda it is also told that Midgard borders on Utgard, the dangerous, outlying land where giants and other forces of chaos live.

Translated into daily life Midgard would be the equivalent of the farmstead and the cultivated fields, while Utgard signified untamed nature, the forests and mountains. This view of the world was written down several hundred years after the Viking Age. Later research has questioned the role of the hostile Utgard as the antithesis to the secure Midgard. Utgard is a younger concept, with a shorter history than the idea of Midgard.

Meaningful drinking

At feasts and during ceremonies and rituals food and alcohol were important. But consumption was strictly regulated. In verse 19 of Hávamál (Song of Odin, the High One), a wisdom poem from the Poetic Edda, caution is urged.

Keep not the mead cup,
but drink thy measure;
speak needful words or none.

The most common drinks were beer and mead, which were easy to brew. There was wine too, but it was probably rare, as it had to be imported.

The ritual drinking in the feast hall, or in conjunction with burial ceremonies, was a social act but it also had other functions. Becoming intoxicated was meant to bring the participants closer together, and possibly connect them to the gods and ancestors. Drinking ceremonies could also be a way of legitimising and demonstrating power. In this, the mistress of the house had a central position. It was she who was responsible for offering the guests a beaker and filling it, based on their position and rank.



Beaker. Yellow-green glass funnel beaker. This type of glass was imported from the European mainland where glass beakers were mass-produced. Grave find, Birka, Bj 850, Adelsö Parish, Uppland. Object number: 106822_HST

Town-like trading centres emerged

During the late 8th century a network of large trading centres emerged in northern Europe. In their structure they resembled towns and they became a part of the international trading networks and long-distance commerce. This network stretched from the North Atlantic islands, the British Isles and the continent of Europe to what is now Russia, Byzantium/the Eastern Roman Empire and the caliphate on the Iberian Peninsula and in the Middle East.

The most well-known town-like places in Scandinavia were Birka (in Sweden), Kaupang/Skiringssal (in Norway), Ribe (in Denmark) and Hedeby/Haithabu (in northern Germany).

Skiing Finns – the people of the north

In large parts of northern Scandinavia lived the indigenous Sámi people, with their own culture, social structure and settlement patterns. In the written sources which give accounts of the peoples of Scandinavia the Sámi were called Finns or "Skiing Finns". The Sámi culture has been handed down through verbal narratives so there are few written sources. The name Sámi appears for the first time in writing in the 13th century.

The Sámi people were not settled farmers, but rather lived from hunting and fishing in a wide area, stretching from the Atlantic coast in the west to far into modern-day Russia in the east.

The label "Skiing Finns" comes from the words used around Europe in ancient times to describe the Sámi people: Scridefinni / Scridefinnas / Skrithiphinoi.

In the sources they were described as skilled hunters, as ironsmiths and as good boatbuilders. Analyses of some of the Viking Age boat wrecks found in the waters outside Roskilde in Denmark suggest that they were built in northern Norway, probably by Sámi people.



Spoon. Antler spoon with Sámi influenced entrelac decoration on blade and shaft. Find location unknown. Object number: 481865_HST

Ceramics from all around the world

Everyday objects, such as ceramic vessels, can tell us about the extent of the contact network of a farmstead. Containers and urns from large parts of the then known world have been found in Scandinavia.

Many were probably originally containers for traded goods. Some of them were put to a new use as household utensils, signalling the wider network of the farmstead. Many of the vessels ended up as bone urns in burials.



Vessel. Small, wheel-turned vessel with outwardly curving rim. Light grey pottery of Rhinelandish or Frankish provenance. Grave find, Birka, Bj 457, Adelsö Parish, Uppland. Object number: 524095_HST

Runes in everyday life

Runes and runic script were used in the Nordic countries hundreds of years before the Viking Age. Originally, the runic alphabet had 24 characters. By the beginning of the Viking Age it had been modified and comprised 16 characters. In the new system the same character was used for several different sounds.

Most runes were inscribed on wood and/or bark, materials which are easily destroyed. Jewellery, combs and other artefacts were also inscribed. Sometimes with personal messages, and often just with the name of the person who owned the object or the person who did the engraving.

One unique example, which also reveals how the inscriber was aware of the meaning of the object, is the silver coin on which God has been inscribed in runes on top of the Islamic creed.

How the runes were first created is unclear. They were probably based on the Latin alphabet. But the differences are quite large, including how the characters are arranged in a different order. Rather than ABC, the runic alphabet begins with the runes f u þ a r k which is why it is often known as the futhark.



Comb. Double comb of horn. One side has one runic inscription; the other side has two. The three inscriptions are the 16 character runic alphabet, "the futhark". The contents are doubtless magical and a deterrent, since the futharken was believed to have supernatural powers and was sometimes engraved as a protection against misfortunes and evil forces. Grave find Årsta, Österhaninge Parish, Södermanland. Object number: 107862_HST

Surviving the winter

The Scandinavian winters can be long and cold with snow, slippery tracks and ice covered watercourses. Spikes were used for both humans and animals to navigate the slippery surfaces. Grave finds reveal that broken bones were common, and that many of these injuries healed.

Ice skates were usually made from the metatarsal bone of a cow or a horse. A large number have been found in archaeological excavations in Birka on the island of Björkö in Lake Mälaren. It is difficult to interpret from the finds how the skates were used.

Dirty creatures or vain Norse people?

The Norse people are not depicted as particularly dirty in other eyewitness accounts or in the archaeological material. Rather the opposite. Combs are common finds. This suggests that they placed great importance on their appearance, combed their hair and beards and paid attention to their hygiene. In some of the pictures of people preserved from that time we can see skilled hair styling on women and well-groomed men with trimmed beards.

Finds of washbasins, ear picks for cleaning out ears, tweezers and even glass mirrors suggest that the Norse people were not dirty, unkempt brutes.



Bone ice skates. Four bone ice skates, made from sheep bone. Settlement find, Svarta Jorden, Birka, Adelsö Parish, Uppland. Object number: 364148_HST



Ear spoon. Gilded silver ear spoon. The handle is decorated with a female figure on one side and animal ornamentation on the other. The woman has her hair in a pretzel knot and is holding out a drinking horn. The figure probably represents one of the mythological goddesses who could disguise themselves as a bird. Grave find, Birka, Bj 507, Adelsö Parish, Uppland. Object number: 456867_HST

No moderation when dressing up

Objects and textile fragments reveal that people enjoyed dressing up. And moderation does not seem to have been a virtue. Lustrous brooches and belt buckles of silver or gilded bronze would catch the eye. Everyday objects such as fire lighting implements, whetstones, needle cases and small leather bags or purses could be beautifully decorated and worn on clothing.

Women, and sometimes men, wore colourful beads, though in different ways. Well-to-do women might wear large sets of beads arranged in several rows on the chest, on top of their clothing. In the larger sets of beads, pendants were often attached. Sometimes they were made of coins or other miniature objects. Men would usually wear a smaller number of beads together with a knife or comb, hanging from their belt.

Only fragments and threads remain

Usually only individual fragments or threads remain of Viking clothes. They are often found attached to metal objects. The rest was decomposed. Our knowledge about clothes of the period, fabrics, patterns and colours ought to be very limited. But research has allowed us to know a fair amount.

Wool was the most common fabric. It was used for skirts, trousers, sweaters, tunics and cloaks. Luxurious materials such as silk and linen were also used, and not only by the rich. Sometimes these materials are also found in simpler graves.



Belt purse. Squirrel skin belt bag with bronze mount. Grave find, Birka, Bj 958, Adelsö Parish, Uppland. Object number: 459583_HST

House and home under lock and key

It was important to keep house and home under lock and key. Stealing was common and thieves were punished severely. Breaking into a locked space was more severely punished than if the stolen goods were unprotected.

In food storage rooms and storehouses there were often goods attractive to a thief. They had to have proper locks with large iron keys. Homes had to be securely locked too, but we do not know how common that was.

The valuables that were inside the homes were kept in caskets and chests which were locked with different types of padlocks and smaller keys.

A wooden spoon for the soup

Even if hands were used a lot during meals, sometimes cutlery was needed. Spoons for soups, porridge or stews were made of bone, horn or wood. A small iron knife was used to slice meat and bread and to dig out the nutritious marrow from bones. Claw-shaped forks were used to pick up food from saucepans.

Cooking vessels and saucepans were made of ceramic, iron or soapstone. These were placed either directly on the hot coals or hung on a type of chain above the fire.

Household articles such as plates and cups were usually made of wood, a material that is quickly destroyed. In archaeological excavations wooden artefacts are rarely found. Beakers and drinking horns with beautifully formed details were only used in very well-to-do homes with wide contact networks.

The longhouse – symbol of ownership

On the farmstead lived people with different social status and with different origins. The free and the unfree worked side-by-side, accompanied by the noise of everyday life.

In southern Scandinavia the farmsteads were grouped together in villages. In the north individual farmsteads were often separated. Both types of farmstead consisted of a larger dwelling house with several smaller buildings around it.

The main building was called the longhouse, which might be up to 20 metres long. The house, which was divided up into different parts, was built in line with traditions dating back several hundreds of years. Living and storage spaces were side-by-side with space for the animals.

During the last part of the Viking Age it became common with more and smaller buildings for jobs which previously had been carried out in the longhouse.

The size and structure of the farmsteads varied. The individual farmsteads that belonged to aristocratic families were actually estates, with several smaller farms working for them.

When the farmsteads were changed, the longhouses were often kept. Many were reinforced and renovated. The fact that the buildings were taken care of indicates that they symbolised the family's right to the surrounding land.

Dark – but warm and colourful

Inside, it was quite dark. Daylight and fresh air made their way in via apertures in the walls or holes in the gables in the roof ridges, known as wind-eyes. The English word window derives from the Old Norse word "vindauga".

The wind-eyes also released smoke from the hearth, which was the main source of light. Oil lamps, tar torches and brands could be carried spread light where it was needed. In well-to-do houses, wax candles might be found.

Along the outer walls benches were attached. Finds of padlocks and fittings suggest that they also served as storage chests. The benches could function as both seats and places to sleep. Some, particularly the rich, also had regular beds.

Tables, chairs and stools were other articles of furniture. The master and mistress of the house sat in the seat of honour at the short end of the table or in the middle of the long side.

Demand for timber emptied the landscape

To build houses, ships, wagons and tools large amounts of timber were required. As well as for heating and cooking. Huge amounts of charcoal were needed for the preparation of tar and for iron and steel casting. Deforestation occurred and the landscape in populated areas became depleted, bare, treeless.

The life of most people centred around the farmstead. Daily life consisted of agriculture, taking care of cattle, hunting and fishing.

One of the most important tools on the farm was the ard. It was used to loosen up the earth so that the seeds could be placed in the soil. The dominant crop was barley, though wheat and oats were also grown.

The ard was a predecessor of the plough. Most were made of wood, often using a naturally curved, thick branch or root. Those who could afford, attached an iron share to the end of the ard which turned the soil.

Food for the poor and the rich

The poem Hávamál (Song of Odin, the High One) in the Poetic Edda shows that food and mealtimes were important. Food was status. For example, according to the written sources the meat of piglets, white wheat bread and wine were coveted and a sign of high standards.

Analyses of food remnants in household vessels and of human faeces show that cereal dishes, such as oat and barley porridge, were common foodstuffs. Cultivation of certain vegetables also took place. Slaughter waste also indicates that sheep and cattle were on the menu.

Bread was usually baked using barley, oats or varieties of hulled wheat such as emmer or spelt and was a part of feasts and everyday meals. Sometimes small buns have been found in graves. Perhaps eating bread was part of the burial rituals.



Bread. Two small round buns. Made using finely ground barley and probably baked on a frying pan. Grave find, Helgö, Ekerö Parish, Uppland. Object number: 455021_HST

Music for work, everyday life and feasts

The voice was the primary musical instrument of the period. The literary sources describe cult songs and Skaldic songs, poetry and verse. Singing and music were doubtless also a part of everyday life.

Flutes, bird whistles and horns from cows and goats were common instruments which were probably used both in social situations and for hunting and work. Individual finds of bridges and tuning pegs from bowed harps and lyres have been found in aristocratic settings. Norwegian finds suggest that mouth harps were used.



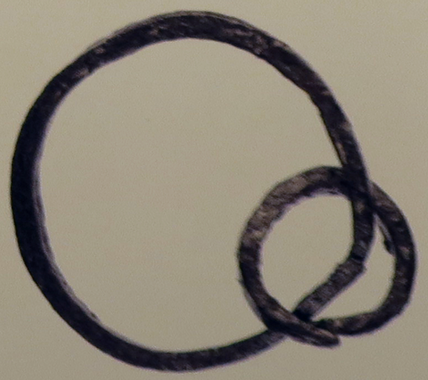
Flute. Simple bone flute with four holes. Vreta Kloster Church, Vreta Kloster Parish, Östergötland. Object number: 435734_HST

Sacrifices – Viking home insurance

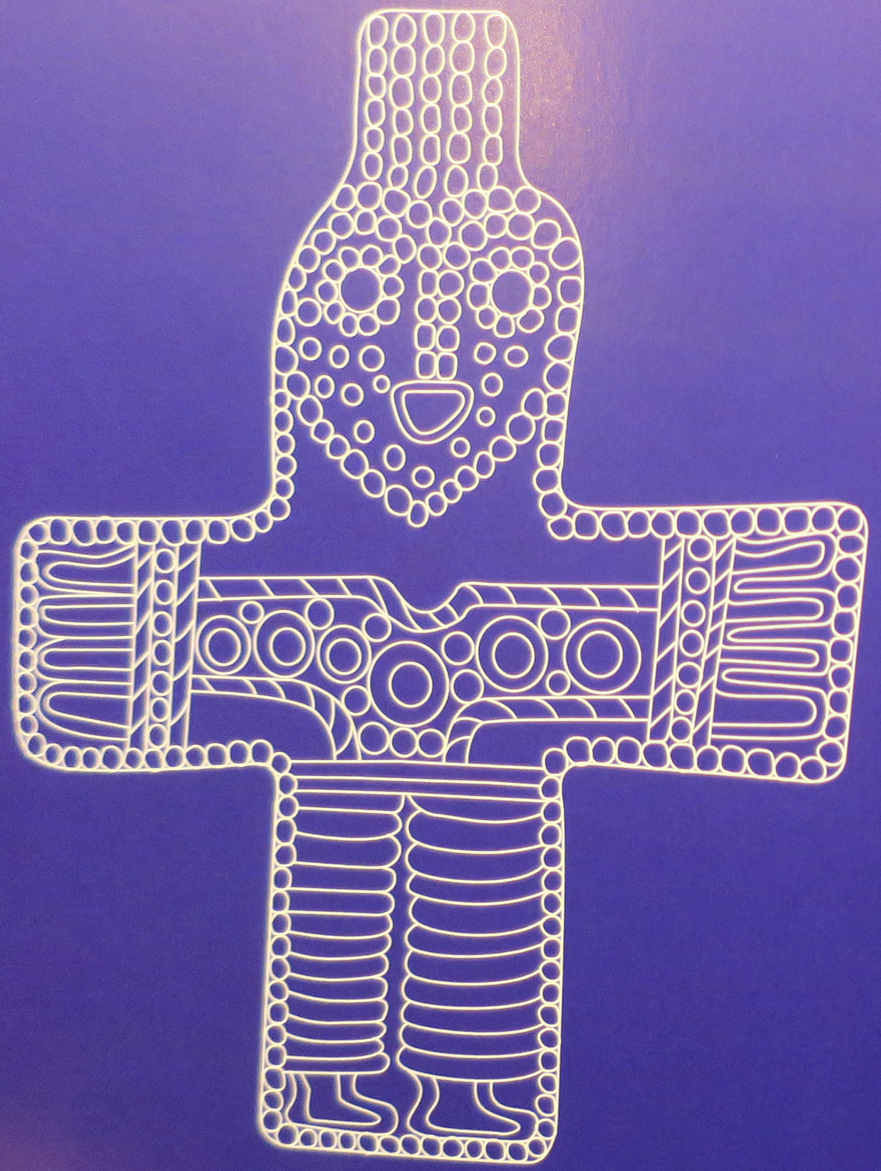
Tradition and belief were constantly present in everyday life. When a house was going to be built sacrifices were made.

In a gutter of a house in Birka two large iron amulet rings, parts of a cow cranium, some eider duck bones, and a shoulder blade from a strongly built man were found. A short distance away lay a Stone Age axe.

Stone Age tools, most often axes, that Norse people found were called thunderstones. According to later folklore the god Thor threw them to the ground causing lightning strikes. A French poem from the 11th century tells of the magic properties of thunderstones. They would protect both the wearer and the house they were kept in from being struck by lightning.



Amulet rings. Iron amulet rings, the smaller attached inside the larger. The rings were deposited in a small pit located between two workshops, Svarta Jorden, Birka, Adelsö Parish, Uppland. Object number: 914264_HST



BELIEF AND TRADITIONS

RELIGIOUS HYBRIDS PUT THEIR STAMP ON LIFE

At the start of what we call the Viking Age, large parts of Europe had been Christian for several hundred years. For a long time, the lives and beliefs of the Scandinavian people were influenced by both Norse belief systems and Christianity.

This mixture sometimes turned into a kind of religious hybrid. The Norse tradition had many deities, male and female, and built on the collective with a focus on family and kin. Christianity was more individual, hierarchical and patriarchal, with a single god.

This complex mixture was also influenced by mutual and sometimes intensive exchanges with Sámi beliefs and religious practices.

Different concepts combined in objects

Norse and Christian concepts were often melted into hybrids. This merging was a natural consequence of a changing world. The many combined concepts can be clearly seen in the written sources and in the design of objects.

On pendants and brooches of different kinds old symbols such as the hammer of the Aesir god Thor and the triquetra eternity symbol alternate with the Christian cross. The new and the old were often combined in one object, which then took on a new and more complex meaning.

Brooches to read and understand

Throughout history the deer has been used as a symbol for Christ. In the Viking Age deer appeared sometimes on certain types of brooches, and sometimes as an embroidered motif on clothes and other fabrics.

On a special type of round silver brooch they appear in fixed combinations. One motif shows four deer gathered around a well or a rock where four rivers are rising. The well has been interpreted as the Well of Life and the rock with the rivers as a symbol of paradise.

The composition may be a depiction of some lines from the Old Testament Book of Psalms, Psalm 42, verses 1 – 2:

As the deer pants for streams of water,
so I long after You, Oh God.
I thirst for God, for the living God.
When shall I come,
and appear before God?

The song was sung on Easter Day, when new converts were accepted into the Christian community, and was an important element in Christian worship.



Brooch. Round silver brooch depicting deer drinking from the Well of Life and thirsting after 'the living God'. The deer, of which there are four on this brooch, are surrounded by four beasts of prey looking at the scene with raised necks and staring eyes. Stray find, Väsby Storgården, Skä Parish, Uppland. Object number: 112584_HST

Many kinds of Christianity

It took a long time before Christianity became the dominant religion in Scandinavia. There were also various Christian traditions, which were different from one another.

The Roman Catholic mission from the continent of Europe is the best known of these, thanks to the chronicles of mission history. But the ideas of Greek Orthodox Christianity also reached Scandinavia from the east in the same period. Missionaries and bishops also arrived from the British Isles in the west. This influence from the west and east is not mentioned in the written sources, but rather has left traces in the form of ornamentation and objects.

Magical amulets

The Old Norse written sources, from Norway and Iceland, tell of large gatherings where rituals were carried out. But the archaeological finds which may be linked to cult worshipping indicate that these were usually held on a smaller scale, in local communities or in the home.

Small amulets – sometimes made of iron, sometimes of bronze, silver or gold – were important. They represented different deities and were a tool whereby an individual could communicate with one or several gods. The amulets were carried in an easily accessible leather pouch.

Another sign of how faith was carried out in everyday life is the small runic plates with inscribed incantations which may be found in graves. They often have messages of the type: *Malevolent one. May ruin befall you* or *Be not too sprightly outside the grave, spirit! May misfortune fall upon the wrongdoer.*

There are no contemporary written sources which describe the religious beliefs and customs of the Norsemen. The most coherent accounts were written later, in around 1220–1230. This was a time when Christianity had taken over as the dominant belief system. In his work the Prose Edda the Icelandic chieftain and poet Snorri Sturluson presented the Norsemen's pantheon and concept of the cosmos.

The Poetic Edda also offers a window into the supernatural world of the Norsemen. The author was probably the Icelandic chieftain Saemunder Sigfusson (1056–1133). Certain researchers maintain that many of the poems in the Poetic Edda derive from the Viking Age and that they may have been retold since even further back in time.

Attributes of the gods

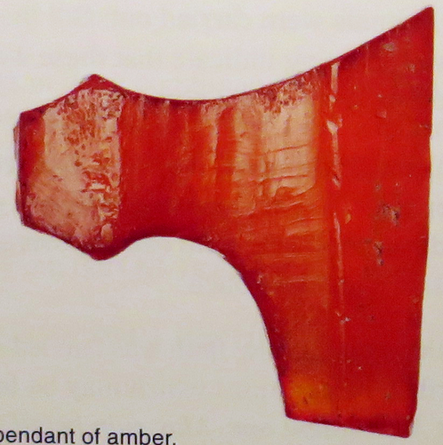
Many amulets resemble objects which are associated with specific gods. Small, miniature sickles refer to the god of fertility, Frey. The pendant in the shape of a fire striker is associated with the Aesir god Thor. He would summon lighting and rain which guaranteed regrowth and good harvests. Axes may be associated with the same god, Thor – even though his most well-known attribute was a hammer.

In his work the Prose Edda, Snorri Sturluson writes that the mythological world was populated with gods and giants. There were two kinds of gods, the Aesir and the Vanir, and they lived in Asgard. The giants lived outside, in Jotunheim.

Gods and giants have a lot in common. They behave like humans, they both fight with each other and get along peacefully. In the stories there are many examples of them having sex with each other, thus creating new beings.

The world of the gods is similar to that of humans. The central characters are complex. The stories often have to do with the conflict between chaos and order. With Thor at their head, the gods keep the forces of chaos – giants and terrible monsters – at bay.

The myths may be read as poetic depictions of humanity' striving towards order and meaning in existence.



Pendant. Axe-shaped pendant of amber. Found at excavations in 1826. Settlement find, Svarta Jorden, Birka, Adelsö Parish, Uppland. Object number: 420407_HST

Relics became traded goods

Trade in and worship of relics became an important feature of the Christian cult, including in Scandinavia. Parts of the skeletons of saints and small chips of wood allegedly from the cross of Jesus were preserved in caskets or capsules.

They could also be placed in hollow crucifixes, engolpions, which were worn around the neck. These reliquaries were often made of silver or gold.

Offerings gave protection

Different types of boundary and transitions – ditches, burial mounds, thresholds and post-holes in buildings – were significant. The same is true of geographical features, such as hills, glacial erratics, steep cliff faces, bare rocks, marshes and seashores. These places were viewed as zones where two or more concepts of existence could meet.

They became natural sites for offerings, where objects thought to be full of power were placed. Many hoards with silver objects have been found in such borderlands. The aim of placing such offerings was to ensure oneself of protection and prosperity.

Sami cult practice in borderlands

Elements of the Sámi people's ceremonies and cult worship took place at sacred sites outdoors. For example where land met water – on beaches and shores – or where earth met sky – high up in the mountains. That is, in similar types of borderlands as in the Old Norse tradition.

The divine phenomenon, sáiva, which lived in a parallel world to that of humans, was seen as protector of the sacred sites. Stones or rocks with eye-catching shapes, known as seidas, symbolised divine power. The seidas were shrines and sacrificial sites. They were smeared with blood and fat and worshipped.

In Sámi regions there are examples of buried bears and elks from ancient times, which indicates that animals were worshipped and mythologised. There are also thousands of sacred sites which are known to belong to the Sámi culture. The sacrifice sites belonged to the men; the women were not allowed to approach them, and neither were strangers.

Men of the church took power and position

For those with power, Christianity could bring great benefits. The men of the church were often educated on the European continent. They were good administrators and community builders, which gave them a strong position.

A Christian king in Scandinavia, who received support from the Holy Roman Emperor and the Catholic Church had great opportunity to become a stronger ruler than the previous local kings. They could assume new rights and use more effective means of power. Something that was not appreciated by those in the aristocracy who were not in the King's favour.

The shift in religions meant that the days of the kin-based society were numbered. In the long term, the new social order, based on a Christian thinking, was incompatible with the old customs.

Missionaries came to Scandinavia to spread the Christian teachings. As early as the 9th century Ansgar was preaching in Birka on the island of Björkö in Lake Mälaren. He came from Bremen in present day Germany, the North European headquarters of the Catholic Church. Ansgar's missionary work appears to have made slow progress, but nevertheless became known as the Apostle of the North.

Three gods of fertility

The Vanir were gods of fertility. In his work the Prose Edda, Snorri Sturluson recounted how they were held as hostages in the home of the Aesir, Asgard, following a war between the Aesir and the Vanir at the beginning of time.

He tells that there were only three of them: Njord, his son Frey and his daughter Freya. Snorri does not reveal much to us about Njord, but he does tell us more about Frey and Freya.

Frey can bring good harvests, healthy cattle and peace. He lives in Alfheim. He owns the ship Skidbladnir which always sails with a tailwind. Skidbladnir is so big that there is space on board for all the Aesir gods, but it can also be folded up like a cloth and placed in a small bag. He also owns the horse Blodighov and the golden boar Gullinbursti.

Freya rules over fertility and is invoked during pregnancy and giving birth. Freya is a skilful magician with power over life and death. She teaches sorcery to the Aesir. She is also a goddess of combat and is counted as the foremost of the Valkyries. As such she takes half of the men who have died in battle, housing them in her field, Folkvang.

Freya often travels in a chariot drawn by cats. According to the myth she obtained the enchanted piece of jewellery called Brísingamen by having sex with the four dwarves who made it.



Crucifix. Silver crucifix pendant with filigree. The Christ figure is tied not nailed to the cross. The pendant is often referred to as the ”Birka Crucifix”. Design and technique reveal that it is Scandinavian craftwork and it appears to be one of the oldest crucifixes in Scandinavia. Grave find, Birka, Bj 660, Adelsö Parish, Uppland. Object number: 108914_HST



Pendant. Round silver pendant shaped like a female figure, partly covered by a ring. The woman is pregnant and is standing with legs apart, hands clasped under her stomach. There is much to suggest that the pendant represents the goddess Freya, who, as well as being regarded as the foremost of the Valkyries was also invoked during pregnancy and childbirth. Grave find, Aska, Hagebyhöga Parish, Östergötland. Object number: 107873_HST

The Aesir – the gods of the aristocracy

The Aesir gods had very complex personalities, including being shape-shifters, able to transform themselves into animals.

Odin is first among the Aesir, a god of war, wisdom and death. Odin and Frigg are married. Together with his brothers Váli and Ve, Odin created the world from the corpse of the giant Ymir. He has only one eye, after having given up the other eye so as to receive more wisdom, and he hung for nine nights in the world tree Yggdrasil to learn the art of the runes and magic.

Odin is the main character in many of the songs in the Poetic Edda and is described in detail by Snorri Sturluson. Odin had children with both Asynjur (Aesir goddesses) and giantesses.

He lives in Valhalla, which is located in the middle of Asgard, where half of the men who have fallen in battle come. Odin’s ravens Hugin (thought) and Munin (memory) work as his scouts. He rides the eight-legged horse Sleipnir and wields the spear Gungnir. The day Wednesday is named after Odin who is primarily the god of aristocrats and the elite.

Frigg protects marriage and all mothers. She is married to Odin, but also has many other partners. Just like the Vanir goddess Freya, Frigg is a sorceress and mistress of the magical arts. She is a Valkyrie and can take the shape of a falcon, enabling her to move about rapidly in the air. The day Friday is named after Frigg and her home is called Fensalir (”fen halls” or ”halls in the marsh”).

Thor rules over the elements: thunder, lightning and rain. He is the son of Odin, and husband of Sif. Thor is more forthright and decisive than Odin. He is impulsive, is moved quickly to anger and is exceptionally strong, with a huge appetite and thirst. He lives in a part of Asgard called Thrudvang, in a hall named Bilskirnir.

He has several magical objects. As well as his hammer Mjölnir (the grinder), with which he fought the giants, he has a power belt, Megingjord, which makes him twice as strong. A pair of strong iron gloves helps him keep a grip on his hammer. In the fight against chaos, whether in the form of giants or of other monsters and perils, he protects the gods and humans alike. The day Thursday is named after Thor.



Statuette. Cast bronze male figure with upturned moustache and pointed goatee beard. He is wearing a pointed hat, possibly a helmet. Some believe the figure was deliberately depicted with a deformed, damaged eye. Thus representing the Aesir god Odin, who sacrificed one eye in order to drink from the well of the giant Mímir. Others believe that the 'damage' occurred during casting. Stray find in a gravel pit, Lindby, Svenstorp Parish, Skåne. Object number: 109043_HST

Staff-bearers could see into the future

Women in the Viking Age could be very influential, even though the majority of them had no formal power. Some aristocratic women were thought to be able to direct fate, and they were feared. Such knowledge was attributed to both real and mythological women.

One mythological entity was the seeress. She had the ability to predict the future. This magical ability was called to "sejda". A clear example of this is the poem Prophecy of the Seeress which opens the literary work the Poetic Edda. There the seeress prophesises Ragnarök, the downfall of the world of both gods and humans.

The Old Norse word for seeress, völva, was probably related to the word vǫlur, meaning staff. A völva is a staff-bearer, and the staff was the tool she would use to prophesise. A few staffs have been found in the graves of women. These finds confirm that seeresses did exist. But what their position and function in society was, is unclear.

The collections of the Swedish History Museum contain a handful of similar staffs that may have been used by seeresses. They are made of metal with a braided, basket like construction at the top. The most splendid one is from Klinta on Öland.

The position of the seeresses in society is a point of contention. They rarely appear in the oldest Edda poems or in runic inscriptions, which may be interpreted as meaning they mostly moved on the edges of society, outside aristocratic circles. Perhaps their ability to predict the future made them feared individuals. Their most important function appears to have been to predict coming events, rather than being spiritual cult leaders.

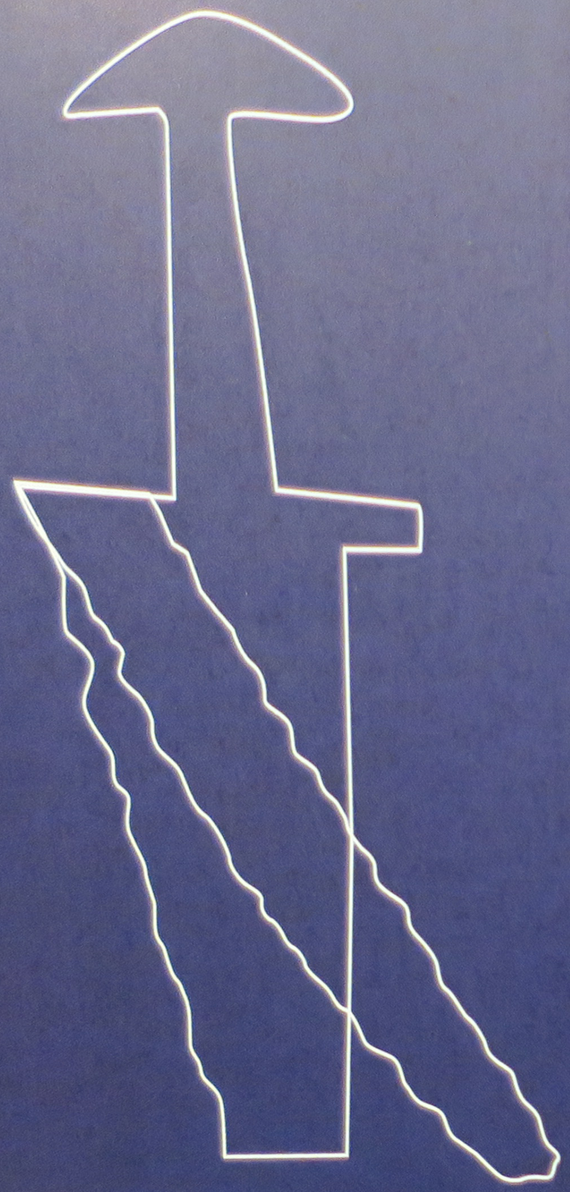


Figurine. Amber figurine of a sitting cat. Cats were Freya's special attribute animal and were said to have drawn her chariot. Settlement find, Svarta Jorden, Birka, Adelsö Parish, Uppland. Object number: 267204_HST



Staff. Iron staff with copper and bronze details. The Swedish History Museum's collection contains a handful of similar staffs, the one from Klinta is the most elaborate. The staff is crowned by a small house on a rectangular plate - one of few contemporary, three-dimensional depictions of a Viking Age house. The staff is 82 centimeters long, originally it was longer. It has been bent in a couple of places, perhaps to take away its power before it was driven diagonally down into the grave. Grave find, Klinta, Köping Parish, Öland. Object number: 107776_HST





THE LIVING AND THE DEAD

MOST PEOPLE WERE BURIED CLOSE TO THE FARMSTEAD

Many different ideas about death and the next life existed. Archaeological investigations of graves show that the way the burial was conducted, and the accompanying ceremonies varied from region to region. And between those who followed the Old Norse customs and those who viewed themselves as Christians.

In the Norse tradition it was most common to cremate, to burn, the dead. The idea was that their souls or spirits had to be released from their body so that they could be transported to a kind of realm of the dead.

The Christians, on the other hand, believed that the body was necessary in paradise. The way in which Jesus died on the cross and was subsequently buried was a template. Therefore, the body could not be destroyed by fire.

Regardless of the faith of the deceased or the survivors, the great majority were buried close to home, on the farmstead. Christian graveyards were not instituted until the last part of the 11th century, when the first churches were built.

Four scenes in stone

The picture stone from Tängelgårda on the island of Gotland is divided into four depicted scenes. Together they tell a story.

At the top is the battlefield. Warriors battle with swords, while eagles and crows tear into the soldiers who have fallen. Below a lavish burial is portrayed. The fallen warrior is lying on Sleipnir, Odin's eight-legged horse. Sleipnir is a symbol of the pallbearers, the four men who carry the deceased on a bier in the funeral procession.

The next scene shows the deceased riding into Odin's hall, Valhalla. In his hand he has his oath ring, on which he has sworn eternal loyalty to Odin. A Valkyrie with a drinking horn welcomes him. Under the horse are three eternity symbols, triquetras. Around the man we see his relatives who – like the deceased – are holding rings in their hands. Similar representations of Valhalla appear on many other picture stones from Gotland.

The whole of the lower field is taken up by a ship, an important symbol in burials.

In archaeological excavations, gold rings are found much less frequently than silver rings. Gold and silver are found separate from one another which suggests that the metals have different functions. Gold hoards consisted mostly of only rings. Silver was the metal for payment while gold was a mystical metal.

The dead were a part of the living society

Most excavated cremation graves are similar. When the funeral pyre died down the burnt bones of the deceased and of the sacrificial animals, burned objects, charred soil and pieces of charcoal were moved together to create a thick cremation layer.

Parts of the remains and other remnants were put in a ceramic urn which was placed in the cremation layer. Often larger fragments of bone from the deceased's skull and other larger bones were deliberately selected.

Small fragments from humans and animals, plus burnt remnants of personal objects were left in the cremation layer, outside the urn. Combs were important – they have been found in most graves. After that the arrangement was covered with one or several layers of stones, on which soil was placed.

Family mounds were burial sites situated alongside farmsteads and used for long periods of time. Deposits and new burials often happened adjacent to, or in a relative's grave. Sometimes these events took place shortly after each other. In other cases decades or even centuries went by between the burials.

The Old Norse sagas are full of tales of how to contact the dead in the burial mound and how to protect oneself against the dead who walked again with evil intent. One way was to sit on the grave at night.

Burials were also a form of interaction between the living and the dead. They required a great deal of work, knowledge of customs and practices, planning and logistics. This regardless of whether the deceased was buried intact in a coffin or chamber or was cremated on a pyre.



Picture stone. Divided into four fields that recount parts of a story. Tängelgårda, Fånggården, Lärbro parish, Gotland. Object number: 108186_HST

The rituals affected the living and the dead

The rituals surrounding cremation had a clear purpose in Old Norse customs. They had an effect both on the dead in the next life and on the survivors after the burial.

Animal sacrifices were common. The number of animals sacrificed can tell us about the social standing of the deceased. The animals most frequently sacrificed were dogs, cats and poultry.

The dog may be interpreted as a kind of psychopomp, a being which escorted the soul over the boundary to the next life. Perhaps the dog sacrifices represented Garm, the guardian of the underworld.

The cat was the animal of the goddess, sorceress and seer Freya. Freya's chariot was drawn by cats.

The poultry can be associated with striving to see into the future or to make contact with "the other side". An eyewitness account from the 10th century describes how a slave woman was to be burned in order to follow her dead owner into the grave. But before this happened, she cut off the head of a hen and threw it onto the burning pyre. She then saw her dead relatives and her master calling to her.

Different regions had different rituals. In the easternmost parts of modern-day central Sweden, and on the island of Åland there was a tradition in the 10th and 11th century of making an amulet ring and placing it atop or around the urn containing the burnt remains. These were known as Thor's hammer rings. From them would hang one or several miniature hammers and sometimes other types of pendants.

Returning from the underworld by boat?

Iron boat rivets are commonly found in cremation graves. In some graves there are so many rivets that it appears as if the deceased was burned in a whole boat.

To burn a whole ship, which the ritual might have prescribed, would have been expensive. Just a few rivets might also represent a whole boat. Was this a way of creating symbolic ship burials and of expressing the cultural significance of boats? Women and men of different ages were buried in boat graves.

The custom of boat graves might be connected to a tale from the Prose Edda about the god Balder, his burial and travel to the underworld. Balder was cremated in his ship in front of the other gods.

Golden horses and swords

Headstalls, bridle details and harness bow mounts for horses have been found in many aristocratic graves. These objects are often cast in bronze, gilded and ornamented.

One splendid example is a headstall and bridle from a grave at Broa in the parish of Halla on the island of Gotland. The grave contained the remains of a man, his horse and dog and weapons and other equipment.

The horse's headstall had been ornamented with around twenty gilded mounts, in a gripping beast style which takes its name from the site where it was found, Broa style.

The sword, which was broken into pieces, had a gilded hilt with geometrical ornamentation surrounded by Scandinavian animal ornamentation. The man's belt or baldric had a round link for four hanging mounts.



Bridle. Decorated horse bridles made with 21 differently shaped, gilded and richly ornamented bronze mounts on a leather strapping and an accompanying iron bit. Five of the gilded mounts are decorated in relief in a gripping-beast style called Broa style, named after the place they were found. Grave find, Broa, Gotland. Object number: 107213_HST

The survivors opened graves

Sometimes graves would be reopened by the survivors. This is called, literally translated, a mound breach. The target seems to have often been human remains rather than high value objects.

The traces indicate that those who dug into the graves knew how to reach what wanted with least possible effort. This suggests that the mound breach took place very soon after the interment. The boat grave at Årby in Uppland is one example.

The grave was reopened at the stern of the boat, where the deceased was located. Virtually the whole body was taken out of the grave. All that was left were individual bones from one arm and one hand, one kneecap and four cervical vertebrae. The body was probably not fully decomposed when the breach was carried out. That meant that it was easy to pick the desired parts of the body out of the grave. The fact that the remaining vertebrae were anatomically correctly positioned when the grave was discovered in the 1930's, supports this idea.

The grave is from around the year 900. The boat is relatively small, about four metres long. Despite the damage, it is one of the best preserved from the era.

The Valkyries welcomed the fallen to Valhalla

Valhalla is Odin's hall, the most well-known of the pre-Christian underworlds. Into this "hall of the slain" Odin admits half of the warriors chosen by the Valkyries. The notion of Valhalla mostly belonged to aristocrats and warriors.

The mythology around the Valkyries is partly associated with women of high station. In Valhalla the Valkyries welcomed the warriors with drinking horns in their hand: in the hall of the worldly chieftains it would be the role of the mistress of the house to welcome the guests with a drinking ceremony in this way.



Pendant. Silver pendant depicting a female figure moving froward and holding out a drinking horn. The pendant has usually been interpreted as a Valkyrie welcoming a fallen warrior to Valhalla with a horn of mead. But it could equally well be an aristocratic lady of the house at a drinking ceremony. Stray find, Klinta, Köping Parish, Öland. Object number: 108864_HST

Valhalla was a mythical equivalent to a temporal aristocratic hall, but immensely larger and more lavish. The hall had 540 doors, all wide enough for 800 einherjar – fallen warriors – to pass through at the same time.

At Odin's great feasts the fallen warriors were given meat from the boar Sarimner, who was slaughtered everyday but rose again, just as fat and opulent, the next morning. From the Valkyries they received the mead which ran constantly from the teats of the goat Heidrun.

In Valhalla the einherjar were trained by Odin in preparation for the final battle at Ragnarok. Every day they would practise. No matter how badly wounded the participants were, they always recovered the next day.

The path to Hel

A third underworld in Old Norse poetry, apart from Folkvang and Valhalla, is Hel. The name means "the hidden".

In contrast to the Christian inferno, Hel was a place where it was eternally cold. The path to the underworld, which went "downward and northward", is described as ice-covered and slippery. This led to the tradition of "binding Hel-shoes", shoes with spikes, onto the deceased. These have been found in many excavated graves.

The ruler of Hel is herself also called Hel. She is "half blue, half the colour of a corpse". Hel's realm is guarded by the hellhound Garm, who lives in the cave Gnipahellir at the entrance to the underworld.

A funeral pyre with ritual drama

At some point during the first half of the 10th century a great funeral pyre burned at Klinta, outside the trading centre Köpingsvik on the island of Öland. In a ship drawn up from the beach lay a woman and a man, wrapped in bearskins, along with sacrificed animals and objects.

The woman was wearing three gilded brooches and a lavish set of almost 200 beads of glass, carnelian and rock crystal. She also wore a pendant and two small copper plates inscribed with runes. Two large pairs of sheep shears and two iron keys hung from a silver chain.

The man's attire is more difficult to have an idea of, but his shirt or coat had small, gilded bronze buttons. A number of gilded strap end mounts show that he also wore one or a several belts.

The remnants of the funeral pyre were divided up over two areas of about 5 square metres. One on the fire area, the other a short distance away.

Among the remnants were soot, burnt parts of the boat, fragments of objects and remains of the two people and of animals. On top of these two layers lay an Islamic silver coin. Up to this point the rituals for the two areas were similar. After that, differences start to appear.

Where the funeral pyre had burnt a hole was dug straight through the layer of remnants from the pyre. At the bottom a ceramic urn was placed containing burnt remains and other remnants. Next to the urn a strangled hen was placed. The hole was then filled with remnants from the pyre and other rare objects.

An axe was driven down blade first and beside it was placed a large copper pot, made in Persia or east of the Caspian Sea. Then a metre long iron staff was placed diagonally into the hole, maybe a seeresses staff, a som called völva staff. It is cracked and bent, as if it had been deliberately deformed. It also has fire damage but not as much as the other objects and was probably not in the funeral pyre.

Boat. The Ärby boat is a small rowing boat which, before being used for a boat grave, was sailed on lakes and other small water courses. The boat is just over four metres long and made of oak and spruce. It was equipped with a pair of oars and a longer steering oar. The stern and the starboard side were severely damaged during the possible plundering of the grave. Grave find. Ärby, Rasbokil Parish, Uppland. Object number: 107470_HST

The hole and the arrangement were covered with remnants from the pyre. Later, a cairn of stones and boulders was built over everything.

Those parts of the cremation layer which were moved a little to one side were arranged differently. The burnt remains of humans and animals were placed in a large cask. On top of the remains were placed 18 semi-circular shaped gaming pieces.

Finally, an iron sword was broken in half. The lower half, with the blade, was placed lying on the cremation layer. The upper part, the sword handle, was driven diagonally down through the centre of the cremation layer. To cover all this, the survivors chose in this case a mound of soil and peat.

The burial followed a ritual whose significance we can only guess but not completely understand. Was the destruction of the sword and the staff a way of preventing their powers from being used again?

Freya's hall for fallen warriors

Half of the slain warriors were chosen by the Valkyries for the goddess Freya. She was the goddess of love and fertility, but she also had a darker side as the goddess of war and was the foremost among the Valkyries.

Freya took the fallen warriors to her home Folkvang, with its beautiful hall Sessrumne.

The descriptions of Freya's home and what awaited the slain warriors there are scantier than those which tell of what took place at Valhalla. This may be a result of the accounts of Freya and her home not having survived the subsequent editing by the Christian chroniclers. From the Christian viewpoint Freya was seen as uninhibited and "immoral".

The name Folkvang means field of the people or plain of the army.

The path to the Christian paradise

To reach the Christian paradise the soul was thought to have to go on a long and dangerous journey. The obstacles were many.

Around paradise flowed a dark, sulphurous river, full of sharp iron spikes. The only way to cross it was to balance one's way over a small footbridge. The unrighteous souls would tumble into the river from the bridge or be forced to wade across. The righteous crossed unhindered to the other side.

Objects which might help the deceased reach paradise have been found in many Viking Age graves. Some are simple, such as a sharp iron object to ward off evil. Others are more lavish. A bronze key with a decorated shaft may symbolise the keys to the gates of heaven belonging to St Peter, the disciple of Jesus.

In some graves on Birka French wine pitchers, decorated with the Christian cross in tin leaf have been found. Perhaps they were used during the vigil for the deceased.

In the east Nordic area, in modern-day Finland, they used the term soul birds. These would lead the dead to paradise, in the same way as the dog did in the Old Norse burial traditions. Soul birds included different types of water birds and gulls. Perhaps the small gull-like bird from Birka, carved from bone, is one such soul bird.

To kill an object

Many burial rituals included deliberately destroying weapons, often a sword or a spear. Other objects thought to give power and strength were sometimes given the same treatment when they were deposited in the grave.

Reasons for this destruction are open to debate. To literally and symbolically take the power away from the objects may have been a way of stopping them from being used again. By the deceased owners or by someone who might in the future dig up their graves.

A place where many weapon deposits have been found, and which does not have any clear association with known graves in the vicinity, is Gudingsåkrarna in the parish of Vallstena on the island of Gotland. Over the years, almost 500 weapons have been ploughed or dug up there. Most of these were spears, many also deliberately destroyed.

Important positioning of the body in the grave

In early Christian graves it was important how the body was positioned. The deceased was laid supine, with the arms along the side or folded in over the body, or on the side, as if sleeping.

Laying the body like this was a way of showing faith in a physical resurrection and that the time in the grave was expected to be short.

Individual rituals and winged sacrifices

When powerful people died they would be buried together with exclusive objects. The rituals at the burials were individually designed for them and the dead were given many animal sacrifices. This was a way of showing their social standing. One example of this is the Skopintull grave mound at Hovgården on the island of Adelsö in Uppland.

The remnants after the funeral pyre covered an area of over 70 square metres. At least one man and one woman, along with 25 animals – whole or in parts – were cremated on the pyre.

At least four different urns with cremated remains were found in the grave mound. Two of the deposits stand out in terms of the nature and choice of the burial goods for the rituals. One consisted of a copper bucket with a braid of human hair over 30 centimetres in length in the bottom. The other is a common clay pot with a chicken's egg at the very bottom. These objects may be interpreted as a wish for strength and rebirth.



WATERWAYS

SHIPS WERE NEEDED FOR THE VOYAGES

The sea walls, and the Wave-Borne
Bears bright froth o'er the red wood,
Where gapes the Roller's Brown Ox,
With mouth gold-ornamented.

The poet Torleif fager writes about the waves, from Snorri Sturlason's Skáldskaparmál.

Ships were necessary for the Vikings' voyages over the seas. Today they continue to be strong symbols of the age. In the Norse literary sources ships are often referred to with "kennings", figures of speech in poetic or epic form. "Sea-steed ", "Wave-horse", "Sail-horse" and "Sea-ski" are some of the most common.

Settlements, trading centres and administrative centres were almost always located near lakes, waterways and sailing routes. Making journeys on land was difficult and dangerous, not least in the snow, slush and darkness of winter. Open or frozen water was the natural route of communication. Harbours and docks became important junctions, where people, goods and ideas from near and far came together.

Ships depicted on stones

The ships illustrated on picture stones from Gotland appear to be of different sizes. The number of people in the crew varies from a handful to more than ten.

The shields hanging along the gunwales plus the fact that the men are armed suggest that the purpose of the trips was not peaceful. Many of the ships also have a dragon's head or other figurehead at the prow.

Unlike on the picture stones of Gotland, ships almost never appear as motifs on Viking Age runestones. The reason is doubtless that picture stones and runestones were set up in different environments and with different purposes. Both categories may be viewed as monuments.

The wordless narratives and motifs of the picture stones are clearly based in the world of mythology, whereas the inscriptions on the runestones tell of personal qualities and deeds and the motifs reflect both religious and mythological trends.

Ship finds in water and in graves

There have been a relatively large number of archaeological finds of ships and boats in Scandinavia. Some were found in burial mounds on land, others under water. The ships found under water were deliberately sunk in order to function as barriers or as filling in the harbour.

A number of wrecks have been found in Roskilde Fjord in Denmark. One of these is a longship made in Dublin, Ireland during the 9th century.

During the excavation of the Viking town of Hedeby, in modern day northern Germany, a fire-damaged longship, 31 metres long with 30 pairs of oars was found. It is slender, with a shallow draft and a low freeboard. Analyses of the wood in the ship revealed that it was built in the year 985.

In Sweden, finds of ships without fire-damage are rare. Only one has been found, the Äskekärr ship. It is a knarr, but unfortunately it is very fragmented.

More boats of smaller size, around 8–12 metres long, have been found in graves. Often, they are almost completely decomposed, but their form is made visible in the excavated grave by their iron rivets. It is these rivets that were used to join together the strake planks of the boats or ships.



Rope. Bast fibre rope. Well preserved overhand knot, though the strands are loose. Found in the bottom sediment, in the waters outside Birka, Adelsö Parish, Uppland. Object number: 3002039_HST

Ships reconstructed thanks to many finds

Many types of objects associated with ships and seafaring have been found. For example, different kinds of rigging equipment, belaying pins, shroud pins, and accessories such as hooks, buoys and fragments of cordage and rope.

Thanks to the archaeological finds it has been possible to reconstruct Viking ships, and to research their seaworthiness and sailing characteristics. It has been possible to understand more about life on board and what resources shipbuilding required.

On board the long narrow warships there was minimal space for non-essentials. The spacious knarrs were better suited to settlers who could transport cargoes of cattle and equipment.

Knarrs and other commercial ships could perhaps maintain an average speed of 6 to 8 knots. But speed was dependent on the type of boat and the cargo. The warships could take advantage of their oarsmen to make them much quicker.

Pictures show ships with sails

There are contemporary representations of the ships of the time on many Gotland picture stones. There are also pictures of ships on some coins, on the occasional weight and in the form of simple engravings on other objects.

The depictions show almost exclusively ships with sails. Some of the picture stones are so detailed that they have been used to reconstruct and understand sailing techniques.

When sailing was introduced in Scandinavia is unclear, but the picture stones show that ships with sails were used at least since the beginning of the 9th century. From this time there are archaeological finds of boats that show signs of being equipped with a mast.



Coin. Nordic silver coin minted around 825, probably in the Jutland trading centre of Ribe. On the reverse of the coin there is a naturalistic boat, with shields along the gunwale. Grave find, Johannishus, Hjortsberga Parish, Blekinge. Object number: 300049_HST

WATERWAYS

From longship to karvi

In Egil Skallagrimsson's saga several boats are named. Longships were fast warships which were also called drakkar (meaning dragon or serpent). The longship could be 20–40 metres long, with space for 50–100 armed men. These warships were fast thanks to their long narrow shape and the large number of oarsmen. Another, smaller type of warship was called snekkja.

Other types of ships named in the saga are karvi and knarr , which were mostly used for different kinds of cargo transport. The knarr was the largest cargo ship, with a deep draft and high sides. It was suitable for journeys over open sea and could transport cattle and other necessities when the Vikings settled the islands in the North Atlantic.

Probably none of the above types of boat were used for the eastward journeys, to the Gardariki in modern-day Russia, where the journeys went via the river systems. These journeys required smaller boats.

A weathervane was placed at the top of the ship's mast. They could be ornamented with dragon or animal motifs, many were gilded and partially perforated. This suggests that the vanes had another purpose, perhaps as field signs or standards.

Traces of ships preserved in the silt

In the muddy bottom sediment in the waters outside Birka on the island of Björkö in Lake Mälaren the conditions for preserving organic material are optimal. A number of objects linked to repairs and maintenance of ships and boats have been found there.

One example is the wooden rivets. These were used in shipbuilding to attach the planks on the side of the boat. Attaching planks with wooden trunnels was undoubtedly common. But in the ships found in the earth the trunnels are generally decayed.

Using bits of wood rather than iron was a technique that was used by boat builders active along the southern coast of the Baltic Sea. The discovery of wooden rivets outside Birka gives an indication of the contacts the town had to the east.



Toggle. Wooden toggle. A toggle is a type of fastening pin fixed to the end of a rope. Toggles were common in the rigging on ships and were also used for other purposes. Found in the bottom sediment of the waters outside Birka, Adelsö Parish, Uppland. Object number: 3001990_HST

27,000 hours to build a ship

In the first decade of the 21st century a reconstruction was made of the 30-metre-long warship Skulderlev 2, which was found in Roskilde Fjord in Denmark.

The work took 27,000 hours, of which about 14,000 were devoted to cutting, shaping and transporting the timber. The actual construction of the ship took about 10,000 hours. A construction team of one master and ten builders could have built a ship of this size in about seven months.

The reconstruction required enormous amounts of natural resources. In addition to 150 cubic metres of oak timber, 7,000 rivets were made from approximately 400 kilos of iron, which in turn required the production of a large amount of charcoal. In addition, 18 cubic metres of pine wood for tar production was needed, along with 2,000 metres of hand-made plant-fibre rope, cordage, and 120 square metres of sail.

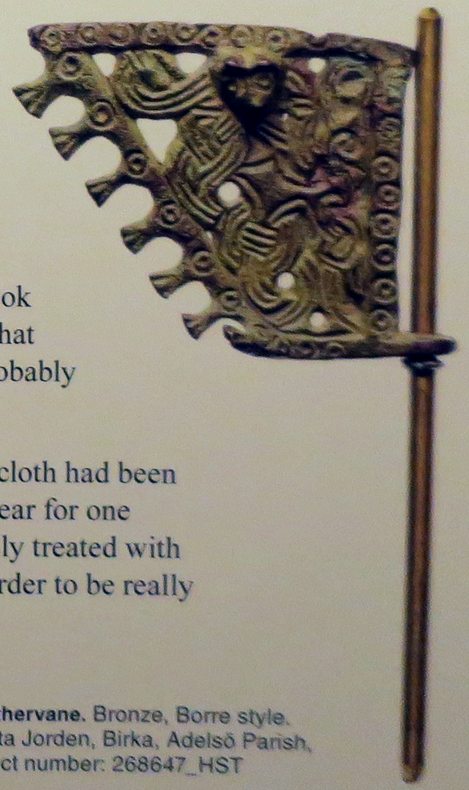
The result was a ship which could be rowed at 5 to 6 knots or sailed at a top speed of 10 knots and an average speed of 7 knots. At this speed the ship could sail from Scandinavia to Great Britain in a few days.

Time-consuming sail making

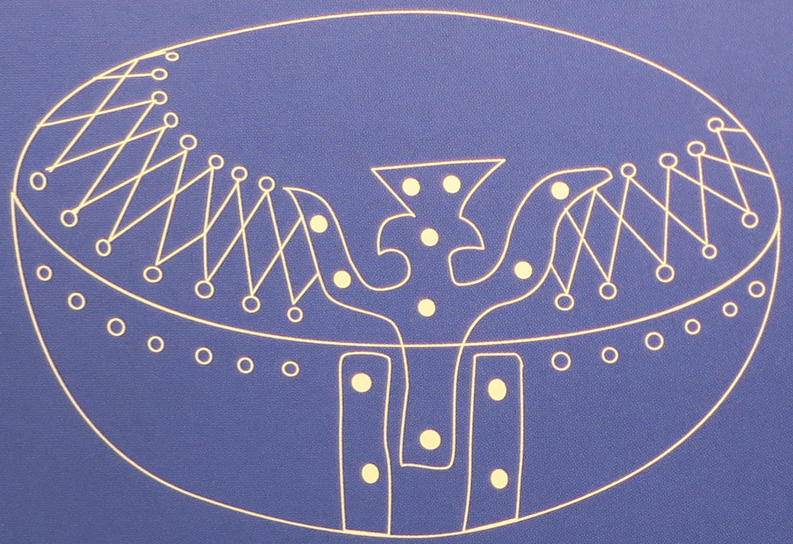
To make a sail is almost as big a job as building the boat. The material was wool or in a few cases hemp. Taking into account how much time and material was needed, a good number of people must have been involved over a long period of time.

For a sail of about 100 square metres, wool from about 225 long-haired sheep was needed. To prepare and spin the approximately 300,000 metres of yarn took 1,250 days, (almost 3 1/2 years for one person). And that is assuming a 12-hour working day. The work was probably shared between a number of people to reduce time.

After that, the loom would be warped. When the sail cloth had been woven, which probably would have taken about one year for one person, it would be fulled and sewn together and finally treated with fat, grease or some other water repellent material in order to be really waterproof.



Miniature weathervane. Bronze, Borre style. Found at Svarta Jorden, Birka, Adelsö Parish, Uppland. Object number: 268647_HST



TRADING AND RAIDING

EXPEDITIONS TO ALL POINTS OF THE COMPASS

The Norsemen's expeditions started during the 8th century. They travelled to what is now north-west Russia, which they called Gardariki, to the lands beyond the Black and Caspian Seas, to Byzantium and the Muslim caliphate.

In the west, in the end of the 8th century, they raided the British Isles, the North Sea coast and the Frankish Empire. During the beginning and the middle of the 9th century a number of Viking fleets travelled south, along the coast of the Iberian Peninsula. And all the way they raided the shores. It seems that trade and plunder were closely related.

Many of the trading sites in Scandinavia were raided and plundered. On the Continent and in the British Isles, monasteries and churches were also financial centres, which was one reason why they also were targets for raiding parties.

At its greatest, the world of the Vikings stretched from Iran in the east to Greenland and North America in the west, and from the North Atlantic islands in the north to the Mediterranean and North Africa in the south.

Prestigious weapons

Weapons were important for those who would go out on a "Viking". The sword was the most prestigious weapon. They were often designed with beauty in mind.

High quality sword blades and spears might be damasked, that is, decorated with a number of melded layers of iron and steel of different quality. When the blade was polished an intricate design would appear. The sword hilt had details in precious metal or bronze.

In the case of the spear, it was mainly the handle that was decorated, with a relief pattern directly in the iron or with "tauschering", a kind of metal inlay. This involved hammering thin threads of silver, copper or brass in flutes into the surface. The thread created geometric patterns. Another method was to cover the entire surface with hammered silver and to engrave inlays which were filled with a black substance, niello. Most of the weapons were not so lavish. The main thing was that they did their job in battle.

Frankish sword blades were particularly sought-after. The reason for this was the quality of the steel and the skilled metalwork, that made the blades easy to handle and effective in battle. The Frankish blades were so effective that in the 9th century Emperor Charles the Bald forbade the export of them to Scandinavia. This meant that they began to be copied, inscriptions and all. The Scandinavian copies were worse than the originals, but the copying itself bears witness to the fact that it was prestigious to own a Frankish blade.



Sword. Double-edged iron sword with Latin inscription on the blade: INGELRIIMEFECIT, which means "Ingelrii made me". The name is known from other swords and is, like the name ULFBERTH, a mark of quality and likely refers to the workshop where the weapon was made. Stray find in wetland (lake), Sigridsholm, Lunda Parish, Uppland. Object number: 106760_HST

Weights and scales

Weights and scales were important for trade. Small balance scales with two trays were used to weigh currency, usually silver.

A common type of weight was shot-shaped with flattened poles. On the poles the weight markings were stamped. The sinker was made of iron with an outer shell of bronze. The shell functioned as a type of insurance that no one could file off metal and make the weight less than indicated.

The weights could be arranged in sets with different sizes, creating a system of weights. There were several systems. The system used in Scandinavia was influenced by the weight system in the Muslim caliphate and the one used by the so-called Volga Bulgars in south-eastern Europe.

Large goods, such as textiles, skins and foodstuffs were weighed with the aid of a type of steelyard balance, such as besman and pundari.



Scale box. Intact bronze scale box with ornamentation on the lid. The clasp on the box is shaped like a swooping falcon. Part of a hoard find Öja Parish, Gotland. Object number: 108167_HST

Women on a viking

There is evidence in both written and archaeological sources indicating that both women and men went out on trade expeditions: they were on a "viking".

The Laxdæla Saga, a saga from the northern (Icelandic) islands, tells of Aud, nicknamed the "deep-minded". She had a ship built and fitted out. She embarked on trading expeditions, including visits to the Orkney and Faroe Islands, before she finally headed for Iceland, where she made claim to land.

In Gardariki in the east, (in what is now Russia), there are large burial grounds adjacent to Viking era trading sites such as Staraya Ladoga/Plakun, Rurikovo Gorodische and Gnyozdovo. In the graves which have been excavated, the majority of those buried are women. Many of them were buried in boats or small ships. Many artefacts in the graves are clearly linked with trade.

In Birka, on the island of Björkö in Lake Mälaren, about one third of the artefacts that may be linked to trade and financial transactions were buried together with women. These finds indicate that women were active in trade.

HANDEL OCH HÄRJNING
TRADING AND RAIDING

Prestigefyllda vapen

Many forms of payment

Silver was used as a currency and could have many forms. These include jewellery, broaches, silver rods, silver pieces and other types of objects.

A large portion of the silver used as currency consisted of imported coins. But there was no economy based on a standard currency.

The purity of the silver and how much it weighed decided its value when an item was purchased. One way of determining the authenticity and quality of the silver was to cut or "hack" into it. Coins and pieces of jewellery could also be cut up to adjust the value of the payment to the value of the merchandise. This practise is evident in the many finds of cut up coins and jewellery found in hoards.

Brutal and lucrative slave trade

During the Viking Age the slave trade in Europe grew. Taking people captive and selling them was a lucrative business.

Researchers have previously interpreted the trips east as peaceful trade journeys, contrasting with the journeys to the west. However, there are many indications that Norse people traded in humans.

Along the rivers to the east there were not as many monasteries and rich cities to attack as there were in the west. But there were a lot of people living along the riverbanks. Arab chroniclers described the Rus, the Norse people that is, as slaveowners.

People were captured during the raids on both the western and eastern routes and sold as slaves in Byzantium, as well as all around Europe and Scandinavia. Might it be that many of the buried silver hoards were originally payment for human trafficking on the slave markets?

Trading and raiding were two sides of the same coin. It is probable that the crews on board the trade expeditions comprised equal numbers of tradespeople and armed warriors.

Jewellery and weapons from the East

The Norse people's lengthy contacts eastward left traces in the form of objects such as earthenware vessels, jewellery and weapons.

One hoard found in Burge on Gotland contained one of the largest finds in Scandinavia of rectangular silver ingots, used as currency in the region of modern-day Russia.

Bone, antlers and pelts in the North

Contact and trade with the Sámi people in the North included goods made from pelts, and deer and elk antlers for making combs. The literary sources tell of "trading expeditions" up in the Arctic areas where the Sámi people were taxed.

Objects made of whalebone and walrus tusk, along with a bone from a polar bear found in the middle parts of Sweden, may be the results of such expeditions.

Trade and raiding in the West

The Vikings had contact with the western parts of Europe and the British Isles which can be seen in finds of silver coins, glass beakers, jewellery and lead weights. The fact that objects arrived in Scandinavia was doubtless the result of both raiding and trade.

Impressive beads

Polished beads of rock crystal, agate and carnelian as well as mosaic-patterned glass beads of different shapes and hues were brought back from regions around the eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea.



Dice. With concentric circle markings on the sides. Grave find, Birka, Bj 581, Adelsö Parish, Uppland. Object number: 561857_HST



Set of beads. Made of carnelian, rock crystal, amber, glass and silver foiled glass as well as three bead pendants. Most were imported from the eastern Mediterranean region. The bead pendant rings were made of twisted silver threads and each ring carries one rock crystal bead. Grave find, Birka, Bj 642, Adelsö Parish, Uppland. Object number: 470725_HST



TOWN-LIKE CENTRES

CULTURES, TRADITIONS AND RELIGIONS WERE MIXED TOGETHER

During the late 8th century a network of town-like trading centres became established in northern Europe. These were cultural meeting places and life there was different from the everyday life of a rural farmstead.

Trade and handicraft were the most important sources of income and cultivation was only possible over small areas. Therefore, these places depended on the outside world for necessities and supplies.

People with different identities, cultures, traditions and religions came together there. Some made their way there of their own free will, others were taken by force. Many different languages were spoken and various types of payment systems used.

Over time many of these places changed. Several of them were abandoned and disappeared, others developed into early towns. During later parts of the 10th century power was centralised and restructured following the Central European model. Self-appointed royal figures established themselves in some of these places and issued coins with the aim of legitimising their newly won power.

The child from Birka

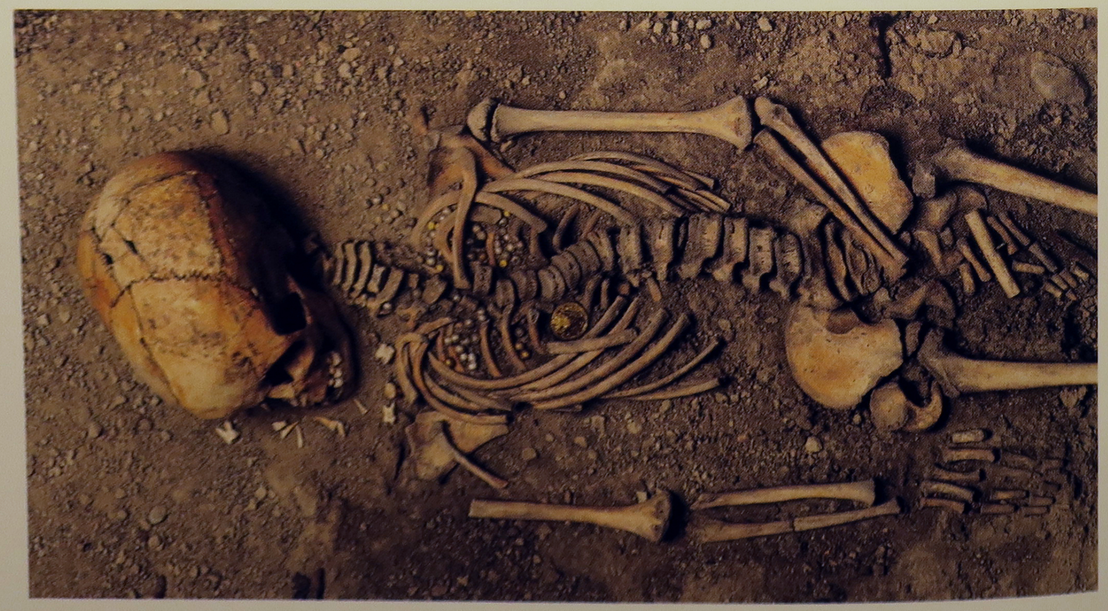
When tooth enamel from a dead person is analysed it is possible to get a picture of the person's patterns of movement. One example is the child from Birka. The 20 or so strontium samples from a milk tooth which was analysed tell us where she was born and that the first nine months of her life involved constant travel.

During this short time the child moved to and from Birka twice. The first journey was immediately after she was born somewhere in Mälardalen. Her stay in Birka was short-lived. After just two weeks she was back in the same area she came from.

She remained there for a few months. But analyses of the samples suggest that, still a baby, she was soon on her way back to Birka.

She was about five years old when she died. We know this because the length of her thighbone is the same as in other children of that age, and because the permanent front teeth in the lower jaw had not broken through. Where she stayed and what places she went to during the rest of her short life is not possible to say from the samples from her teeth. Probably it continued in the same way, with regular journeys between her home village and Birka, or another trading centre.

She was buried in Birka in a dress which links her to the role of a well-to-do woman. Like many other children, she was dressed like an adult. Her blouse or shirt was held together at the neck with a small, round, gilded brooch, ornamented in the Scandinavian style known as Borre style. Over her chest hung a set of silver and gold-leafed beads and in a belt or band around her waist she wore an iron knife and a bone needle case.



Grave. Human remains of a child buried in a coffin grave. Birka, Bj 463, Adelsö Parish, Uppland. Object number: 971046_HST

Lost silver speaks of trade

In excavations of trading centres many objects which can be linked to financial transactions have been found. For example weights, silver pieces and coins. These were probably lost by tradespeople or their customers.

It was not only silver which was used. Written sources tell us that, for example, cattle and clothing could be used as payment. These are items which rapidly decompose which makes it difficult to find traces of them. It is also difficult to find traces of barter, which was also common.

During the Viking Age there was a weight economy; all payments were made with weighed silver. Silver could be in any form whatsoever and would be cut to pieces to attain the desired weight. Small pieces of silver were called "hacksilver".

Towards the end of the period hacksilver was replaced by locally minted coinage, whose value was guaranteed by the producers, the Kings. In a monetary economy, coinage no longer needed to be weighed or tested by the user. For a long time the two systems existed side-by-side.





Balance scales. Bronze. Grave find, Långbro, Vårdinge Parish, Södermanland. Object number: 107468_HST

Poor waste management and high-risk craftwork

At the larger trading centres there are traces of mass production and trade in both everyday and luxury goods. Craftwork such as bronze casting, comb making, iron production and smithery, bead making, textile production and preparing hides was common.

Other important activities were shoemaking, tanning and other kinds of leather work, carpentry and timber work for boat and housebuilding. Craftwork was also done on the farmstead, but on a smaller scale.

Remnants of these trading sites which have been investigated, indicate poor waste management. The waste layers contain human and animal faeces, food and slaughter waste, household refuse, by-products and handicraft waste along with lost implements

and jewellery. Everything was simply dumped, both in the ditches between houses and in the water outside the settlements. The stench on warm summer days must have been unbearable. The risk of illness was much greater in this environment than on the Viking farmsteads.

Craftwork seems to have been carried out indoors, including metalwork and casting. Each house had an open hearth and both casting and bead production require high temperatures. The risk of fire was great. Archaeological investigations show that the houses had short lives and that blazes were commonplace.

Power was centralised

During the second part of the 10th century power in Scandinavia was centralised and Christianity gained more influence. This also had an impact on the large trading centres.

Sovereigns no longer built their power on the basis of old traditions. They thought of themselves as leaders of Christian dynasties, and as equal to other Christian kings on the European continent.

At the same time new administrative and Christian centres were created, near old hubs. Close to, but a reasonable distance from Uppåkra, Lund was built. The same applies to the relationship between Old Sigtuna and "new" Sigtuna, across the water on Lake Mälaren. These new places, Sigtuna and Lund, were characterised from the beginning by both royal power and Christian leaders. They were actively involved in, for example, royal estates, coin minting and church building.

For a short while, most of the trading centres had a dominant function in long-distance trade. They were part of a Scandinavian and North European maritime network and were the largest source of income for royalty.

The trading centres lost their importance during the 11th century. Many of them disappeared completely when European towns were developed into the kings' administrative centres and took their place in the trading networks.

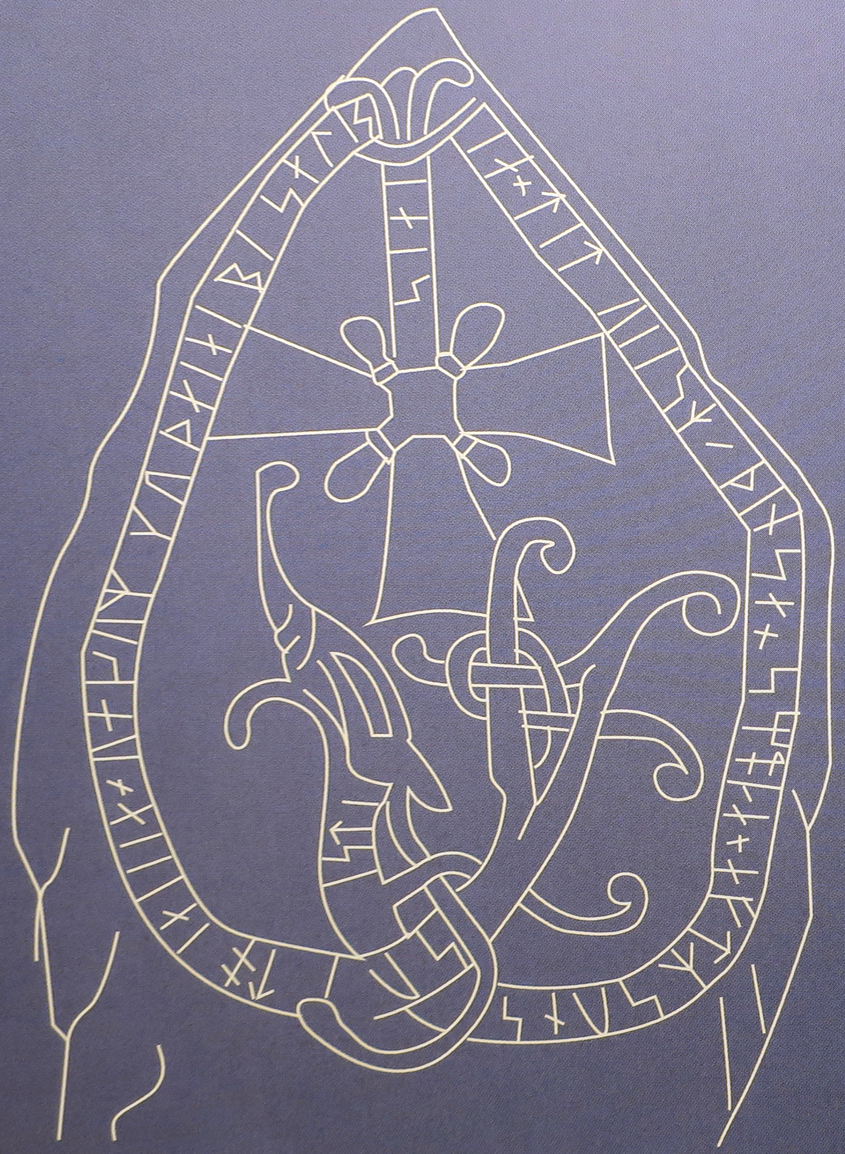


Ring-headed pin. Ring from a bronze ring-headed pin with animal decoration. Svarta Jorden, Birka, Adelsö Parish, Uppland. Object number: 268450_HST





Spindle whorl. Bone/antler spindle whorl with ring and dot decoration. Svarta Jorden, Birka, Adelsö Parish, Uppland. Object number: 270175_HST



CHRISTIAN MONUMENTS

THE NEW RELIGION GETS ITS OWN HOUSE

When the Christian faith was first introduced into Scandinavia there were no specific buildings for the new religion. Services and masses were probably held in normal houses and outdoors.

The first churches were built in the 11th century. Probably by rich families on their own land. It took many years before the Church as an organisation gained control of people and the landscape.

The churches were so-called stave churches, made of wood and built with a post and lintel technique. They were quite small with a 40 – 50 square metre longhouse, which on the eastern side was connected to a smaller, rectangular chancel.

Fragmented traces of early wooden churches have been found in a number of locations in Sweden. Most commonly in the shape of holes for wall posts. In Lund in Skåne, Klosterstad in Östergötland and on Gotland large-scale investigations of church remnants have been carried out.

The stave churches of Gotland

For a period of just over a hundred years, from the first half of the 11th century, an estimated 60 wooden churches were erected on Gotland. During the renovation of medieval stone churches sometimes traces or remnants of older wooden churches have been found. Most often wooden planks and sill beams or stone sill foundations.

Early Christian stone grave monuments

In Västergötland, Östergötland, parts of middle Sweden and on Öland, new types of grave monuments began to be used during the 11th century.

The design of the monuments varies, but all have stones with inscriptions and pictures resembling the appearance of contemporary Christian runestones. On the mainland limestone casks were common, being the length of an adult person and with stone slabs on the sides, gables and lids. It is unclear whether the grave monuments on Öland had the same appearance, since there are no definite finds of stone slabs from the sides and lids of caskets.

Most of the monuments from the early Christian period were broken up soon after they were made. Slabs were smashed and reused in other graves or for the construction of churches. The examples we know of today were found during archaeological investigations of churches or in graves around them.

The grave monuments probably stood on sites which belonged to influential relatives and where wooden churches stood or were built.



Runestone. Probably a gravestone. The main motif is two deer-like runic animals in Urnes style. The bottom edge of the stone is damaged and the inscription is incomplete, but runs '....the stones in memory of Svena, her husband...'. "Stones" in the plural suggests that the monument originally consisted of several stones, and that they comprised an early Christian tomb monument. The paint is modern but is based on what can be discerned from other stones. Resmo Church, Resmo Parish, Öland. Object number: 45168_HST