

Viking Age society in Scandinavia was hierarchically organized and shaped by its geography (Haywood, 28–33, 18–19). Structures ranged from isolated rural farms to emerging urban commercial centers. These were linked by complex networks of royal power, laws, and kinship (Brink, 23–24; Skre, 83–85). Above the ordinary farms in the hierarchy stood “central sites”, aristocratic estates such as Tissø, Lejre, and Uppåkra (Hedeager, 14–16; Jørgensen, 77–80). These sites served as political, religious, and artisanal centers for the ruling elite and were often characterized by enormous halls (Christensen, 121–124). During the 700s and 800s, the first true urban-like permanent settlements, densely packed and with street-regulated plots for merchants and craftsmen, began to emerge, such as Birka, Hedeby, Ribe, and Kaupang (Skre, 83–84). These were frequently associated with royal power and long-distance trade (Skre, 86–88; Ambrosiani, 94–96). Scandinavia's spatial organization was divided into smaller regions or provinces (land), united by a common legal system centered on a thing (þing) (Brink, 23–24).

Society was highly stratified, something later reflected in the mythological poem *Rígsþula*, which describes the divine origins of three distinct social classes: unfree thralls, free farmers and artisans, and warriors/jarls (Brink, 24, 50–54; handout). The aristocracy, with chieftains, jarls, and emerging kings, based their power on land ownership, control of trade, and the maintenance of private warrior retinues (a *lið* or *hirð*), which were bound to their leaders by strict codes of loyalty (Haywood, 32–33, 56–57; Krag, 647). Although society was distinctly male-dominated, free women held a relatively strong position with important rights and responsibilities (Haywood, 44). Women from the elite lacked formal political roles, but could have considerable informal influence through strategic marriages and concubinage (Magnúsdóttir, 40–43).

Runic inscriptions provide valuable evidence of social roles, property rights, and spatial organization (Williams, 281, 284). Examples: The Bällsta stones (U 225/226) with þingstaðr; Forsaringen has Scandinavia's oldest legal text with “the people's right”; Hovgården (U 11) explains social hierarchies; bryti/steward (Brink, 26–28, 52–53). Burial customs reflect social differences and gender roles; textile tools in women's graves, craft tools or weapons in men's graves (Haywood, 32–33, 44). Class differences are evident at sites such as Oseberg, Gokstad, Valsgårde, and Ladby (Price, 262–265; Hedeager, 15–16; Haywood, 56). Archaeology also reveals slavery in Scandinavia (Price, 266; Brink, 54). The Icelandic sagas (*Sturlunga saga*, *Njáls saga*) preserve the mentalities, marriage policies, and kin-based structures of the free and aristocratic classes (Magnúsdóttir, 44–45). Contemporary foreign eyewitness accounts, e.g., Ibn Fadlan, describe social stratification among Norse-related groups in the East (Price, 266; Montgomery).

Kings were primarily rulers of people rather than of geographic territories (Haywood, 32–33, 120–124; Androshchuk, 49–51). During the Viking Age, the Scandinavians underwent a fundamental transformation from pagan societies with charismatic chieftains with retinues and unstable ‘minor kingdoms’ to Christian polities with increasingly institutionalized military organization, later reflected in the *leiðangr* systems known from the medieval laws (Skre, 85; Williams, 198–199; Brink, 23, 621–622; Haywood, 120–134, 136).

At the end of the Viking Age, there was a shift towards territorial, unified, and centralized kingdoms (Brink, 23). Smaller chiefdoms were giving way to organized states (Haywood, 54; Lindkvist, 668). Royal power rested to a much greater extent on laws and fixed institutions rather than on the king's personal warrior qualities (Skre, 85; Haywood, 102). To gain military and administrative control, kings like Harald Bluetooth in Denmark began building networks of ring forts (Trelleborgs) to secure more direct territorial control over the kingdom, rather than relying on the indirect authority of local chieftains (Haywood, 124–126). The transition to Christianity played a decisive role in this development (Haywood, 106). The new religion brought an ideology of divinely sanctioned kingship that elevated the king above his subjects (Haywood, 106; Krag, 648). The Church also helped strengthen royal administration and facilitated more regularized forms of governance and taxation (Haywood, 106). An efficiently administered kingdom made royal power less dependent on personal raiding (Lindkvist, 668–671; Haywood, 120–134 (implicit)).