

Topics: Family and Leisure

Information for parents and teachers

Family

Kinship had a central role in the organisation of Viking Age society. In the absence of a strong central government, the family was the unit which determined status, wealth and protection for its members. The maintenance of law and order depended on kin-groups acting as self-regulating units. A crime committed by one member of a kin-group might obligate all members to contribute to pay compensation. Similarly, it was the responsibility of the kin-group to ensure justice for one of its members as they all potentially benefited from compensation, and the reputation of the family was maintained. If appropriate compensation could not be given or received in relation to crimes committed the situation could escalate into a blood feud between rival families, but this was normally seen as a last resort as this was a situation in which no-one benefited.

Families might hold certain possessions in common such as kin-land, which individual members of the family could not sell or gift away without the permission of the other family members. In addition, a women's interests continued to be protected by her kin-group after her marriage and they were expected to fulfil some responsibilities for her children should she die before they reached adulthood. It was an obligation for the family to care for its own members who could not look after themselves, including those with physical and mental illness, disability and minors.

The kin-group was defined in law by an individual's paternal kin, but the maternal kindred may hold a share of responsibility in certain circumstances or if there were no paternal kin alive. Marriage was an obvious way of expanding one's family group, but there were also bonds of fictive kinship such as fosterage and godparenthood. People without an effective kin-group included foreigners, foundlings, clerics and freed slaves. Such people fell under the protection of their lord and the king. Kinship ties became progressively weaker in the late Viking Age and subsequently as lordship and central government took on an increasingly wide range of roles which had once been within the rights and obligations of a kin-group.

Leisure

Times of work could be limited by daylight hours, weather conditions, holy days as well as the luxury of free time afforded by wealth. Unlike nowadays, individual pastimes such as reading for pleasure, collecting or games for one player were rare. Spare time was often used in fostering social bonds by undertaking family or communal activities, particularly through feasting and drinking. Storytelling and singing were common ways of passing time which could also combined with repetitive tasks that do not require too much concentration such as weaving or digging. Many stories which have been preserved in poems, sagas and carvings probably circulated orally and the skills of a good storyteller, singer or poet would have been highly valued in the ninth and tenth centuries. At royal courts, professional entertainers could be maintained with the skills of a poet combining with duties of royal spin doctor and diplomat.

The harp was an instrument often referred to into aristocratic halls (such as in the household of the Danish king Hrothgar in Beowulf) where stories and poems might be set to music. Other stringed instruments such as lyres were popular. In archaeological contexts, whistles and pipes have been found made from bird bones, as well as horns and trumpets and small metal bells. At Coppergate in York a set of pan pipes was recovered made from box wood. In Ipswich a reed pipe made from a deer bone has been recovered. In the tenth century there is evidence for the triangular harp and bowed instruments being introduced as increasing overseas trade put people in contact with the musical cultures of other peoples. Dancing is also recorded in formal and informal contexts.

Board games were another activity that could be used to while away time both indoors and outdoors. Chess does not seem to have arrived in England until the eleventh century, but gaming pieces are a common find on archaeological sites, indicative of games such as Nine Men's Morris or Hnefatafl, which combined entertainment with ideas of military strategy and such games seem to have been a features of court life. Dice games and gambling are also attested.

Games and entertainment also included acrobatics, wrestling, ball games and hoop rolling. Sports such as horse racing, dog racing, swimming, ice skating are also recorded in sources ranging from the seventh to the twelfth centuries. Aristocratic pastimes of hunting and falconry/ hawking are particularly well attested. King Alfred's biographer Asser tells us that the king employed falconers and hawkers and hunting birds could fetch a very high price. Hunting scenes are a common theme on Viking Age sculpture.

Although children from an early age, seem to have been involved in the world of work, even if just helping with domestic tasks, there is evidence that children of the past, just as now, were particularly playful. In archaeological contexts where there is good preservation of wooden artefacts, such as tenth century Dublin, toys have been found including a small wooden boat from Fishamble Street and a toy sword from Christchurch place. Graffiti and sketches on wood and stone have also been recovered from Viking Age sites.