

The Vikings


Because the Viking Age only lasted around 200 years—from the very late 700s CE to about 1000 CE—records left of this period are very limited. In fact, much of what we know relies on what others wrote about them.

Most of the remaining **sources** were recorded by Christian monks in the lands Vikings invaded. They include the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. This 100 000-word document is thought to have been started about 890 CE and was added to for another 250 years. There are also the writings of the 10th-century Arabic traveller Ibn Fadlan (among others) and the Icelandic **sagas** (written after the Viking Age).

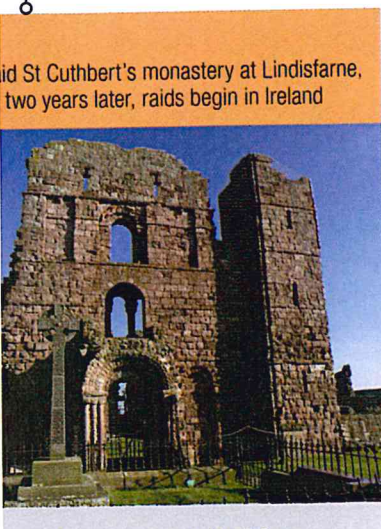
There are, however, many Viking burial mounds and **runestones**. There are also **artefacts** such as ornate wood carvings, jewellery and weapons, and the remains of their boats and settlements. These sources tell us a great deal about the way in which the Vikings lived.

799

Raids begin in France



Viking raiders arriving at coastal France in their longships



Remains of the monastery at Lindisfarne, England

834

A Viking longship called the *Oseberg* is buried as part of a Viking funeral in modern-day Norway

862

A Viking named Ulrich becomes ruler of Novgorod (in Russia); it was later the capital of the Rus Vikings (who had sailed there from today's Sweden via the major Russian rivers)

867

Viking invaders (from today's Denmark) settle in northern England (around York)

870

First Viking settlement in Ireland

878

Alfred the Great (King of Wessex) makes a treaty with Danish Vikings; they are given control of an area of eastern Britain in which to settle and trade (known as the Danelaw)

911

The King of France makes a treaty with invading Vikings led by Rollo; Vikings are given a tract of land, which becomes the Duchy of Normandy

930

First *Althing* (Norse parliament) held in Iceland

c. 950

Christian missionaries move into Denmark; the king, Harald Bluetooth, is converted 10 years later

985

Erik the Red banished from Iceland for three years for murder; he sails west and discovers Greenland

991

English king Aethelred pays Danish Vikings the first of many tax payments known as the Danegeld (Danes' gold) in a bid to stop them continuing to invade England

1066

In England, King Edward dies. Harald Godwineson is appointed king. Another contender, William of Normandy, defeats Godwineson at the Battle of Hastings (Hastings was known at the time as Senlac Hill) and becomes King of England.

Artist's impression of the Battle of Hastings, showing the Norman cavalry advancing on the Saxons. Harald Godwineson, thought by many to have died when an arrow pierced his eye, is depicted in the foreground.

1042

The son of Aethelred, Edward the Confessor, becomes King of England

1035


King Cnut dies

1015

Danish chief Cnut invades England; he becomes King of England (and later of Denmark and Norway)

c. 1001

Leif Eriksson, son of Erik the Red, sails east from Greenland to reach Labrador in North America. A small settlement is set up there, but abandoned by 1015.



Modern statue of the explorer Leif Eriksson, in Greenland

Source 2.1 Timeline of some key events in the history of the Vikings





**Source 2.2** Longhouses like this one were home to the Vikings. Sometimes earth was piled along walls and over the roof. Viewed from the front, longhouses would look like a grassy hill with a door built into it.

**Source 2.3** The social divisions in Viking society

Social class	Members	Comments
Jarls	Powerful noblemen (the heads of influential families, often interlinked through marriage)	Wealthy; wore fine clothes and elaborate jewellery; lived in large, well-appointed longhouses
Karls	Farmers and craftsmen such as silversmiths, boat builders, merchants (many karls became warriors for a raid)	'Free' people who made up most of the population; loyal to, and paid taxes to, either a jarl or to the king directly
Thralls	Slaves (prisoners of war); criminals; the poorest of the poor	Did most of the hard work (e.g. farm labour, cutting wood and stone); had no rights under the law, but most were treated well

## Women and children

As a result of their repeated raids, Vikings secured a base camp in many foreign lands. Some men took their families to live in these places as they continued to fight. But women who were left behind when their men went raiding or trading had to manage on their own. This might mean taking on farm chores, tending to and butchering animals and overseeing slaves.

As a result, Viking women were quite self-reliant. Their social and economic independence was unique among women in Europe at the time. Women could, for example, pick a husband, start divorce action, buy land or finance the building of a bridge.

A woman's main role (whether their men were at home or not) was to look after children and manage the home. While a man's world lay outside the home, the women were in charge inside the home; the door threshold marked the boundary in terms of social roles.

Common tasks for all but the wealthiest (who might have the help of slaves) included spinning and weaving, collecting firewood, and preparing food stores for the winter. Daughters helped their mothers in the home, just as sons helped their fathers on the farm or in workshops.

What little education there was took place in the home (perhaps with the help of educated slaves) for there were no schools. For boys, learning to stay fit, to skate, to wrestle, to use swords and to ride horses was more important, especially during the Viking Age.

## evidence: dress styles

Social divisions were evident in the way people dressed. Peasant men wore belted knee-length tunics over long trousers. While chieftains and nobles had clothes of a similar style, they were more finely made, and more colourful.

Women typically wore a buttonless, floor-length tunic (perhaps with a belt) covered by a calf-length apron. The apron was fixed with two large brooches near each shoulder. The writing of the 10th-century Arab traveller Ibn Fadlan provides evidence of different metals being used by Rus Vikings (from Sweden) for these brooches (such as gold, silver and bronze). His view was that the kind of metal used reflected a woman's wealth.



**Source 2.4** A reconstruction of clothing found in a chief's grave in today's Denmark provides evidence of the use of embroidery, fur trims and ornate metal belt ends.

**Source 2.5**

*Each woman wears on either breast a box of iron, silver, copper or gold; the value of the box indicates the wealth of the husband. Each box has a ring from which depends [hangs] a knife. The women wear neck rings of gold and silver, one for each 10 000 dirhems [a unit of money] which her husband is worth; some women have many. Their most prized ornaments are beads of green glass of the same make as ceramic objects one finds on their ships.*

Translated extract from the writing of Ibn Fadlan

# 2.1 How was Viking society organised?

*Many factors influenced the organisation of Viking society and lifestyle. Social divisions, for example, determined who had the wealth and power. These divisions also determined who did the hard work. Social roles even determined what people did from day to day. Most men, for instance, were farmers (when not on raids!). But there were also merchants, boat builders, weavers and blacksmiths, to name some. Other factors that shaped the way Vikings lived included their law, their economic system and their beliefs and values.*

## Social divisions

At the start of the so-called 'Viking Age', the society was made up of a number of independent tribes. Each was typically ruled by a *konungr* (king), though not a king as we understand it. Some were just warrior chieftains. Within each community were the social groups listed in Source 2.3. Rulers depended on the support of the *jarls* (earls).





Source 2.7 The interior of a reconstructed longhouse

## Home, smelly home

Viking villages were often located near water—on a coastline or beside a river, making it easier to load and unload ships. Among the cluster of pitched-roof longhouses (see Source 2.2) might be a barn to smoke fish, the workshops of village craftsmen, perhaps a sauna, and an open area where markets were held.

The ruler's home (or hall) was the biggest of all **longhouses** and the most elaborately decorated. There might be an array of carved furniture, silver utensils, oil lamps and colourful tapestries inside. Noisy feasts were held here after a successful raid, with men getting drunk for days on mead (a drink made from honey) or ale. Entertainment might include music (using animal horns and a type of fiddle) and dancing. As a special event, a poet might recite his latest work.

Longhouses were generally dark, smelly places. There was a dirt floor and no windows. The only opening, besides doors, was a small hole in the roof. Mixed with the smell of smoke, newly baked bread, sweat, sour milk, and the aroma of cooked onions, cabbages, fish, horsemeat and mutton was the stink of animal manure. An animal pen was often built at one end. Toilets were holes in the ground outside. But in the case of very bad weather, human waste might temporarily add to the stench inside.

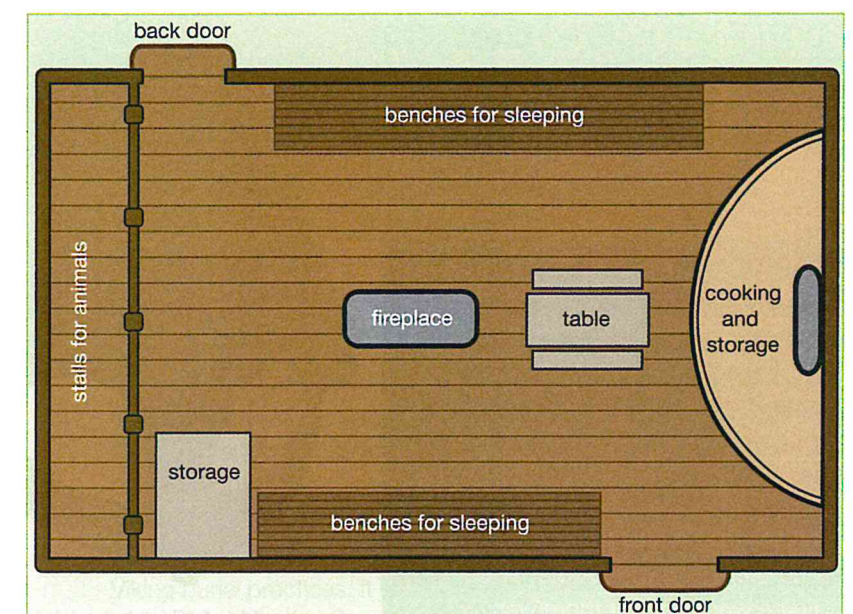


8 The simple and typical diet

In the centre, underneath the roof opening, was a fireplace (sometimes more than one). It provided warmth and some light as well as a means to cook. A big cauldron typically hung above it, sometimes hooked over a roof beam.

## Furniture

The longhouses of most Vikings were sparsely furnished, perhaps with no more than a roughly made table and benches. Low platforms, built along the sides, doubled as beds and places to sit for those who chose not to squat. These benches were typically covered in skins, furs or cloth 'bags' filled with feathers or down. (The word 'doona' comes from the Norse word meaning feather down—*dunn*.)



Source 2.9 The floorplan of a typical Viking longhouse

## Check your learning

- 1 Explain why a Viking longhouse might potentially be *each* of the following: cosy, smelly, noisy.
- 2 What link does the feather doona you might have on your bed have to a Viking longhouse?
- 3 Make a labelled sketch showing a modification you would make to the longhouse shown in Source 2.7 to make its interior more suitable as the hall of a local Viking ruler.



Source 2.10 Viking homes were ideally built near the water, such as shown in this reconstruction of a Viking village in Denmark



# Social roles



I'm Skardi the Weary, and, like most Viking men, I'm a farmer when I'm not raiding. Farming is not an easy life. Winters are long and bitterly cold. We lose stock—some animals starve, others freeze to death. There's not much good land either: too many mountains, fjords [long, narrow inlets] and bogs! I grow a kind of wheat we call spelt, and have cattle and a few pigs and goats. My neighbour is a sheep farmer. Our farm animals give us meat, skins and milk. My wife uses some of the milk to make cheese and buttermilk. We sometimes drink the whey, sweetening it with honey.

I'm Hrodgeir the Lucky—a merchant. I've spent my life trading, as my father did. I have sailed many times across what you call the Mediterranean and Baltic seas, and down many rivers in Europe. Once I sailed the entire length of the mighty Volga River, then on to Constantinople (you know it as Istanbul). My ships carry out goods to trade, such as jewellery, combs made from deer antlers, decorated swords, furs, and sometimes slaves. What I bring back includes wheat, salt, silver and gold, and spices.

I'm Olaf the Tall. I'm heading off now in a longboat for a raid; should be back in time to harvest my crop of rye. More glory and loot for me! I have here my prized sword and shield. I also have an iron-headed axe. I want these weapons buried with me when I die. See the metal boss [a knob or stud] on my wooden shield? It protects my hand, which is holding a handle on the other side. We Vikings don't wear uniforms when we fight. I have a chain mail tunic and iron helmet only because I am wealthier than some of my fellow warriors.



I'm Gudrun, Hrodgeir's wife. I'm often on my own, as you would expect. When not looking after the children, cooking, or chopping wood, I'm spinning and weaving, mostly wool. Sometimes Hrodgeir brings me back a piece of silk. I use it to make my underwear. I also make dresses, aprons, jackets and hats, sometimes decorated with animal fur. My sister, Solveig, spends her spare time helping her husband make silver jewellery. Beautiful work they do!



I'm a boat builder—have been all my life. Ingvar the Old, that's me! My sons help me when they're not raiding. We use iron axes and adzes (another wood-shaping tool) to make keels from a single tree trunk. The oak planks of the hull (which we join with iron rivets) are green wood that is freshly cut, making the wood easier to bend. We use curved branches or roots to carve curved sections. For waterproofing, we use wool soaked in tree sap. A carved figurehead at the bow (front) and stern (back), often of a dragon, is the finishing touch. Our boats can be rowed or sailed.



Source 2.6 Some social roles of the Vikings

## Check your learning

- 1 Draw a labelled diagram to explain the way in which Viking society was organised.
- 2 Explain why Viking women were typically independent people.
- 3 To which social division did captured prisoners of war belong? Why?
- 4 Name two ways in which social divisions were reflected in what people wore.
- 5 Use information collected on the Internet to design a 'very best' outfit for either a Viking man or woman.
- 6 Select any three characters profiled on these pages. With two classmates, write a short dialogue they might have on meeting in the marketplace. Your dialogue will reflect their different social roles and lifestyles. Your teacher may ask you to perform it for the class.