



# ANCIENT NORSE CULTURE

Debunking myths & stereotypes about Vikings





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## Meaning of the word “Viking”

The word in the sense we know it today has its source in two different languages: Old English and Old Norse. In the beginning its meaning was different from the one it has nowadays. The first source is the word wicing used by Anglo-Saxon monks, in the sense of “pirate” or “piracy”, to define any outsider that came by sea. It was only during the end of the 10th century and the beginning of the 11th one that the word came to mean “Scandinavian raider”. As for the Old Norse word, vikingr, its original meaning was “sailor from Vik” (Vik was and is a district in a fjord in Oslo). Later on it came to mean “sailor warrior” at first from just that district and even later, from any part of Scandinavia.





## Class distinction in Old Norse culture

Materials found in tombs have shown us that there were class distinctions in the Viking period. The class a family-circle belonged to dictated the rank a person had in society for their entire life. It was very rare for someone to transcend class distinctions. A person's individual life mattered little, for it was the class of the ancient lineage of their family which gave them position, rights and duties in society.

In Viking society it was very important to one's self-esteem to be a free person. However, this depended upon the class they belonged to.

In The Gulathing law, which addresses violence, we find seven classes of free men: **løyising**, son of a **løyising**, farmer, **hauld**, **lendmann**, **earl** and **king**. In *Rigstula*, a poem in *Edda*, we can read about how *Rig* (the god *Heimdall*) visits families belonging to three of the classes during the Viking period. *Rig* stayed with each family for three days, sleeping with all three wives, and becoming, this way, a father to all the classes of man. Slaves or **thralls**, as Vikings called them, are not mentioned in the law because they were

not protected by it.

The slave was a master's property in the same way he owned his domestic animals. Owners could buy and sell slaves and could treat them as they pleased. If the master killed one of his slaves, it was not considered to be a murder. If a free man killed another man's slave, the murderer only had to pay for a new slave. The price was nearly the same as that of a domestic animal.

When a female thrall bore a child, it automatically became the property of her owner. If a pregnant slave was sold, her unborn child became the new owner's property as well. *Rigstula* tells us that slaves worked all the time. They collected wood, fertilized the fields, made fences, dug turf, bred pigs and made bast ropes. Thralls ate unwholesome and unappetizing food. According to the law, the only thing a slave was allowed to own was a knife.

Slaves were often captured during Viking raids upon British islands, but a free Norwegian person could also become a slave, either by free will or by force. They might be forced into slavery if they weren't able to pay the mulct ordained by the Thing or if they couldn't feed themselves and their family. Some Vikings became rich by selling slaves to other tribes in Europe.

**Løyising**, or bondsman, was a slave who had been set free by their owner, but who was still dependent upon and still owed duties to their former master. A bondsman was allowed to purchase his freedom by hard work.

The **løyising's son** represented a separate class, according to the Gulathing law.

A **farmer** was a free man with all available rights and duties in the Viking society. *Rigstula* states that farmers made looms, spun thread, plowed the fields, built houses and made fences and carts. Most people in the Viking society belonged to this class in particular.

**Leiding**, or tenant, was a man who rented or leased a farm. Payment for use of said farm involved giving some of the food to the owner. The tenant could be anyone from a former farm worker to a chieftain. However, as a free man he had all the pertinent societal rights and duties.

**Haulds** were freeholders. A man could not become a freeholder until his family had owned the farm as freemen for six generations.

A **chieftain**, *Rigstula* tells us, lived his life in luxury and owned about 18 farms. The father made strings for the bow, while the mother adorned and dressed herself with jewels and blue ornaments. The son used the bow and arrow, sword, spear and shield. He rode horses, swam, trained dogs, learned the art of

runes, went out to battles and conquered lands. They also learned the songs of birds, played board games, tamed horses and made arrows and shields.

The **king** and his men, the **lendmann** and **earls**, were classes which were added later in the Viking period whereas the other ranks mentioned above existed during the entire

period. *Rigstula* mentions that the king was usually a clever hunter and good with weapons as well. But more importantly - he had

magical abilities. He could save lives, stop storms, understand the birds, ease sorrows, give peace to the mind, stop fires, and was a rune master. The king could also ride a horse and draw the sword, vanquish enemies and travel out in Viking raids. The Viking raids were only organized by rich people, such as the chieftain's family, the king's family or a very rich farming family. However, warriors might be recruited from the entire area.





## The Viking household and family ties

As it has already been mentioned, most people in the Ancient Norse world were farmers. Thus we'll take a peek at a farmer's household and the life within.

Only a few Vikings lived in towns. As mentioned before, most Norsemen were farmers and lived in hall-like houses near fjords in small countryside villages or in valleys further inland. The Viking farm was very often placed on a hilltop with a very good view of the surrounding area. In this way they were able to quickly see friends or enemies who had arrived. They used to build them slightly tipped downhill, so that droppings and urine from the domestic animals living in the stables wouldn't fall inside the actual living quarters.

The hall-like houses could be 10 to 100 feet long (3 to 30 meters). The largest were sometimes up to 250 feet long (83 meters).

These halls were usually built as one big room, which could be divided into three main parts: a living room, where everyday life was carried on, a ceremonial hall, where big feasts were thrown and a stable for the animals. The lady of the house would sometimes use

the ceremonial hall to offer sacrifices to the gods.

Along the walls, inside the house, there were sitting and sleeping benches covered with fur or cloth. Beds were only used in rich families. A fireplace, right in the middle of the room, was the main source of light and heat. The smoke was vented through a hole located on the roof. If they needed extra light they used a lamp fueled with wax or blubber.

Some houses in the Ancient Norse world had running water in them. They redirected some water from a river or a pond via a small channel which ran underneath the house. Inside the building, said channel was covered by slabs of rock. When they needed water they just had to lift up one of the rocks.

Most Viking farms had a separate bath house which they used every Saturday - Viking bath day. If they lived near the sea they could have a ship-house, called naust in Norwegian, for their ships and small boats.

As for family ties, Norsemen lived in collective or extended families. Children, parents and grandparents all lived together. If the farmer kept workers, servants or slaves, they usually lived along with them in the family house. When the oldest son took over the farm, he became the head of the family and it became his duty to run both. On his farm cows, sheep, goats, pigs, horses and maybe chickens could

be found. Most Viking farms had dogs and, from, at least, circa 1000 AD., they had cats as well.

## Daily meals

Norsemen customarily ate two meals each day. The first, **dagmál** or "day-meal" was eaten in the morning, approximately two hours after the day's work began around 7-8 am, while the second, **náttmál** or "night meal" was consumed at the end of the day's labor at about 7-8 pm. The times mentioned above would vary seasonally, depending on the hours of daylight.

## Types of Food

The foods listed here were known to the Vikings, as evidenced by mention in the literary sources, or documented by archaeological finds (i.e., grave sites, etc.). Additional foods were probably consumed as well, including but not limited to wild herbs and fruits known to grow in Scandinavia, additional game animals not listed below, and any foodstuffs that may have been imported from other countries.


### Proteins

**Domestic Sources:** Beef, mutton, lamb, goat and pork were eaten throughout the Viking homelands and settlements. Horse meat was also consumed, and by the Christian Middle Ages the consumption of horseflesh had become identified as a specifically heathen practice.

Cattle were the most important type of livestock.







**I**n Denmark, about one half of the cattle were slaughtered before the age of 3.5 years, allowing most cows to produce at least one calf and making both meat and milk production possible. In Western Jutland, oxen were renowned for their high-quality meat and were produced for export as meat animals by individual farmers, then later sold to a larger estate. When they were 4-5 years old, the oxen were walked down the peninsula about two weeks' distance and sold, then re-fattened for three weeks on the marshes before they were slaughtered. This trade in oxen supported some of the nutritional needs of the towns.

Meat was a seasonal product, as slaughtering was mainly done at the end of the grazing season. Pigs were kept for meat, and were usually sent off into the forest to feed on mast, especially in the southern areas of Scandinavia where pigs could be forest-grazed year-round. Pigs were an efficient means of recycling food waste and turning it into consumable meat. They were also valuable food animals for town-dwellers and those in dense settlements where they could be kept penned and fed household scraps, a practice which began in Scandinavia in the Viking Age, particularly in early towns. In Iceland animal husbandry was the major

source of food and the principal occupation of the inhabitants. Cattle appear to have been the main farm animal until the 12th century, when deterioration in the climate made it difficult to maintain large herds of cattle and sheep farming took the forefront. This would directly affect diet as well. The Viking Age people also kept chicken, geese, and ducks both for eggs and meat. Hens, geese, and ducks were used to provide fresh meat throughout the year.

**Hunting/Gathering:** While people in the Viking Age did hunt and eat game, the amount of wild meat consumed was very low in comparison to that from domestic sources. However, in the farthest northern areas, such as Norrland in Sweden, Troms in Finnmark and Nordland in Norway, game meats were much more important and represented a much larger, or even the greatest part of the meat consumed.

Deer, elk, reindeer and hare were the most important animals hunted for meat. Red deer has been shown to have been eaten in Jorvík and the Danelaw, and there is evidence that venison was consumed at Jarlshöf in the Shetlands. Bear, boar, and squirrel were all hunted at times as well. Squirrel was the most important animal hunted for furs, and so may have been eaten fairly often.

In Jorvík and the Danelaw in England, wild poultry used for food included golden plover, grey plover, black grouse,

wood pigeon, lapwing. Wild goose has been identified as a foodstuff in Dublin.

Nuts were also a source of protein. Hazelnuts were the only nut found wild in Scandinavia and were consumed throughout Scandinavia and the Viking settlements. Walnuts were imported, even in the Viking Age, and medieval Scandinavian cooks imported almonds and chestnuts as well.

**Food from the Sea, Rivers and Lakes:** The fish resources in the Atlantic off the western coasts of Scandinavia were (and still are) extremely rich, providing cod and coalfish, and freshwater would have been a source of salmon. Even Norwegians who lived inland had access to high proportions of fish in their diets, since coastal people would have traded fish for timber and other goods. Shrimp were also eaten.

Other saltwater fish known to have been eaten include haddock, flat-fish, ling, horse mackerel, smelt, and saithe.

Most of the evidence for freshwater fish consumption comes from Jorvík (modern York) and the Danelaw. Freshwater fish included roach, rudd, and bream, with perch and pike being the most commonly found freshwater fish at archaeological sites. We have evidence for estuarine fish from both England and the Viking holdings in Dublin, including oysters, cockles, mussels, winkles, smelt, eels, salmon, and scallops.

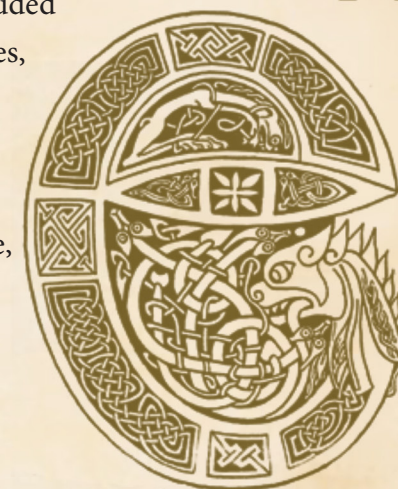
Whales were also an important food resource during the Viking Age. The sagas frequently mention complex conflicts that arose because of disputes over the legal rights of a landowner to the meat, blubber, and bone from beached whales. It was probably extremely rare that ships went out and harpooned whales, and probably only Iceland and the Faroe Islands used this method of whaling. Porpoises and seals were also hunted. The most important seal product was blubber, which was eaten in place of butter or used for frying. Apparently seal meat was not a particularly prized food, but was eaten by peasants because other meat was scarce.

In addition, various sea birds and their eggs would have been consumed.

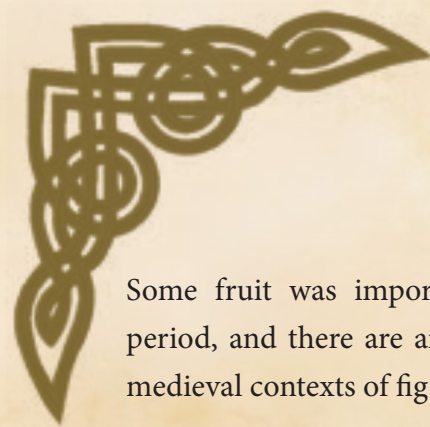
### Fruits

Sloes, plums, apples and blackberries were consumed throughout Scandinavia and the Viking settlements. Bilberries were another common fruit, and unfortunately since the Icelandic word for bilberry is bláber (literally, "blue berry") many sources list these as "blueberries."

Other fruits eaten included raspberries, elderberries, hawthorn berries, cherries, sour cherries, cloudberries, strawberries, crabapple, rose hips and rowan berries.








Some fruit was imported in the medieval period, and there are archaeological finds in medieval contexts of fig seeds and grape pips.

### Vegetables



The Ancient Norse people consumed a variety of vegetables, both grown in gardens and gathered in the wild. Vegetables known from Jorvík or Dublin include carrots, parsnips, turnips, celery, spinach, wild celery, cabbage, radishes, fava beans, and peas. Other vegetables would have included beets, mushrooms, leeks, onions, and edible seaweeds. Sandwort and acorns were used sometimes as starvation foods, but were only eaten in extremity as they were fairly unpalatable. A variety of seeds were used to produce oils used in cooking as well in both Jorvík and Dublin. These included linseed oil, hempseed oil, and rapeseed oil.

### Dairy

Dairy farming was very important in northern Sweden, Finland, and Norway, with cows being the primary dairy animal, although goat's milk was also used. During the Middle Ages, bread and other cereal food types only slowly replaced milk products as the staple food of the general population, and in some parts of Scandinavia milk products have remained the most important foodstuff up through the nineteenth century. Milk was not usually

consumed, but rather used to create other dairy foods which could be stored for winter consumption, such as butter, buttermilk, whey, skyr, curds, and cheese (which was usually heavily salted to help preserve it). Whey was retained and used either as a beverage or as a preservative to pickle meats and fish. The lactic acid in whey acted to slow or halt bacterial growth, allowing foods to be stored longer just as pickling in vinegar (acetic acid) does.

### Bread and Cereals

Mostly cereals which have been burnt and carbonized survive in the archaeological record, to be discovered a millennium later.

Barley was the most commonly grown grain in Sweden and Denmark. Rye began being grown in Finland, eastern Sweden and parts of Denmark back in around 1000-1200, although its production did not become widely established until the late Middle Ages. In Norway oats and barley were extensively cultivated. Iceland had some cultivation of barley and oats until around 1150, made possible by the favorable climate during the first part of the Middle Ages. Wheat has also been found at Jorvík, Birka, Oseberg, and Dublin. Some rice was imported from Italy in the Middle Ages.

Hulled barley was used for thin, flat bread, baked on an open fire. Oats seem to have been preferred for bread and porridge in parts of western Sweden. In Denmark, barley was primarily used for porridge

and beer, while oats were fodder for the animals.

Most of the barley grown would have been used to make ale. The remainder was used for bread and other dishes. Porridge or gruel made from whole or cracked grains was an important everyday food for the Viking farm family and it is believed that it was the staple food of the Viking Age. During the week the grain for the porridge would be simply cooked in water and then eaten. At celebrations porridge would be cooked with milk and eaten with butter.

### Herbs and Spices

Dill, coriander and hops are known from Jorvík and the Danelaw. There is evidence from Dublin for poppy seed, black mustard, and fennel. The Oseberg burial included cumin, mustard, and horseradish. Other spices included parsley, juniper berries, and garlic.

By the Middle Ages, Scandinavia had access to exotic spices obtained by trading. These included cumin, pepper, saffron, ginger, cardamom, grains of paradise, cloves, nutmeg, mace, cinnamon, anise-seed, and bay leaves.

Vinegar was used as a flavoring in foods, as was honey.

### Beverages

Alcoholic drinks were heartily consumed, this being one way to preserve carbohydrate calories for winter consumption, and consisted usually of ale. Hops and bog myrtle were used to flavor ale.

Mead was also consumed: honey was cultivated in southern Scandinavia, and imported by those in regions where bees cannot thrive. A drink which was both very alcoholic and which is described as being sweet was bjórr. Fruit wines were occasionally made, being used for sacramental purposes late in the period, and grape wine was imported from the Rhine region by the wealthy.

Other beverages included milk, buttermilk, whey, and plain water.





## Dress code and fashion

(it's more of a visual subject, so won't be going into detail)

**Men:** Shirt/kirtle and trousers (plus hauberk, weapons, shield and helmet for battle)

**Women:** Gown/underdress, apron-dress and coif (for married women).

Main colours used for clothing were red, green and blue, always combined with leather brown, black or white.

## Grooming and personal hygiene

Although the popular image of the people of the Viking Age is one of wild-haired, dirty savages, this is a false perception. In reality, the Vikings took care with their personal grooming, bathing, and hairstyling.

Perhaps the most telling comment comes from the pen of English cleric John of Wallingford, prior of St. Fridswides, who complained bitterly that the Viking Age men of the Danelaw combed their hair, took a bath on Saturday, and changed their woolen garments frequently, and that they performed these un-Christian and heathen acts in an

attempt to seduce high-born English women. The sagas often describe a woman washing a man's hair for him, usually as a gesture of affection. Almost all sources indicate that the Vikings were among the cleanliest of all Europeans during the Middle Ages. In summer, bathing could be performed in lakes or streams, or within the bath-houses found on every large farm, these would be much like the Finnish sauna, though tub bathing was also used. In winter the heated bath-house would be the primary location for bathing. In Iceland where natural hot springs are common, the naturally heated water was incorporated into the bath-house.

The Vikings also bathed their hands and faces on at least a daily basis, usually in the morning upon arising. Handwashing was customary before meals as well.

It seems clear that regular washing of hands and hair was the norm, and that failing to keep oneself clean was an unusual practice, perhaps reserved for those in

mourning. It is said that Odin, king of the gods, left his hair unwashed as a sign of mourning for the death of his son Baldr in the poem **Völuspá**.

### Combs and Other Tools for Grooming

The Viking Age people used a variety of tools for personal grooming and cleanliness. Perhaps the most important grooming tool was the comb, which was used not only to smooth and order the hair, but also to help remove any dirt or vermin. Combs were in everyday use at every level of society. They were used as a part of the hair washing process, being used to comb through the wet hair during washing. Some scholars believe that the widespread use of combs throughout the ancient world was due to their utility in controlling lice and nits.

Bone combs are among the most common archaeological finds in Viking contexts. Two types of combs are found: single-piece combs and composite combs.

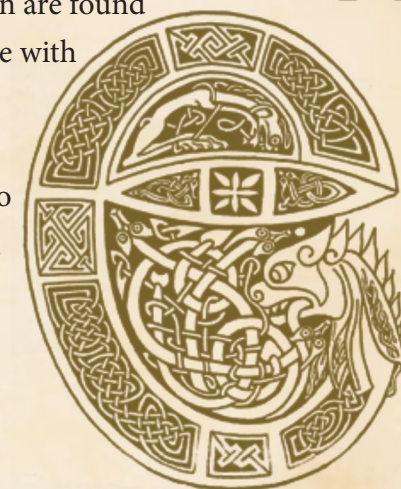
Single-piece combs were made as the name suggests, all in one piece from a single piece of bone or ivory. The majority of such combs have teeth on both sides of the spine.

Although single-piece combs were predominant during the Migration Age in Scandinavia, by the Viking Age they had become much less common. Still, the few one-piece combs known from this era were either made from imported elephant ivory or else they were made of cetacean bone, and were generally intricately ornamented.

Double-sided combs from the Viking Age usually have fine teeth on one side of the comb and coarser teeth on the other. The fine teeth are extremely close in many cases, and this side was probably used for control of pests in one's hair. The coarser side would have been used to comb out tangles and style the hair.

Composite combs make up the majority of surviving combs. A composite comb is made of several pieces of skeletal material, most commonly deer antler which has been split or sawed into individual plates. The two halves of the spine of the comb were cut and matched to either side of the comb.

Grave-finds show a slight difference between men's comb usage and women's comb usage. Men's combs most often are found with a comb case, made with almost identical construction to the comb itself but with no teeth. The open area in the middle provided a place for the matching





comb's teeth to be slotted, protecting them from damage. Women, on the other hand, apparently carried their combs inside a purse or pouch, and so did not need comb cases. At any rate, women's graves rarely include combs with comb cases, while men's graves that include combs almost always do.

In the Viking Age, there were no such things as cotton swabs for cleaning one's ears. Instead, a tool known as an ear spoon was used.

Earspoons could be made from a variety of materials, including bone, ivory, silver and other metals. Often women wore an ear spoon dangling from one of their brooches on a chain, not only to have it handy for use, but also to display it since many ear spoons were ornamented.

Other tools for personal grooming included tweezers and razors. Tweezers were frequently carried by women on a chain from their brooches. They could be made in iron, silver, or even in antler or bone. Tweezers were also used for plucking the eyebrows.

## Naval and trading prowess and discoveries

(it's more of a visual subject, so no explanation here, we will explain a bit during the presentation)



## Religious beliefs

Just mentioning the main gods, because they had plenty of them.



**Odin:** The chief divinity of the Norse pantheon, the foremost of the Aesir. Odin is a son of Bor and Bestla. He is called Alfadir,

Allfather, for he is indeed father of the gods. With Frigg he is the father of Baldr, Hodr, and Hermod. He fathered Thor on the goddess Jord; and the giantess Grid became the mother of Vidar. Odin is a god of war and death, but also the god of poetry and wisdom. He hung for nine days, pierced by his own spear, on the world tree. Here he learned nine powerful songs, and eighteen runes. Odin can make the dead speak to question the wisest amongst them. His hall in Asgard is Valaskjalf ("shelf of the slain") where his throne Hlidskjalf is located. From this throne he observes all that happens in the nine worlds. The tidings are brought to him by his two raven Huginn and Muninn. He also resides in Valhalla, where the slain warriors are taken.

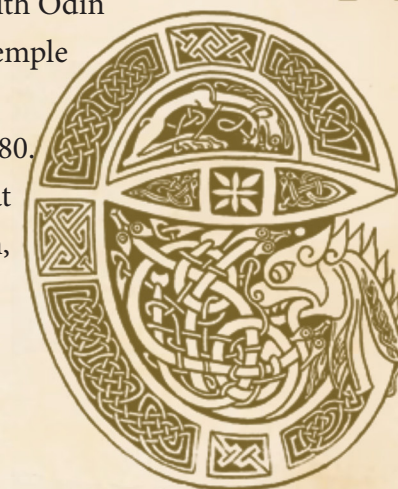
Odin's attributes are the spear Gungnir, which never misses its target, the ring Draupnir, from which every ninth night eight new rings appear, and his eight-footed steed Sleipnir. He is accompanied by the wolves Freki and Geri, to whom he gives his food for he himself

consumes nothing but wine. Odin has only one eye, which blazes like the sun. His other eye he traded for a drink from the Well of Wisdom, and gained immense knowledge. On the day of the final battle, Odin will be killed by the wolf Fenrir.

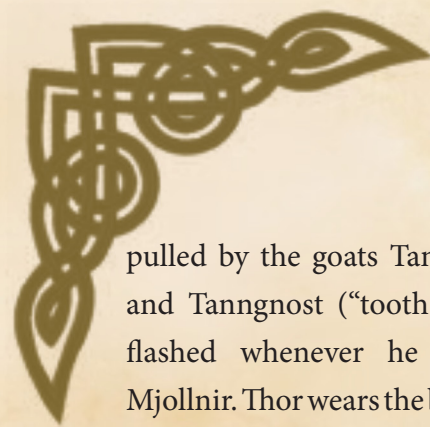
He is also called Othinn, Wodan and Wotan. Some of the aliases he uses to travel incognito among mortals are Vak and Valtam.

**Thor:** Thor is the Norse god of thunder. He is a son of Odin and Jord, and one of the most powerful gods. He is married to Sif, a fertility goddess. His mistress is the giantess Jarnsaxa ("iron cutlass"), and their sons are Magni and Modi and his daughter is Thrud. Thor is helped by Thialfi, his servant and the messenger of the gods.

Thor was usually portrayed as a large, powerful man with a red beard and eyes of lightning. Despite his ferocious appearance, he was very popular as the protector of both gods and humans against the forces of evil. He even surpassed his father Odin in popularity because, contrary to Odin, he did not require human sacrifices. In his temple at Uppsala he was shown standing with Odin at his right side. This temple was replaced by a Christian church in 1080. The Norse believed that during a thunderstorm, Thor rode through the heavens on his chariot







pulled by the goats Tanngrisni (“gap-tooth”) and Tanngnost (“tooth grinder”). Lightning flashed whenever he threw his hammer Mjollnir. Thor wears the belt Megingjard which doubles his already considerable strength. His hall is Bilskirnir, which is located in the region Thrudheim (“place of might”). His greatest enemy is Jormungand, the Midgard Serpent. At the day of Ragnarok, Thor will kill this serpent but will die from its poison. His sons will inherit his hammer after his death.

Donar is his Teutonic equivalent, while the Romans see in him their god Jupiter.

**Loki:** Loki is one of the major deities in the Norse pantheon. He is a son of the giant Farbauti (“cruel striker”) and the giantess Laufey. He is regarded as one of Aesir, but is on occasion their enemy. He is connected with fire and magic, and can assume many different shapes (horse, falcon, fly). He is crafty and malicious, but is also heroic: in that aspect he can be compared with the trickster from North American myths. The ambivalent god grows progressively more unpleasant, and is directly responsible for the death of Balder, the god of light.

Loki’s mistress is the giantess Angrboda, and with her he is the father of three monsters.

His wife is Sigyn, who stayed loyal to him, even when the gods punished him for the death of Balder. He was chained to three large boulders; one under his shoulders,

one under his loins and one under his knees. A poisonous snake was placed above his head. The dripping venom that lands on him is caught by Sigyn in a bowl. But every now and then, when the bowl is filled to the brim, she has to leave him to empty it. Then the poison that falls on Loki’s face makes him twist in pain, causing earthquakes.

On the day of Ragnarok, Loki’s chains will break and he will lead the giants into battle against the gods. Loki is often called the Sly One, the Trickster, the Shape Changer, and the Sky Traveler.

**Frigg/Frigga:** As the wife of Odin, Frigg is one of the foremost goddesses of Norse mythology. She is the patron of marriage and motherhood, and the goddess of love and fertility. In that aspect she shows many similarities with Freya, of whom she possibly is a different form.

She has a reputation of knowing every person’s destiny, but never unveils it. As the mother of Balder, she tried to prevent his death by extracting oaths from every object in nature, but forgot the mistletoe. And by a fig made from mistletoe Balder died. Her hall in Asgard is Fensalir (“water halls”). Frigg’s messenger is Gna, who rides through the sky on the horse Hofvarpnir. In some myths she was rumored to have had love affairs with Odin’s brothers Ve and Vili.

**Freya:** In Norse mythology, Freya is a goddess of love and fertility, and the most

beautiful and propitious of the goddesses. She is the patron goddess of crops and birth, the symbol of sensuality and was called upon in matters of love. She loves music, spring and flowers, and is particularly fond of the elves (fairies). Freya is one of the foremost goddesses of the Vanir.

She is the daughter of the god Njord, and the sister of Freyr. Later she married the mysterious god Od (probably another form of Odin), who disappeared. When she mourned for her lost husband, her tears changed into gold.

Her attributes are the precious necklace of the Brisings, which she obtained by sleeping with four dwarfs, a cloak (or skin) of bird feathers, which allows its wearer to change into a falcon, and a chariot pulled by two cats. She owns Hildesvini (“battle boar”) which is actually her human lover Ottar in disguise. Her chambermaid is Fulla. Freya lives in the beautiful palace Folkvang (“field of folk”), a place where love songs are always played, and her hall is Sessrumnir. She divides the slain warriors with Odin: one half goes to her palace, while the other half goes to Valhalla. Women also go to her hall.

**Tyr:** The original Germanic god of war and the patron god of justice, the precursor of Odin. At the time of the Vikings, Tyr had to make way for Odin, who became the god of war himself. Tyr was by then regarded as Odin’s son (or possibly of the giant Hymir).

He is the boldest of the gods, who inspires courage and heroism in battle. Tyr is represented as a man with one hand, because his right hand was bitten off by the gigantic wolf Fenrir (in old-Norse, the wrist was called ‘wolf-joint’). His attribute is a spear; the symbol of justice, as well as a weapon.

At the day of Ragnarok, Tyr will kill the hound Garm, the guardian of the hell, but will die from the wounds inflicted by the animal. In later mythology, “Tyr” became to mean “god”. He is also known as Tîwaz, Tiw and Ziu.

**Hel/Hell/Hella:** In Norse mythology, Hel is the ruler of Helheim, the realm of the dead. She is the youngest child of the evil god Loki and the giantess Angrboda. She is usually described as a horrible hag, half alive and half dead, with a gloomy and grim expression. Her face and body are those of a living woman, but her thighs and legs are those of a corpse, mottled and moldering.

The gods had abducted Hel and her brothers from Angrboda’s hall. They cast her in the underworld, into which she distributes those who are sent to her; the wicked and those who died of sickness or old age. Her hall in Helheim is called Eljudnir, home of the dead. Her manservant is Ganglati and her maidservant is Ganglot (which both can be translated as “tardy”).





## Vikings: A Self-Regulated Society

**V**iking society was self-regulated. Law and order were based upon the Thing system, which had already been established via common-meetings dating to, at least, 600 AD. The Thing had legislative and judiciary powers. Every free man had a duty to meet at the Thing's common-meetings, except men who farmed alone and were unable to leave their farm unattended. Women and handicapped people could attend these meetings too.

Vikings elected their King at the Thing, among other things. These common-meetings might last several days, therefore it proved to be a great occasion for a large marketplace and festivals to take place. Every farmer brought their main products to sell or exchange for others and they usually used this time to form alliances between houses by engaging their children to other families. It was a big social event, especially when you take into account the fact that each family used to live pretty much isolated in their own fjords the rest of the time. They, of course, visited friends living in other valleys and fjords from time to time, but the trip was long and dangerous back then, not to mention how much more dangerous the entire ordeal became when they had to visit their kins in other lands.

Norsemen had no written laws. However, a man referred to as a *lovsigemann*- meaning "he who reads the law" in English - opened the Thing by reciting the laws he had previously memorized by heart. This was done to ensure that no one changed the

laws. Every free man had to respect the law, including chieftains and the king. The Thing was a democratic constitution. In comparison to the Ancient Athenian democracy, which included only 10% of the inhabitants as legal voting citizens, the Viking system was more democratic: it included everybody, except for the thralls and those exiled from society - the outlaws.

Viking society was permeated by religion, even though they had no proper word for "religion". Instead they used the word *siðr*, which means custom or practice. However, the moral code in Viking society was not directly tied to having a belief in the gods. Social behavior was based upon an unwritten honor based system or code of Ethics. Right and wrong, gender roles, sexual morality, daily life, the timing of festivals; in all these circumstances the free man was evaluated by standards of honor.

A man of honor was a man of principles. He was given to modesty, was hospitable and generous and offered a helping hand to friends in need, even if that meant aligning himself against his friend's enemies. A man of honor never forgot to be the foe of his enemy. This, he did with all his heart.

The opposite of honor was disgrace, and because every man lived his life as a member of an extended family-circle, he could easily bring disgrace to his entire family - including his forefathers. Therefore, it was intolerable for a free man to live in such a fallen state. If he was disgraced, he could only restore balance in his social system by confronting the source of his fall from an honorable status. Thus, revenge was an key component of this social system, a system which placed

great importance upon maintaining personal honor.

The typical view of revenge was present in the old adage: "A slave takes revenge at once, a fool never takes revenge". A good man, however, simply waited. He left his victim unaccosted for a long time, up to several years. Then, just as retaliation seemed to be forgotten, one day he would suddenly attack his enemy with a masterful stroke - hard and inexorable.

Through the ordeal of waiting the good man showed his strong character. This long waiting and the coolness of the fulfilment of the revenge may appear to us as cruel and heartless, but we have to remember that the threat of blood vengeance was the only effective punishment in Old Norse society. It was only through the good man's composed way of enforcing revenge, that revenge itself became a genuine judicial authority, and not merely a primitive and vindictive act. There was, in other words, an ethical social code in the private claim of a delayed and resolute revenge.

The explanation for the frequent in-fighting within Viking society lies not with a lack of respect for the law among its members. Rather, the basis was provided by the tension of living in a society which placed a premium upon maintaining personal honor. Men therefore took the requisite action to maintain honor or ward off dishonor. Revenge was a mechanism employed by individuals or families to maintain a positive balance in their own lives. This is the background for the many bloody fights written about in the family-sagas and history books.

By virtue of the conservative power of the family-circles who regulated the Thing system, its moral and ethics, Viking society was a self regulated society which was independent of the authority of a state. For example, in 800 AD approximately 30 chieftains resided within the boundaries of what is modern day Norway.





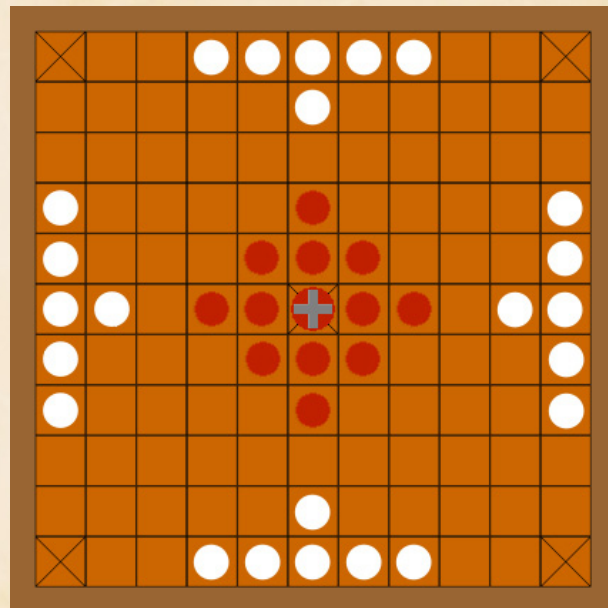
## Viking pastimes

The Vikings had a great many amusements, from very physical sports such as footracing, swimming, wrestling and skiing, to horse fighting, playing a game very like the Scottish sport of curling, drinking games, in which women were allowed to participate, and several board games. The most useful of these for the snow-bound will of course be the board games.

Before the introduction of chess (O.N. skak-tafl) in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Scandinavians sharpened their wits by playing a game known as tafl. Tafl in Old Norse means “table,” and by the end of the period referred to a variety of board games, such as chess (skak-tafl or “check-table”), backgammon (kvatru-tafl, introduced from the French as quatre), and fox-and-geese (ref-skak, “fox chess”). However, the term tafl was most commonly used to refer to a game known as hnefa-tafl or “King’s Table.” Hnefatafl was known in Scandinavia before 400 A.D. and was carried by the Vikings to

their colonies in Iceland, Greenland, Britain, Ireland and Wales. The Saxons had their own variant, derived from a common Germanic tafl-game,

and this was apparently the only board game known to the Saxons prior to the introduction of chess. Viking women were allowed to play these games along with their male counterparts.



## Inherited words



Week days are the most used Viking inherited words along with welcome and a few others that will appear on the video we'll play.

**Monday:** Moon's day (Munni)

**Tuesday:** Tyr's day (Ancient god of war)

**Wednesday:** Wodan's day (Dane/Germanic variant of god Odin)

**Thursday:** Thor's day (God of Thunder)

**Friday:** Frigg's day (Goddess of marriage and motherhood)/Freya's day (love and fertility). There's a slight controversy here on after who's day it is. Personally I think it's Frigg's, because all Viking weddings were celebrated on a Friday.

**Saturday:** Saturn's day (only non-Viking god)

**Sunday:** Sun's day (both this and Monday can derive from just about any culture)

## Vikings as a source of inspiration



Mentions of different Viking inspired artwork such as Tolkien's Middle Earth, Wagner's operas, Marvel comic books and manga and the Heavy Metal band look.

