

The Untold History of Slavery in the Viking Age

When one thinks of the Viking Age, images of fierce warriors, longships, and exploration often come to mind. However, there is another dark aspect of Viking society that is often overlooked - slavery.

Contrary to popular belief, the Vikings were not simply raiders and traders. They were also actively involved in the slave trade, which played a significant role in their society. In this article, we will uncover the brutal history of slavery in the Viking Age.

The Origins of Viking Slavery

The Viking Age, spanning from the late 8th century to the early 11th century, was a time of great expansion and exploration for the Norse people. As they traveled to distant lands, they encountered different cultures and societies. One of the practices they adopted was slavery.



Thraldom: A History of Slavery in the Viking Age

by Stefan Brink(Kindle Edition)

★★★★★ 5 out of 5

Language : English
File size : 42283 KB
Text-to-Speech : Enabled
Screen Reader : Supported
Enhanced typesetting : Enabled
Print length : 404 pages
Lending : Enabled

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The Vikings primarily acquired slaves through warfare. When they raided towns and monasteries, they would often capture the inhabitants and bring them back as slaves. However, not all slaves were obtained through violence. Some slaves were obtained through trade with other societies.

Slavery was widely accepted in Viking society and had different purposes. Slaves were used for manual labor, such as farming and construction, and they were also valued as commodities to be traded or given as gifts.

Treatment of Slaves

Life as a Viking slave was cruel and harsh. Slaves were considered property and had no legal rights. They could be bought, sold, or killed by their owners without any repercussions.

Slaves were subjected to physical and sexual abuse, with no recourse for justice. They lived in deplorable conditions, often housed in small and cramped quarters. Slavery was an integral part of Viking society, and the slaves were treated as inferior beings.

Roles of Slaves

While most slaves were employed in manual labor, some had more specialized roles. Female slaves often served as domestic workers, taking care of household tasks and raising children. They were responsible for cooking, cleaning, and looking after the children of their masters.

Male slaves, on the other hand, were assigned various tasks depending on their skills. Some became skilled craftsmen, working in iron, wood, or jewelry. Others were used for farming, herding livestock, or as rowers on Viking longships during their expeditions.

The Outlook on Freedom

Although slaves were considered property, there were instances where they could earn their freedom. The practice of freeing slaves was known as "manumission." Slaves could gain their freedom by serving their masters faithfully or by performing heroic acts. It was also possible for slaves to be given their freedom as a reward for their loyal service.

However, the chances of gaining freedom were slim, and many slaves remained in bondage for life. The system of slavery was deeply ingrained in Viking society, and escaping the clutches of slavery was a rare occurrence.

The Decline of Slavery

As the Viking Age drew to a close, so did the prevalence of slavery in Norse society. With the spread of Christianity, the attitudes towards slavery began to change. The Church actively discouraged the owning of slaves and campaigned for their emancipation.

Additionally, as Viking kingdoms became more centralized, the need for slaves as a form of labor decreased. The economy evolved, and the focus shifted towards a feudal system where serfs replaced slaves as the primary labor force.

Legacy of Slavery

The impact of Viking slavery cannot be underestimated. It shaped their society, economy, and culture. Slavery was a source of wealth and power for the Viking elite, enabling them to maintain their status and influence.

Moreover, the consequences of the Viking slave trade extended beyond their immediate society. Slaves captured by the Vikings were often traded across

Europe and the Middle East, spreading the influence of Viking culture and leaving a lasting imprint on the regions they touched.

The Hidden Truth Unveiled

While the Viking Age is often romanticized as a time of adventure and exploration, it is vital to acknowledge the dark side of their history. Slavery was an integral part of Viking society, and it played a significant role in their expansion and wealth.

As we delve into the complexities and nuances of history, it becomes evident that no society is free from flaws. By unraveling the hidden truths of the past, we gain a more comprehensive understanding of our collective history.



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Nordic slavery is an elusive phenomenon, with few similarities to the systematic exploitation of slaves in households, mines, and amphitheaters in the ancient Mediterranean or the widespread slavery at American plantations during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Scandinavians in the early Middle Ages lived in a society foreign to us, characterized by different and shifting social

statuses. A person could be at once socially respected and unfree. It was possible to hand oneself over as a slave to someone else in exchange for protection and food. One could be sentenced temporarily to enslavement for some offense but later purchase his manumission. Young men could enter into a kind of "contract" with a king or chieftain to join his retinue, accepting his authority, patronage, and jurisdiction, while at the same time making a quick social elevation.

Slavery was widespread all over Europe during the early Middle Ages and Scandinavians, as Stefan Brink illustrates in this book, became a major player in the northern slave trade. However, the Vikings were not particularly interested in taking slaves to Scandinavia; instead, their "business model" seems to have been to raid, abduct, and then sell captured people at major slave markets. Their goal was not people but silver. Using a wide variety of source materials, including archaeology, runes, Icelandic sagas, early law, place names, personal names, and not least etymological and semantic analyses of the terminology of slaves, *Thralldom* provides the most thorough survey of slavery in the Viking Age.



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