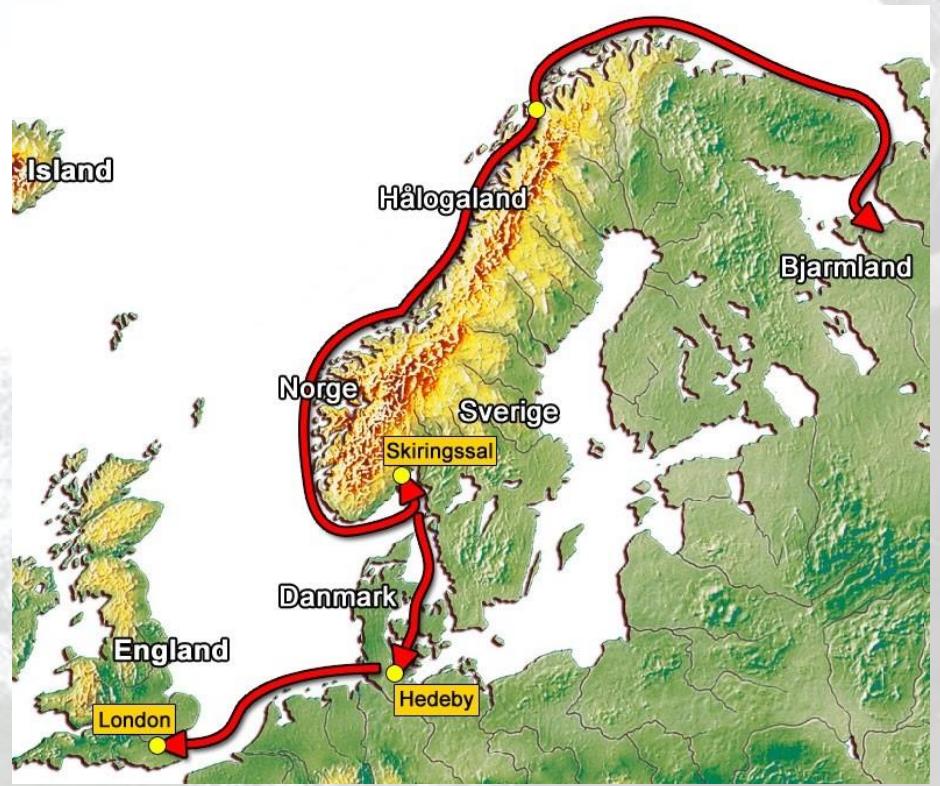


Who Were the Vikings?



Map of Ohtere's voyages from his home in Hålogaland, Norway.

Viking Social Structure

A Viking-Age poem, *Rígsþula* ('The Lay of Ríg'), describes a simplified scheme of how society was divided. In the poem, a mysterious figure called Ríg visits three families and causes them to give birth to children who give rise to the three key groups in Viking society.

The first family Ríg meets consists of poor farmers who eat simple food, and name their son Prall, or 'slave'. He and his children are the ancestors of the servile people in Viking society.

The second family Ríg meets are farmers and craftspeople, who provide better food for their visitor. They later name their son Karl, or 'farmer/freeman'. He and his offspring are the ancestors of free farmers and skilled workers.

The third family Ríg encounters are rich and refined, and provide excellent food. Their son is named Jarl, meaning 'earl/noble'. In time he is trained to hunt, ride and handle weapons. Ríg expresses most pride in Jarl's accomplishments, and in time he becomes a powerful lord, as do his children.

In reality Viking society was more complicated. Social groups were not established solely by descent, and status could be won or lost.

Raiders – and Traders and Farmers

Many Vikings were not full-time raiders or traders, but farmers. They lived with their families in communities across Scandinavia, and would either go away on voyages seasonally, or for a period of several years, returning with treasure and stories to tell.

One rich Viking traveller, named Ohthere, told the English king Alfred the Great (871–99) about his life when he visited England. Ohthere described how he would farm and live off the land in Northern Norway, using a wide variety of animals from horses to birds, reindeer and walrus. He was also an expert sailor and a successful merchant, who journeyed north into Arctic Russia, and south to the trading settlement of Kaupang near modern Oslo.

On this 11th-century runestone from Sweden, a rich chieftain proudly proclaims how he owns land and has built a bridge.



Women and Marriage

Women's roles in the Viking Age centred around the home and the farm. They also practised certain crafts such as weaving and spinning, both for their own family and for the market. Some women travelled long distances and acted as the leaders of their family. It is debatable whether they wielded weapons in battle.

Viking women had a higher degree of liberty in choosing whether and whom to marry than their counterparts in many contemporary societies. Men hoping to marry had to present a suitable dowry or gift for the woman's family, and also have the resources to set up a home for the new family. It is thought that demand for the wealth needed to accomplish these tasks was an important factor in the beginning of Viking raids.



Modern women re-enact the roles of Viking women on a farm.