

The population

The construction of society

Viking Age society was hierarchical, with the king at the top and surrounded by an aristocratic elite. This very small group of people was very wealthy, and owned much land. The upper third of society has left by far the most sources, forming the core of our knowledge of the period. Therefore, they are also the ones that we know best.

The free

Freemen constituted by far the majority of the population. Most were peasants, but the category contains all social classes, from poor people who owned no land to the rich aristocracy who owned huge areas. A freeman enjoyed the protection of the King's Law. He had the right to carry weapons, and to be heard at the Thing.

The mobile society

The group of freemen also contained craftsmen, hunters, professional warriors and merchants. They could either be employed on the larger farmsteads, or they could travel around the country for markets, offering their services and goods. This group was more mobile than the rest of society, and they could therefore exploit the possibilities offered by an increasingly sophisticated social structure.

By entering the service of the King, or by trading with foreign lands, much wealth could be accumulated by artful and competent people. Some of them succeeded in acquiring wealth and lands, and thus improve their social status considerably.