Everyday life in
Viking Age
Scandinavia

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Cross-section of an early Viking Age house

House reconstruction from Fyrkat, Denmark
Single farmstead vs. village

- environmental factors: possibility of exploitation
- differences in work division and social rules
- from the end of the 10th c onwards reorganization of rural landscape supervised by kings and Church
  - new villages are founded;
  - new networks between countryside and towns
  - increased specialization and production
Everyday life in the countryside: means of sustenance

• Farming and husbandry: main sources of sustenance

• Fishing, hunting, extraction of natural resources

• Household crafts:
  - spinning and weaving (textile production)
  - pottery making (for needs of an individual household)
  - wood-working
  - iron-working
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women+Men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cooking and preparing food</td>
<td>Tilling (plowing, sowing)</td>
<td>Herding animals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child care</td>
<td>Clearing new land</td>
<td>Certain farming activities (e.g. harvesting)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Milking the cows</td>
<td>Building and repairing</td>
<td>Going to the market</td>
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<tr>
<td>Making butter</td>
<td>Fishing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Work in the garden</td>
<td>Hunting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spinning, weaving, sewing</td>
<td>Iron casting and iron-working</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ceramic production for household needs</td>
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How do we know about social classes in Viking Age Scandinavia?

- Saga literature and poetry (generally the ones of higher social status are described as stronger, wiser, taller, better clothed and more beautiful, e.g. Rigsthula)

- Legal regulations (differences in punishment and compensation; wergeld - the value of a man’s life, payable to his family by his murderer)

- Archaeology
Social stratification

- King, Chieftains (konung, drottinn, jarl)
- Aristocracy (odal-men)
- Free peasants (hauldr, bonde, karl)
- Freedmen and landless peasants (landbo, coloni)
- Slaves (thrall)

Social hierarchy at the cemetery according to Norwegian provincial law of Eidsivating
Social classes

- Kings, jarls, and chieftains: elected to guarantee peace and stability and to provide overall protection by supervising defense and organizing military campaigns when needed. Exercised diverse degrees of authority and depended on decisions made during assemblies of all free men (‘things’). Although authority of the kings and jarls was limited they had some rights that other individuals did not have, like the right to collect taxes and customs, rights to collect tributes from subjugated people, right to mint coins and other privileges.

- Aristocracy: a true ruling class in the Scandinavian society. The source of their wealth and status came from land ownership, from trade and from military exploits and raids. Networks with jarls and kings could substantially raise their status and wealth.

- Free peasants: the difference between aristocracy and free peasants was based upon accumulated wealth and land property and the influence they could exercise in the political, legal and social matters.

- Landless peasants and tenants: did not own land property. Instead they rented pieces of land from landlords, worked it and divided the profits with the owners.

- Slaves: slavery was a widespread phenomenon in the Viking Age Scandinavia. Most of the slaves worked on the farms and were ordered to do the hardest and most tedious tasks, like preparing the soil for agriculture by clearing it from stones and putting fertilizer, taking care of animals, fetching water, grinding the grains for flour, etc. Slavery could result from war or raids (war captives) or could have been imposed because of debt or as a punishment. Slavery was hereditary but it was mother’s social position that had a decisive role on the faith of the children. Slaves were treated badly and used as a means of payment.
Social classes in archaeological sources

• Diverging sizes of farms
• Material culture
• Burial archaeology
Borg, Lofoten, Norway – a chieftain’s hall

A – banquet hall; B – entrance hall; C – living room; D – storage room; E – barn

Ca 750 sqm !!!!! Size of a house with ca 38 rooms

• Additional buildings including traces of three boathouses

• Extraordinary examples of material culture: gold and silver jewelry, imported ceramics
Long house from Lejre (Zealand, Denmark)

• Dated to the 9th c – 10th c
• Approx. 48 m long and 10-11 m wide (ca 500 sqm)
• Lejre=Hleidr from Hrolf's Saga?
• Residence of Skjoldung dynasty?
Oseberg burial

- burial of a queen or a priestess accompanied by another woman dated to ca 830’s
- extraordinary grave gifts including: sleigh, four-wheeled wooden cart, wooden chests
- skeletal remains of animals sacrificed for the deceaseds
Burial from Köping, Öland (Sweden)
A peasant’s house

- more modest
- 10-30 m long
- usually lacking luxurious objects (regional differences)
Examples of Viking Age burials from Scania

Fjälkinge cemetery
Everyday life in trading centers and early towns

- Limited ability of farming and keeping livestock (compared with the countryside houses and house lots in the towns are smaller and concentration of the population much larger)
- Importance of handicraft
- Middlemen in trade
- Other services
- Early taxation
Nodal points, market places, early towns

• Nodal points: important trading places, permanent settlement, long-distance trade, accumulation of various craft specialists (e.g. Birka, Hedeby, Ribe, Ahus)

• Market places: more or less seasonal, oriented towards local market (place names with “köpinge”, “kaupang”)

• Towns: besides market and handicraft production they hosted administrative, religious and juridical institutions, connected with countryside and long-distance trade. Late Viking Age or medieval origins
Craft

• glass production
• specialized forging and iron-working
• bronze-casting
• silver-working
• antler-working
• production of fine textiles
• shoe-making
• minting
Thing and law

- Allthing and thing: assemblies of all free individuals
- Held to resolve legal issues, elect kings, discuss political matters and conduct religious ceremonies

Arkils Tingstad, Uppland, Sweden. Runestone: Ulfkell(?) and Arnkell and Gýi, they made the Assembly-place here ... No landmark will be more (great), than (the one) the sons of Ulfr made in (his) memory; able lads in memory of their father
Viking age laws

• Oral traditions memorized by ”law speakers” and recited during the assemblies

• First written down in the 11th c; the first to be recorded in text are Norwegian provincial laws: Eidsivating, Gulating and Frostating and Scanian Law in Denmark

• Provincial, i.e., valid within boundaries of a particular district

• Deal with most common offences and issues: murder, theft, inheritance, debt, personal rights and obligations, defense, etc.

• Generally two types of punishment: fines and outlawing. The fines varied depending on the severity of the offence and social status of the plaintiff
Laws-Forsa ring

"one ox for the compensation of the sanctuary and two onces staff for the first time. Two oxen and four ounces for the second time, but for the third time four oxen and eight ounces staff. And all property lost after he has not done right four times, the way the people has the people’s right to demand, as it was stated in the past and consecrated. And those who made this for themselves (were) Anund of Tåsta and Ofeq of Hjorsta. And Vibjörn carved”

(transl. S. Brink 1996)
Summary: everyday life in the Viking Age

1. Most of the Scandinavians lived in the countryside. Farming, animal husbandry and extraction of natural resources were the main sources of livelihood. Many farms were self-sustainable.

2. A fraction of people lived in the trading places and towns. The main means of sustenance here are manufacture, handicraft and services offered to the merchants and travelers.

3. Viking Age society was stratified (aristocracy, free peasants, tenants, slaves). Some of the personal rights and obligations differed according to the social status.

4. The basic institution of public life was an assembly (thing).

5. In government structure assembly was an initiating body, making decisions on courses of action, while king executed these decisions.
To learn more about everyday life in Viking Age Scandinavia please read following articles and book chapters from your course literature:
