Female Vikings?

Could women be Vikings? Strictly speaking, they could not. The Old Norse word *vikingar* is exclusively applied to men, usually those who sailed from Scandinavia in groups to engage in the activities of raiding and trading in Britain, Europe and the East. But some Vikings stayed behind in these regions, and Scandinavian colonies were also established in the North Atlantic (Faroe, Iceland, Greenland).

Women could and did play a part in this process of settlement. Iceland, for instance, was uninhabited, and a permanent population could only be established if women also made the journey there.

Most journeys from Scandinavia involved sea-crossings in small, open ships with no protection from the elements. Families heading for the North Atlantic colonies would also have to take all the livestock they would need to establish a new farm, and the journey cannot have been pleasant.

The Viking colonists settled down to the farming life in their new home, or established themselves as traders and became town-dwellers. Both farming and trading were family businesses, and women were often left in charge when their husbands were away or dead. There is also evidence that women could make a living in commerce in the Viking Age. Merchants' scales and weights found in female graves in Scandinavia suggest an association between women and trade

Viking women in England

The 'great Danish army' that criss-crossed and conquered much of England in the 860s and 870s probably had camp-followers, although these need not have been Scandinavian women. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle notes that a Viking army operating in the years 892-5 was accompanied by women and children, who had to be put in a place of safety while the army fought. But this army arrived in England after raiding on the continent and at least some of the women may have come from there. The first Viking settlers who turned their swords into ploughshares are unlikely to have had Scandinavian wives.

However, place-names and language suggest that there was considerable Scandinavian immigration into those areas of England controlled by the Viking invaders, later known as the 'Danelaw'. Although the nature and extent of the Scandinavian immigration is contested by scholars, the most convincing explanation of the evidence is that there was a peaceful migration of Scandinavian families to parts of the north and east of England throughout the tenth century. Recent finds of large numbers of low-grade, Scandinavian-style female jewellery, particularly in Lincolnshire, have been taken to show the presence of Scandinavian women there in the tenth century.

There was a further significant influx of Scandinavians into England during the reign of Cnut in the 11th century. These new, higher-class immigrants left their mark in London and the south, areas not previously subject to Scandinavian settlement. The rune stone from St Paul's, London, with its fragmentary inscription which tells us only that it was

commissioned by Ginna (a woman) and T-ki (a man), shows two Scandinavians asserting their cultural affiliations at the heart of the English kingdom.

Daily life

The mythological poem Rígsþula, written down in medieval Iceland, accounts for the divine origin of the three main social classes. But it also gives us a snapshot of daily life in the Viking Age. According to the poem, the woman of the slave-class wore old-fashioned clothes and served bread. The woman of the yeoman class wore a cap, a blouse with broaches and a kerchief around her neck and used a spindle for weaving. The aristocratic woman is was busy preening herself: she wore a blouse of smooth linen, a spreading skirt with a blue bodice, a tall headdress and appropriate jewellery. She served silver dishes of pork and poultry on a white linen cloth, washed down with wine.

The archaeological evidence shows that women were often buried in their best outfits, including a pair of oval brooches of gilt bronze, which held up a woollen overdress worn with a linen underdress. Many spindle whorls have been found, as most women would have been engaged in spinning and other textile production much of the time.

The standard Viking Age house was rectangular and had just one room, in which everything took place around a central hearth. As in most traditional societies, women spent much of their time indoors in such houses, cooking, making clothing and caring for children and the elderly, but they would also have had responsibility for the dairy.

Women of influence

Most women's lives were bounded by hearth and home, but they had great influence within this sphere. The keys with which many were buried symbolise their responsibility for, and control over, the distribution of food and clothing to the household.

Some women made their mark through exceptional status or achievement. One of the richest burials of Viking Age Scandinavia is that of the Oseberg 'queen', buried in a very grand style with a richly-decorated ship and large numbers of high-quality grave goods in 834. Later in that century, Aud the 'deep-minded' lived a veritable Viking Age odyssey. The daughter of a Norwegian chieftain in the Hebrides, she married a Viking based in Dublin and, when both her husband and son had died, took charge of the family fortunes, organising a ship to take her and her granddaughters to Orkney, Faroe and Iceland. She settled in Iceland, distributing land to her followers, and was remembered as one of its four most important settlers, and as a notable early Christian.

Queen Emma sums up the cultural connections of the Viking Age. Her father was Duke Richard of Normandy, descended from its Viking founder Rollo, while her mother is said to have been Danish. Emma was married to two kings of England, the English Æthelred and the Danish Cnut, and was the mother of two more. With Cnut, she was a great patron of the Church, and after his death she commissioned the Encomium Emmae, a Latin account of Danish kings in England in the 11th century, ensuring that her portrait was included in the manuscript.