

The Vikings

Women

The Vikings lived in large family groups. Children, parents and grandparents lived together. When the eldest son took over the family farm, he became the head of the family and responsible for the well-being of them all. He had to provide the food the family needed.

His wife, the lady of the household, had to see to it that the food lasted during the long, dark winter. She made butter and cheese, dried and smoked meat and fish for storage and she was also expected to know about herbs for making medicine and care for the sick and wounded. The farm animals were also her responsibility and when her husband went trading, went Viking, or hunting she also ran the farm in his absence. In rich families she would have servants and slaves to help her. As a visible sign of her authority and power the lady of the household wore the keys to the food chests at her waist.

When the men travelled abroad raiding, trading, or had gone hunting or fishing, the women were in charge of the work on the farm. This led to that the women played an important part in society.

Marriage

Girls were married at the age of 12 -15. They were then expected to run a household. Let's hope they got some help from the older women in the family! The marriage was agreed between families and was regarded as an alliance between the two families for mutual help and protection. The girl herself had little to say in the matter.

The Dowry

The bride brought cloth of linen and wool, a spinning wheel, a loom and a bed as part of her dowry. Women from richer families could also have jewellery of silver and gold, farm animals and even farms as a part of their dowry. Everything she brought into the marriage remained her personal property and did not fully become part of her husband's estate. Her children would in turn inherit this property as part of their maternal inheritance.

Divorce

The woman did not fully become part of her husband's family when she married. She continued to be a part of her own family and if her husband mistreated her and the children, or he was too lazy to be a good provider or insulted her family, she could divorce him. To do it she called some witnesses. In front of these witnesses she first stood at the front door, and then at the couple's bed, declared herself divorced from her husband.

The Children

Babies and toddlers automatically stayed with their mother at a divorce. The bigger children were divided between the parents according to the wealth and status of the two families.

With her right to property, inheritance and divorce the Viking woman had more legal rights than most women elsewhere in Europe at the time. Children were also protected by law as members of the family, and their rights to inheritance even after a divorce.

The poorer people

At the smaller farms the systems with men's work and women's work were less strict. With no servants and slaves, everybody had to contribute what they could for the survival of the family in the harsh Scandinavian climate.

The Slaves

Slaves had no legal rights except as property of the owner. They could be bought and sold and the slave-owner could treat them as he or she pleased. If a slave-owner killed one of his own slaves it was not regarded as murder. If a free-man killed a slave belonging to someone else he had to pay the price of a slave as a compensation. The price would be about the same as for a farm animal.

When a woman slave had a child it became the property of her owner. If she was sold while pregnant, the child would become the property of her new owner.