



Sons of Norway
HERITAGE PROGRAMS



MiniPresentation6

VIKING WOMEN

Viking Women

At a time when women's issues are receiving increased attention, it can be helpful to look back in history to the roles women have played in past societies. So let's take time to journey back 1,000 years to the women of the Viking Age.

First, love—The Norsemen were not particularly romantic about the marriage union until near the close of the Viking era. Marriages were arranged by families, often with wealth and property taking precedence over love. In spite of this, many relationships were doubtless very close. We have many stories of hardships women endured to be with their husbands. And in death, women and men were buried side by side with equal care being taken in dress and other arrangements.

Physically, the ideal woman had very pale skin with blond or red hair. Her hair was worn long and down her back until marriage. Afterwards, it would be on top of her head, usually covered with a cap. A good appearance was made when a wife wore a long, sleeveless dress. A woman's arms were shown at full length when the family entertained or attended important functions. Arms were covered with a sleeveless cape when the person was exposed to sun or wind. The cape was such that it could be thrown back indoors. Young girls wore a short skirt and long boots. Undergarments included a plain or pleated chemise of fine fabric.

Women wore quite a lot of jewelry. Often the breast portion of her garment was covered with a sort of external brassiere made of bronze. A container made of silver, with scissors, needles, keys and a knife sometimes hung from her neck or belt. At other times, these objects hung from domed bronze brooches on fine chains. The well-dressed woman also wore an abundance of elaborate rings, necklaces and bracelets.

The greatest virtue in a Viking woman was the fortitude to do what had to be done, without show of fear and without complaint. She was prepared to accept what the Three Norn Sisters had woven for her on their loom of fate. We find a gripping example in the famous Icelandic Saga of Njal ('Nyawl). A couple is trapped by enemies in their home and the house is set afire. The wife refuses to leave her husband's side when she has the choice. They don't discuss the matter, plead, or pray for deliverance. Instead, they talk together in bed till they are suffocated by the smoke from the fire. With pride she had been his wife; with pride she dies with him.

The Viking saga glorify many women: Ragnhild, whose son became the first king of a united Norway; Princess Gyda, who turned down the same King Harald until he had conquered all his royal rivals; and Inga of Varteig, who walked barefoot on hot iron to prove that her son was truly a king's heir—to mention just a few. Viking women were strong and courageous, and a vital force in Viking society.