

Topics: Buildings and Food

Notes for parents and teachers

Buildings

The two most common types of building material in the Viking Age were wood or stone. Stone was used for the most prestigious and permanent buildings, notably high-status churches. Elaborate church doorways surrounding by carvings of plant scroll design have survived at Britford (Wiltshire) and Lastingham and Ledsham (Yorkshire). Inside, the wealthier churches would have been embellished with sculpture, wall paintings, glass, floor tiles, metalwork and textiles. Roofs were constructed from thatch or wooden shingles (as they were for wooden buildings). In some stone buildings stone tiles and lead were used.

Wooden buildings were most common and oak was the favoured material for building. Wattle infilled structural timber, creating a light-weight structure. The wattles could be tightly woven to keep out bad weather, sometimes in double layers, and daub or cob could be used to keep walls windproof. Tenth and eleventh century towns contained buildings with timber lined cellars which could be used for storage. Timber houses had walls which were rarely straight and rounded edges were common. In standard Viking style houses the structural timbers consisted of a row of internal posts with the roof edges resting on the side walls, there was a central hearth and smoke would usually drift through the thatch, there were no windows and an open door at the end wall and the fire would be the main sources of light. The halls of lords might be expected to have a more elaborate construction, with heavy timbers used to facilitate buildings on a large scale. At Calne (Wiltshire) there is reference to a two-storey building collapsing when a royal council was held there in 977 and several people were killed. An early timber jointed building which has survived in Tamworth mill (Staffordshire), which has been date chronologically to 846x864.

Food

Food in the Viking Age was characteristic of other north European pre-modern diets. There was a mixed diet of animal products (meat and dairy), cultivated cereals, vegetables, fruits as well as foods which could be hunted or gathered from the wild.

Cows, sheep and goats were reared for meat and milk as well as for their hides. As milk has a short shelf life, a lot was used to make butter and cheese, which along with bread would have been a dietary staple. Pigs were perhaps the most widely available source of red meat as they could be reared close to home and fed household waste, before being slaughtered to make a range of meat products including pork, bacon, black pudding, sausages and so on. Domestic fowl (hens, geese, ducks) were also reared for meat and eggs. The elite diet was supplemented by the high-class sport of hunting to include venison, wild boar and wild birds, and a wide variety of meats would be the mark of a rich person's table. Sea fish, freshwater fish and shellfish were a significant part of the diet in coastal areas. Salt was an important preservative to keep foods like meat and cheese over the winter.

Unlike today's wheat based diet, barley was the main grain grown in Viking Age England, although rye, oats and wheat would have also been familiar. Grains were important for brewing beer, with hops and other herbs added to flavour, weak beer was often drunk in preference to water and it was more readily available than wine or mead. Cereals were also used for baking bread, porridge and pottage (a type of soup or stew mixing grains with pulses, vegetables and other ingredients at hand). Flour was often ground by hand which made bread more coarse and dense although milled flour became more available from the eighth century onwards. White flour was made by sieving the coarse

particles out and it was therefore more expensive to produce and its consumption was another badge of elite status.

The rich would have drunk imported wines, but also mead which was made from fermented honey. Honey was also an important sweetener for a variety of foods. Native fruits and nuts (e.g. apples, strawberries, pears, cherries, plums, blackberries, hazelnuts) would have been gathered in the wild as well as being grown in gardens and orchards. Vegetables were also cultivated, including onions (the topic of one of the Anglo-Saxon riddles), beans, cabbages etc. Other exotic foods such as walnuts and spices were imported.