

AN EARLY MEAL

*An early meal
Should a man often take
And not go without it into company;
(Otherwise) he sits and sulks,
Looks as if he were hungry,
And cannot talk.*

~ Havamál (Paul B du Chaillu 1890)

This advice can be found in Havamál, a collection of aphorisms, advice and observations about life in general in The Poetic Edda. Although its aphorisms range across subjects from love to death, several of them concern eating, drinking and feasting.

The same preoccupation with food can be found in the sagas and myths, where food, drink, feasting and cooking are mentioned frequently. This probably reflected the important role food played in the life of most people. Although the daily life of a farmer or fisherman revolved around the production of food, the essential nature of food would make it ever-present in all walks of life, from thrall to jarl.

Today, food is one of our most basic needs, yet it can bring us the utmost pleasure. While working at open-air museums, and participating in their events, I have noticed that this is also true among re-enactors who try to recreate life in the Viking Age.

However, despite food's central role, it is often bypassed in studies of the period, and is one of the areas in which most misconceptions have emerged. We are all familiar with the popular imagery of a Viking gorging on a roasted leg of lamb, washed down with copious amounts of mead. Even if that may have been the case on rare occasions, reality was far more complex.

Perhaps because of a lack of time and resources, this rather mythical view of Viking Age food has unfortunately tended to be the standard fare in the re-enactment camps.

The idea to write this cookbook has been with me since I started work on my Ph.D. thesis on the same topic, but the notion of a book did not start to form until I worked at the Lofoten Viking museum in the summer of 2010. In Lofoten, I conducted experimental cooking of Viking Age food in the longhouse, and as I tried the various possible techniques, I had to create a few recipes in order to have something with which to cook. At that point, I realised that I had the beginnings of a cookbook. Upon my return to Sweden, I talked to my co-writer and colleague Hanna Tunberg, and we set out to make a Viking Age cookbook.

The aim of this cookbook is to give a plausible take on what could have been an old Norse cuisine. The cookbook is divided into a number of regional chapters, comprising dishes based upon archaeological finds from each location – both ingredients and cooking utensils. This will, we hope, reflect that already during this period there would have been differing regional cuisines. In some cases we have taken the liberty of choosing ingredients that have not been found in the actual region the dish should represent, but the rationale behind these choices will be clearly stated in the background of each recipe.

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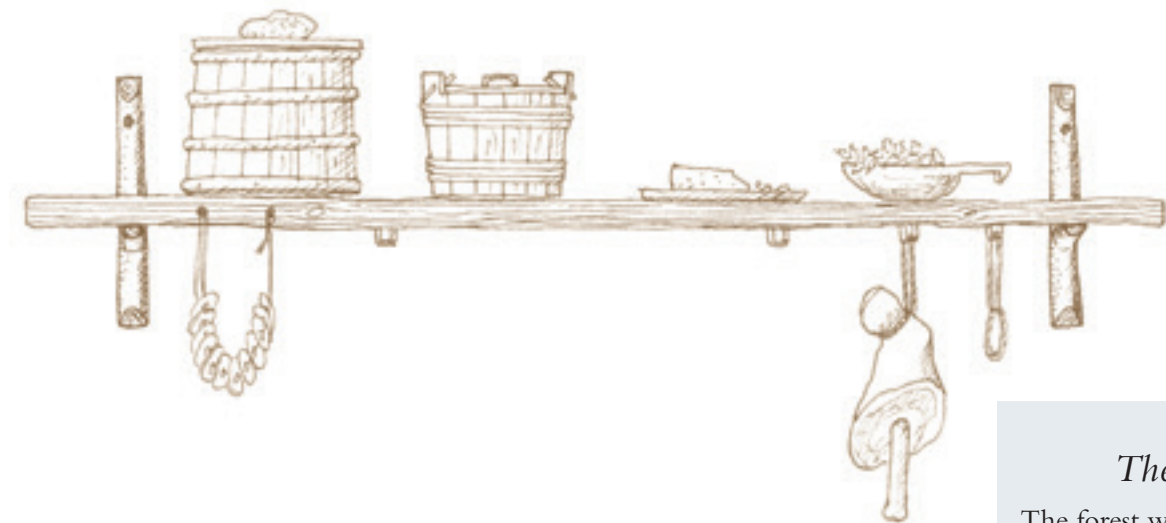


What Did They Eat?

For farmers, traders or raiders alike, eating and drinking were more than just daily necessities; they also served to bring people together, create alliances, connect with the gods, support a loyal henchman or simply to provide some pleasure in an otherwise harsh life. Concerns about procuring, storing and cooking food would have been present in most minds every day. On Iceland, the struggle to obtain malt and meat is frequently mentioned in sagas about feuds and families. Such importance of food and ingredients can even be said to have been the cause for some family feuds. For most people, though, the struggle to obtain food took a more mundane character.

For all but the elite, the culinary year would have looked more or less the same from one year to the next.

The agricultural year begins in spring, as farmers turn to necessary tasks: manuring, ploughing and sowing the spring crops. Despite association between spring and new life and regrowth, actual food would be scarce around the farm at this time. There might still be some pickled or dried vegetables from the autumn, and dried or smoked meat from the winter slaughter was still in some abundance. However, the previous year's cereals would now be in short supply, and dairy products would now comprise only the driest of old cheeses. A few late-spring greens might provide a welcome addition to the food. For the more festive occasions perhaps one could spare a suckling pig or newborn lamb.



Worst from a culinary viewpoint would most years have been the summer. At this time the larders would have been largely emptied, the meat from last autumn's slaughter would have been running low and so, too, the cereals that were supposed to last until the next harvest. A relief in this scarce cuisine could have come from milk products as it was mainly in the summer that the cattle, sheep and goats produced milk that was not reserved for their young. Another possible addition would come from various field greens (e.g. nettles, sorrels and oraches) that grew at this time of the year. For those farmers who had access to the sea, fishing would also have helped to stock up the larder. It was, however, not until the end of the summer that the large schools of herring would pass through the southern Scandinavian waters. In the north, stockfish, or dried cod, would have been ready to be stored or traded at this time. Hunting, on the other hand, was never done on a large enough scale to effectively influence the daily diet.

The Forest

The forest would have played a multi-faceted role during this period; while it could provide some important goods and resources it was also the great unknown, a much more definitive border than the sea.

In the border between forest and fields, most of the recurring activities of the forest took place. It is in this part that pigs were herded, nuts and berries were collected and some of the firewood gathered. Use of the forest further afield was either limited to certain people, i.e. the elite who would go on the occasional big game hunt, outlaws who had nowhere else to go, or woodsmen clearing them to produce timber or arable land.

At the same time, gathering berries and nuts from the forests was regarded with some suspicion. In Anglo-Saxon leechdoms from the period, pregnant women were warned not to live on fruits, berries and acorns.



With the harvests of cereals, fruits and garden plants the autumn would have been a rich culinary season, even if meat was getting scarcer. Although the cereals were meant to last the entire year, it is probable that the stronger beers and some festive breads were made at this time. It would certainly have been the proper time to turn the barley into malt for the year's brewing. To the extent that one pickled vegetables or dried fruits, it would also have been the perfect season.

At the start of the winter, the main task would have been the yearly slaughter. All the animals that were to become meat for the next year would probably have been slaughtered at this time. This provided an opportunity for some fresh meat, but most of it would have been dried, smoked or preserved in some other way. The cereals would still have been fairly plentiful, so the beer could be brewed strong and the food was possibly fairly starchy and rich. With this one would probably have eaten such vegetables that kept over the winter, such as tubers – mainly turnips – and kale.

In most years, autumn and winter would have been the most well-provided seasons, and it is not surprising that most of the larger feasts and the visiting of neighbours are described to have taken place at this time – if weather allowed.

A major part of the food consumed would have been what the farm could produce locally. Mainly one seems to have been limited to what could be grown within or near cultivated areas. There was generally only limited use of nearby woodlands as a pantry, with only one or two percent of the bones found belonging to wild animals and even then mainly from fur-yielding ones. That said, it is possible that one would have used the nearby woods as a grazing ground for pigs.



On the other hand, the sea and inland waterways would have been a welcome and important source of both food and other major products. Train-oil could have been produced from whale blubber and seals' fat, and the meat would have been stored and eaten. Fish could either have been eaten fresh or stored by drying.

Still, most farms would not have been able to produce all that was needed to maintain a major household. This was especially true in the northernmost parts of Scandinavia and the Atlantic islands. Quite early on, food was traded far and wide. In the sagas, goods from the north of Norway are brought south to be traded for important staples such as flour, grains or malt. In the north of Norway and on Iceland, one would expect to find a food culture based mainly on fish, dairy-products and, to some extent, barley. In contrast, southern cuisine would have included more cereals and plant foods in general, with some fish and dairy-products.

In this book we have mainly concentrated on the food varieties in central Scandinavia, i.e. the areas covered by Sweden, Denmark and Norway. In the easternmost and westernmost parts of Scandinavia other influences, preferences and conditions may have been at play and would have influenced the food in other ways. Still, the Icelandic and Greenlandic food traditions would have shared many traits with the observations we can make in Lofoten. The Scandinavian colonies on the British Isles would have been influenced in yet other ways (see Jorvik p.104).



Taphonomy

Taphonomy is the study on how wear and tear will affect animal and plant remains over time. Only a small part of what was once used in the kitchen will actually be left for the archaeologist/osteologist to examine. Important factors include the fact that bones from small and young animals are more easily destroyed and burnt bones are better preserved than unburned. Cooking methods, the composition of the soil, the eventual presence of household pigs are all factors in the case.

The most obvious example would be to compare the femur of a cow with a vertebra of a salmon. While the former may display both cut marks and bite marks, and may even be burnt and somewhat crushed, it is a good chance that the end parts survive in the ground. The latter, on the other hand, will break down in the earth much faster, it may be swallowed and dissolved in the gastric acids or simply crushed into powder under the heel of the next person walking past it. Not even by counting the bones can we make a good comparison between species. One bone from a cow puts more meat on the table than five bones from two chickens. By considering the possible influences on the material, we can reach a better understanding on how to read the material.



Fish

In most areas, fish and other sea creatures played an essential role in the everyday diet. The long Scandinavian coastline made fishing a valuable trade, and fish bones are not only found in coastal settlements but also further inland. Along the Atlantic coast, cod was probably the most fished species, but herring, plaice and halibut were also caught and eaten. Further south in the brackish waters of Öresund and the Baltic Sea, herring was increasingly important. However, it is possible that fish were traded over long distances. Cod from the North Atlantic could end up as far afield as Uppåkra in Scania and York in England. Though fish was probably eaten fresh more often than meat, there were already ways to preserve it. Perhaps the most important technique was to dry the fish, a method still in use in Lofoten (for more information about overseas fish trade and fish drying techniques see the chapter on Lofoten p.40). The frequent presence of fish hooks at burial sites, in areas such as Småland in Sweden, suggests that angling was also common.

Meat

Meat was a festive treat, but could also be part of daily fare. While most animals – cattle, sheep and goats – were kept mainly for their by-products, pigs were kept for their meat alone. Archaeological finds suggest that the most common meat was beef, but pork and mutton would also have been important. However, the size and durability of cattle bones may distort the picture: they tend to disproportionately dominate an archaeological site. This makes comparisons difficult between different animals or indeed different types of food when considering the composition of meals.

Most animals would have been culled at the start of winter in order to keep a balance between saving fodder and maintaining a stock that was strong

enough for the next season. This would have provided a surplus during the winter that was preserved, stored and meant to last until the next slaughter. A yearly slaughter would mean that most meat on the table had usually been smoked, dried, salted or preserved in some way. Fresh meat would have been considered part of a festive meal. In addition, one should probably think of the meat mainly being cut up in small pieces to give the meal some balance rather than being served in large chunks as the base of the dish, as we tend to do today.

Apart from the common domesticated animals, there is also evidence that people ate fowl, horses and, to a lesser degree, hunted animals. At most archaeological sites, remains of game amount to just a small percentage of the total sum or mass of bones. This was probably the result of an attitude towards hunting, especially of larger animals, which was considered a prestigious activity reserved for the elite. This status of hunting most likely arose from the fact that an ordinary farmer would not have had time to leave his farm to frolic in the woods.



Dairy Products

Tables were brought forth and they were given food: bread and butter. Large boxes with skyr were also placed on the table. Bard said: "I regret much that I have no ale to offer you, though I would have liked to". You will have to suffice with that which is here. Ölvi and his followers were very thirsty and drank the skyr. At that Bard brought out some buttermilk and that they drank as well. "It would have pleased me", said Bard, "to give you better drink if I had any".
~ Egil's Saga

Whey Pickles

A traditional Icelandic way of storing food, even meat, is to submerge it in whey. As whey is highly acidic (low pH) the environment is far too acidic for meat to decompose. Instead the proteins may break down somewhat, as when marinating. In order to do this, it is important that the meat is completely submerged into the liquid so that no oxygen reaches it.

Although it is almost impossible to know if this method was in use already in the Viking Age, whey seems to have played an important role in the cuisine at the time. The storage methods available at the time would not have posed any problems, even if the clay vessels would require constant refills of the whey.



Dairy products were another important addition to the protein and energy intake. They would have come in different shapes and forms, but perhaps not in the way we are most commonly used to today. Milk was most likely not drunk fresh but rather used for butter and cheese, or soured to make it last. The milk would have come from common dairy animals, i.e. cattle, sheep and goats.

Butter, together with blubber, marrow and lard, would have been the main source of fat for cooking, possibly complemented by the use of oil from flax, camelina or hemp. During the medieval period butter was not only used for cooking but also as a condiment, primarily for fish. This culinary tradition could mainly be seen in northern parts of Europe. After Christianity made its appearance, fish was mainly consumed during fasting, when a devout Christian was not allowed to eat butter. This discrepancy, between practice and preference on the one hand and ideology on the other, may date back to the Viking Age when no such limitations seem to have existed. The practice of eating fish with butter is still common in Scandinavia. Butter may also have been eaten in a manner that is more widely recognised today, as some of the sagas occasionally mention butter together with bread or other foods.

Beside soured milk, people would also have drunk or eaten skyr, a soured dairy product that seems to have been quite thick yet potable. One saga describes a duel in which a bag of skyr was hit instead of the opponent skyr streamed out of the bag. In present-day Iceland, skyr refers to a curdled product with a consistency more or less like thick yoghurt.

While milk from sheep and goats in many contemporary sources were considered potable, cow's milk seems to have been mainly used for butter and cheese. Evidence of cheese is difficult to find through archaeology, but the general assumption is that fresh cheese has been made since at least the Bronze Age. In late Roman dietary texts there are some references to harder cheese – they try to dissuade the reader from eating it. From Scandinavia, a few passages refer to a harder stored cheese. Harald Sigurdsson's saga mentions how the women of Denmark carved anchors from cheese to mock the Norwegian invader.

His daughters were brought bound to the ships. Earlier that winter they had spoken with scorn about how King Harald would come to Denmark with warships. They cut out anchors of cheese and said that those were enough to hold the ships of the Norwegian king. After this event the following stanza was created: "The Danish women cut anchor rings of cheese."

~ Harald Sigurdsson's Saga

The most common dairy beverages would most likely have been secondary products such as whey and buttermilk rather than drinking the milk directly.

Whey is mentioned as a drink in several of the sagas. To drink fresh milk would have been considered quite luxurious and was possibly only done at certain occasions, and mainly by the elderly or the very young.



Cereal Products

In the south, one could expect to find a food culture in which cereals played an important role. At almost every excavation in central or southern Scandinavia large amounts of barley have been found.

In earlier periods, more or less up until the Iron Age, simple varieties of wheat dominated the crops, but with a worsening climate, an increased use of meagre farmlands and technological advances, barley became the dominant crop during the Iron Age. Wheat, on the other hand, retained its role as the high-status crop. During the Viking Age, archaeological evidence shows two new crops making their appearance in southern Scandinavia – rye and oats.

The exact use of the crops is somewhat elusive. They all have differing characteristics, with rye and wheat preferred for leavened bread and barley for beer, but it is impossible to distinguish any such differences from the archaeological material. In fact, the breads of Birka seem to have contained all the above cereals in various combinations.

It is easy to think of cereals mainly being used for bread and baking, but while bread had an important role, cereals would mainly have been used to make porridges and beer. Both are frequently mentioned in the sagas and other sources. Beer and brewing can be identified either directly through residues in drinking vessels, or through vestiges of the processes, such as malted barley, or locations where the malt may have been dried. Bread seems to often have been regarded as a symbol of wealth and prosperity.

Viking Age Bread

Archaeological finds of bread display a great variety of shapes, though the most common is a small round-ed flat cake approximately 10 cm across and about ½–1 cm thick. In addition the breads could take many shapes from small balls, to larger flat breads, to what has been interpreted as a part of a pretzel. The thickness of the breads, and the available milling techniques, suggests that the bread was not likely to have been made for drying and storing.

Most of the breads seem to have been baked on a flat stone or in an iron pan, but people may have also baked bread under a baking bell or in an oven.

Although the breads stand out in the archaeological material from Birka and the nearby areas, one ought to remember that most were found in graves and therefore do not reflect common food, but rather something eaten at feasts or when having guests.



Beyond the Archaeological Record

When considering the available plant material that we can observe through archaeology, we are fairly limited in what we can use for our interpretations. As plants and seeds are subject to a high degree of deterioration, much is lost in the archaeological record, unless they have been burnt or are found in some type of wetland.

However, in addition to the plants that we can determine through archaeological remains, we may also consider that the cuisine would have used some plants considered native to Scandinavia or introduced prior to the Viking Age. Such plants may include angelica, caraway, wild garlic, black mustard and perhaps even thyme. In addition it is plausible that both juniper berries and spruce also were used. In the sagas and chronicles we can find references to a long-leaved fragrant leek (possibly some kind of wild garlic) and to angelica being gathered.



It is mentioned in a few runic inscriptions referring to someone who is the bread sharer or the provider. In Anglo-Saxon literature the lord of the household is sometimes referred to as the hlef ward – the guardian of the loaf. (For a longer discussion about bread see the chapter on Birka.)

Barley was mainly of the variety “hulled barley” (*Hordeum vulgare*), a sturdy plant that can be grown in harsher climates. If the husks make this crop more durable, they also makes it harder to process. However, in making malt and brewing beer, the hulls can be considered an advantage – today, it is the most common crop used in brewing. It is thus possible that the barley was mainly used to make beer rather than porridge or bread. That said, it should be possible to winnow away some of the husks during the milling process if using a hand mill. The bread produced must have been rather coarse, and it might be such a bread that is described in Rígsthula as being “heavy and thick and swollen with husks.”

Oats were the least common of the four great crops. While already used in the medieval period for porridges, oats can also be found in some of the bread finds from Birka. In contrast to the modern view, however, almost any cereal could have been used to make different porridges, and they were most likely savoury rather than sweet. In medieval cuisine across Europe, gruels and porridges played an important role, either as a dish in themselves or as a side dish, frumenty, which could be both sweet and savoury. Though we lack the actual recipes, several indications points towards a prominent role of porridges in the Viking Age cuisine. From a practical viewpoint porridges would have been advantageous, as the dry seeds would be easier to store and keep longer than actual flour or baked bread. The slow and even heat that can be achieved in a soapstone vessel is perfect for making porridges. These indications, though not conclusive, fit well with passages in different sagas.

The king continued “Porridge and gruel you wish to munch?”

...

And Halle responded “Good and buttery is the mush!”

~ Sneglu-Halle’s Saga

Vegetables

In the northernmost parts of Scandinavia, the climate limits the yield of vegetables, but they had an important role and increasingly so the further south we go. The vegetables of choice would have been pulses (grey peas and broad beans), cabbage, turnip and leeks. In addition to these, one could expect to find that plants growing next to the fields, such as white goose-foot, found in some abundance at most sites, which show evidence of other agricultural activities.

Some medieval Scandinavian sources contain the term “kaalgaard”, meaning “cabbage garden”, but in fact referring to a small patch of land next to the living quarters in which anything green was grown. Although this is mainly regarded as a medieval phenomenon, some finds indicate that the concept existed already during the Viking Age. Next to one of the houses in Uppåkra was a small patch of land in which the earth had been overturned as in gardening. In the soil a few seeds of *Brassica rapa* were found, possibly stemming from the variety more commonly known as turnip.

Turnips and kale would most likely have been a staple in the everyday diet in southern Scandinavia. The turnips would probably have differed somewhat from those that can be found in the markets today, yet they would have belonged to a similar subspecies. The kale was probably close to modern kale or wild cabbage but with a more pronounced stem. The most likely cooking methods would have been boiling, baking or pickling. The tradition of pickling vegetables with lactic acid is probably a very old way to make sure that vegetables keep for a long time.



Seasoning

While the vegetables would have been considered a basic staple, an important role of vegetables would also have been to provide a more varied taste. Herbs used to spice up the food would have included mustard seeds, thyme, dill, caraway, coriander and other plants available at the time.

Most importance seems to have been given to some variety of *allium* (onions, leek or garlic), presumably something similar to ramsons or some other sort with prominent leaves. In several runic inscriptions, leeks or some other sort of allium are mentioned in a way that almost suggests a magical use of the plant. Leek, garlic or some kind of wild allium is also mentioned in the sagas where it is used to diagnose injuries.

Salt Recovery

At the time, salt was probably considered both scarce and exclusive, but such a notion does not paint the full picture, as one has to remember that most of the salt used for preservation can be recovered. In a rather primitive experiment of recovering the salt from the brine of an earlier attempt at smoking tongues, one of the authors managed to recover about 65% of the salt originally used, with better vessels and more practice the result could probably be increased. Even if salt was not added to the food itself, it would have entered the diet and the palate through preserved foods.



She prepared a stone kettle, crushed leek and other grasses in it, and had it boil together. This she fed to the wounded men to find out if they had any bowel-injuries, as one could notice the leek in that which oused forth from such a bowel-wound.

~ *The Saga of Olaf Haraldson, Heimskringla, Snorre Sturlason*

Contacts with the Middle East and Byzantium seem to have been frequent, yet there is no evidence that the eastbound travellers brought home any of the flavours present there. It is likely that the members of the Varangian guard, the Scandinavian bodyguard of the Byzantine emperor, would have been exposed to the delicacies of Constantinople. However, if they did take to eastern cookery, it was probably abandoned when returning home due to the difficulties of obtaining the ingredients. Even if some occasional trader might have brought some spices or other exotic goods north, it would be impossible to distinguish a mere handful of seeds through archaeological means. The earliest known reference to spices reaching northern Europe dates to the late tenth century, when al-Tartushi, a Jewish merchant from Moorish Spain, observed exotic spices at a market in Mainz. *“It is extraordinary that one can find at Mainz, at the extreme end of the West, perfumes and spices that only take their birth in the deepest end of the East”*

The most important condiment today is probably salt, and a dish with no salt is considered by many to be bland and tasteless. Salt has probably been part of European cuisine since the late Stone Age, when it was extracted from mines in central Europe. During the Viking Age, even if salt could be obtained, it is highly unlikely that it was used as a condiment the way we use it today, but may have entered the diet through the ingredients that were preserved with it.

Preservation

Smoking, drying and pickling were the most important ways of ensuring that the food would keep beyond the harvest and slaughter. In addition to these methods, people may also have used salt. Salt would have been a exclusive product, but in no way unattainable up north. In medieval Denmark, salt was extracted from seaweed in a complicated and inefficient process. A possible reference to this procedure is mentioned in the sagas, but there is no support in the archaeological material suggesting any salt extraction from this period. Nevertheless, salt would probably have played a role in preservation, and even as far away as in Iceland the use of salt was mentioned in one of the sagas, although the preserved meat in this case was the severed head of a defeated enemy.

The most common methods of preserving both meat and vegetables would have been through drying. By drying meat or vegetables under controlled

circumstances one could make sure that the food would not deteriorate. Drying could either be done out in the open, as is still the case with stockfish in Lofoten, or food could be hung up in a warm, dry place. Another possibility would be to hang meat in the sauna or malting room for it to be smoked. The most likely method is a hybrid between drying and smoking, in which people would hang the meat, vegetables or seeds to dry near the roof over the hearth, in effect causing them to be cold-smoked by the residual smoke.

There may have also been different kinds of pickling methods. Just as in the above cases it is a question of preventing decomposition, by controlling the environment or state of the food. One such strategy would be to initiate a lactic acid bacterial process, by adding some salt or lactic acid and then keeping the vegetables underwater so that no oxygen entered the mix. A traditional Icelandic way of storing both meat and vegetables would be to keep them in whey, which offers a slightly acidic environment in which no microbes could survive.

Pickling either with lactic acid or whey would require some sort of waterproof vessel, as it is important that the vegetables or meat do not come in contact with the air. Thus one would not want the vessel to lose too much of its liquid. The vessels available at the time would mainly have been made of wood, pottery or leather. The pots of the time were quite porous and lacked any sealing glaze; instead one would most likely have used a vessel of wood. Though carved or lathed bowls may be useful, larger receptacles can be obtained by making staved vessels, either closed as a barrel, or more open buckets. They were in use in the Germanic part of the Roman Empire, and several finds of hoops indicate that staved vessels were also being used in Scandinavia during the Viking Age. People may also have used leather bags for storage, as is indicated in a few of the sagas, where skyr or soured milk are kept in bags.

Sweetness

On the other end of the gustatory scale would have been the few dishes that could offer some sweetness. Although sugar was available in Europe at the time, there were only three sources for sweetness in the north of Europe – dried or frost-bitten fruits or berries, honey, and malt.

Berries and fruits have been found in the excavated material from several settlements, yet one may question the actual sweetness of these fruits and berries, as at the time they were most likely limited to wild or less domesticated varieties which would have been less sweet than today. One may question to what extent they would have been used as an actual sweetener. Instead fruits would probably have been used for cooking and brewing. Some indications suggest that people would have already made cider-like

fruit wines in this period. In the earliest beers identified, berries were added to the brew at some point in the process.

Honey was by far the most sugar-rich sweetener available in northern Europe. In Scandinavia, which lacked bee-keeping tradition, and where average temperatures in the northernmost parts are far too cold for bees to survive, honey would have been expensive. Honey was probably primarily used for mead rather than for making actual sweet dishes. Still, honey is mentioned as the taste of an exclusive savoury dish in one of the stories in the epic about Sigurd the Dragonslayer. Malt was both cheaper and more available, as making it only required barley, water and some supervision. Whereas malted barley and wort could have been used as a sweetener, in general they are more likely to have been used to make beer.



Drinks

Water or sweet milk would not have been the first choice for quenching most people's thirst during this period. Though wells were dug long before the Viking Age, their cleanliness would have been questionable at best. While one most likely were aware that they might be contaminated, the continuous construction of new wells and latrines as the old ones were depleted and filled up, would have made it difficult to keep wells uncontaminated. Medieval and Anglo-Saxon sources suggest that water for drinking and, on some occasions, even for cooking should be drawn from springs and collected rainwater. Milk and dairy products were usually considered too rich and sweet for an everyday drink, and though heated milk is mentioned as a recreational drink in some sagas, it seems to have mainly been provided for the elderly, sick or very young. A more likely drink would have been the soured, longer-lasting products of goat's or sheep's milk, or the leftovers from cheese and butter-making – i.e. whey and buttermilk.

Beer was a more prestigious and essential drink. Common beer was probably both weaker and sourer than the modern variety, with a taste more resembling a Belgian Lambic than the common ale or bitter. Spicing would have varied more than today. In addition to herbs such as meadowsweet and gale, which are mentioned in medieval sources as used in brewing, other known beer spices included rose hips, yarrow, juniper or mixtures of other herbs. It is possible that hops was used already at this time in some German monasteries, as a reference to it has survived in one text. The use of hops was not to become a widespread practice until the 13th–14th centuries. There have been some early finds of hops in Scandinavia, though these are quite rare and not necessarily used for beer.

Anything sweet would seem quite extraordinary and perhaps even rather festive. It is likely that the festive beers had a pronounced sweetness rather than an extreme alcoholic content. This would also explain the mythical popularity of mead, which, according to most ancient recipes, seems to have been valued for its sweetness rather than its potency. In contrast to the popularity of mead in myths and sagas, it was probably far more exclusive in real life, which may also have helped to give it the status of the drink of kings, heroes and gods. The main ingredient in mead, honey, was most likely traded from the Baltic coast.

Food Beyond Scandinavia

Regardless of how we chose to define the Vikings or the Scandinavian inhabitants, Norse cuisine would not be limited to Scandinavia alone. In the west, islands such as Faeroe, Iceland and Greenland were settled, and in the east, Scandinavian settlements emerged along the Volga. Further away, in Constantinople, the Varangian guard served the Byzantine emperor.

In the western colonies, the food sources were limited, and one can see hints of a food culture similar to that in Lofoten, with a strong dependence on dairy products and fish. Though the farming opportunities were limited, beer and malt would probably have played an important role and were imported even to the most remote areas.

Contacts with the continent and the east also influenced cuisine in Scandinavia. This is especially apparent in Hedeby with its continental contacts. There, the foreign influences can be recognized in everyday foods such as millet and in imports of more exotic luxuries such as peaches, walnuts, hops and sturgeon.

However, a controversial point is the question about the use of exotic spices. While it may be possible to assume that those who travelled to Byzantium or Moorish Spain would have been exposed to a food culture that used exotic spices, no finds or texts from the time indicate any such use. The closest reference to spices comes from a quote from al-Tartushi, who is surprised by the exotic spices found at the market in Mainz. He gives, however, no such comment when describing his visit to Hedeby.

terior of many households. According to the sagas, one's seat on the bench was not only where you had your meal but it was also the place where you kept your personal belongings and where you would eventually sleep at night. The least mentioned seat, and thus the one that eludes a proper interpretation of where in the room it was situated, was the side bench. It is generally associated with the kitchen work and the hearth and is often described as the seat of women and of guests that did not join in the meal.

While the long benches would have been fixed to the wall, the tables seem to have been more of a temporary solution both at home and during feasts. The descriptions in the sagas, plus some surviving traditional tables and images such as the dining scene in the Bayeux tapestry, indicate that it was made up of a loose board put up on a wooden trestle. This use of portable tables would free up space in between meals.

By the end of the Viking Age, the seating arrangements seem to have undergone a change. The chieftains and kings were no longer content to sit in the middle of the long tables with all of his henchmen around them, but switched place to the short end of the table and the room, where they would have been a bit more elevated than their underlings. This change in tradition was recognised by Snorre some 100 years later when he attributed the new seating to the Norwegian king Olaf Kyrre, who ruled in the 11th century.

Hygiene

A drink needeth to full dishes who cometh, a towel, and the prayer to partake; good bearing eke, to be well liked and be bidden to banquet again.

~ *The Poetic Edda, Havamál*, (1988 transl. Lee Hollander)

In Havamál, the host is instructed to greet his guests with a warm welcome and a towel, presumably in order to give the guest a chance to clean up before eating. This could come in the form of a bowl that was continuously replenished with water and passed along to the dinner guests allowing them to wash their hands just before the meal. In the saga about Gunnar Tíðrandabane it is the lord of the house himself who provides the guests with cleaning water. Although this probably was mentioned in order to raise some tension in the story, it also illuminates the almost ritualistic trait of the procedure to wash one's hands before dinner. Similar traditions that allowed the guests to clean up before a meal were also practised in medieval Europe. In both Norse and medieval tradition this was probably partly due to the fact that some of the fingers were used for eating.



Although this indicates a certain hygienic approach, the manners of the Norse appalled Ibn Fadlan, an Arabic traveller who wrote one of the few contemporary eyewitness accounts of meeting people from Scandinavia. In a short part of his account he manages to write about burial rites, traditions and hygiene. One of the more vivid descriptions is about the washbasin going from high to low and getting increasingly dirtier as it does. However, one should remember; that the account was possibly spiced up in order to please the reader, that the people he met had been travelling for quite some time and that it is meant to mark the contrast between the civilised Arabic culture and the not-so civilised Scandinavians.

In his journal he writes that while the Norsemen he encounters do have the habit to wash and comb their hair daily, they are still filthy and reuse the same water. However, on the other side of Europe, in Britain, the Scandinavian invaders were instead described as overly obsessed with their looks, as they are constantly grooming and washing themselves.

From an archaeological viewpoint, the sources are far scarcer and are largely limited to a few latrines. However, even these can be informative when it comes to diet and what people really ate.



A VIKING AGE COOKBOOK & CULINARY ODYSSEY

Over the years, working with translation and reconstruction of recipes from times passed, I have gained a lot of experience. What once seemed like overwhelming obstacles on my path have with time become familiar parts of interpreting historical food and cooking. With that in mind, creating recipes for this our second cookbook on historical food did not seem like such a great step. Yes, we did lack original recipes. There was close to nothing written on the subject of Viking Age cuisine neither from the time nor modern. And, even more important, the common conception on the eating habits of the Scandinavians of that time is very strong and very wrong.

After hours of studying archaeological findings and old written sources our ideas on what to cook for every single place represented in this book started to take form. Dishes in which both the ingredients and cooking methods of that time and place were taken into consideration.

The recipes had already been created and approved when a thought struck me, we also had to cook according to season. A simple soup with mixed early spring greens are fine, add some fresh goats milk cheese to it and it is no longer plausible. The Scandinavian goat would not have given milk so early in the spring. (Even if she had already delivered, the kid would have been dependent on the milk to survive and there would have been nothing left for humans to turn into cheese.) Poached fish with fresh herbs are all right if you make sure you can actually catch that fish during summer. Seasonal cooking for real! I have learned a lot about season by writing this book. I have also learned how incredibly spoiled we are nowadays finding almost anything from anywhere at any time in the supermarket around the corner. And of course, how much more flavours we get from choosing small scale organic fishing, farming and meat from heritage livestock.

If you use these recipes at home, feel free to add or take away, change after your own preferences. But if you re-enact Viking Age, think local, think season and get the real feel of Viking age cooking.

Hanna Tunberg

The Culinary Journey

In the late 9th century the English king Alfred the Great took an interest in the lands North of Britain and what trade could be found there. Othere, a trader from Northern Norway, was interviewed by king Alfred's scribes about the lands in the far North and the journey south from there. Othere described how he had travelled south following the coast of Norway, stopping at trading places like Sciringes heal (Kaupang) and Hedeby. In Hedeby, his travel accounts stop but we have to assume that the journey from Hedeby to England was well known.

At the same time an English trader, Wulfstan, was also interviewed. He had travelled from England to the Baltic and back. In his account he describes the trade goods along the Baltic coast and the journey to get there. Just like Othere, he had passed through Hedeby on his way.

In order to portray the regional differences in the Viking Age, we have chosen to take the reader on an imagined journey inspired by the two travellers above, but with a few changes. The imagined journey starts in the very north at Lofoten and then follows the Norwegian coast south to Viken and the trading place there. From there it would be a short trip to Lejre and then Hedeby. In Hedeby, the Jutland peninsula is crossed and the journey continues to Jorvik (York). On the way back, Hedeby is passed once more, and, travelling south of the Danish isles, we reach the Scania coast where we anchor at Trelleborg, before reaching the trading place of Uppåkra. The final stretch of the journey follows the Swedish coast until we finally reach Lake Mälaren and Birka.

Regional cuisine depends on what is available at a particular site, and just as today, there would have been local preferences. A modern parallel of local preferences can perhaps be found in the difference between German and Swedish breads, of which the latter is far sweeter.

However, as today, what you could expect to be served during the Viking Age would depend also on with whom you dined, at what occasion you were eating and who you were. Some of these aspects are also addressed, as the different sites in this cookbook have been given different points of focus. While Hedeby is a prominent trading site at the threshold of the continent, Lejre is instead taken to reflect a large royal farm.

Some Practical Comments

Inspiration for the recipes in this cookbook has been found from various sources – from traditional cooking and medieval recipes to comments and descriptions in early literature. The base for our reasoning, however, has always been the archaeological record and what we can interpret from it.

Most of the recipes are made to serve four people. In obvious cases, like the recipes for mead or beer, no set number of portions is given as that would be very depend on the occasion. The recipes are designed to be replicable in a modern kitchen as well as in a Viking Age environment. However, even though it may be nice to try out a few of the dishes in the safety of a stove, there is always an added dimension to the experience – and even flavour – when cooking in the right environment.

The measures for the various dishes are based on the known tastes dominating at the time, but also reflect the preferences of the authors. As the notion of having fixed measures in a recipe is fairly modern, feel free to deviate from our. We have mostly used the metric system in the dishes, but for our American and British readers there is a conversion table on the inside of the back cover.

Cooking in a modern context, even when re-enacting, limits us in what we can or cannot use, and should at times direct our choices when it comes to ingredients. In many cases a particular plant or sub species of animal is no longer available, at least not commercially. A good rule in that case would be to choose organic traditional produce over industrially produced goods, and to try to find close modern equivalents. The best example comes when buying chickens, where it would be next to impossible to find the types of chickens used at the time. However, in choosing an organic chicken, one will hopefully get a specimen that has been allowed a slower growth and closer in taste and consistency to the old-time version.

Another modern influence on the recipes has been to deliberately rule out any dish containing animals that today are endangered or for other reasons of limited supply e.g. eel, beaver or whale.

In order to cook in the field or at a reconstructed site, certain tools and utensils are needed. A basic set up would include a good knife, a wooden spoon or ladle, some wooden bowls, a hearth and a pot of either pottery or soapstone for boiling. The latter would also have been an essential part of the equipment for a group of travellers. For the more affluent kitchen we would recommend a more extensive set, to include an iron cauldron, a kettle claw, a spit, a tripod with the proper chains, a small frying pan and perhaps a metal ladle.



Lejre

The oven found at Lejre would have made it possible for the people living there to not only fry bread but also to bake it almost like we do today.

Rose hips, as seen in the background, may have been used to flavour mead for festive occasions.



Arriving at the bay of Roskilde, it was a short hike up and around the hill to the hall. On each side of the hall, the landscape was green and yellow with billowing wheat and barley. Despite its kingly reputation, it could not compare to the hall back in Lofoten; which probably could fit at least two of these halls inside it.

However, approaching the top of the hill, it would soon become clear that the hall was not alone, but surrounded by smaller longhouses and other outhouses. Downhill, a huge mound of burnt stones towered over the foot-path. If the outside of the complex seemed rustic, the tables in the main hall were far more prestigious, with meat served beside flat white bread and baked bread of rye.

High on a hill overlooking Roskilde bay did the Danish king built himself a stately hall, richly adorned and a meeting place of vassals and subjects. As it was built in the middle of Denmark, it was easy to reach, yet it was not one of the regular stops on an eastbound trading trip.

According to many sagas and chronicles, Lejre was the centre of the emerging Danish state, settled in the past by a son of Odin, the mythic founder of the Scylding dynasty. Most of the early references come from rather fantastic sources, with the rare exception of being mentioned as the Danish “capital” in a chronicle written by the German cleric Theitmar of Merseburgs in 1016. Despite some earlier excavations, it was not until the 1980s that some of the hall buildings were found.

At the excavations on the site of Old Lejre, so called so when the name Lejre was appropriated by the modern village, a complex picture emerged. In addition to the burial mounds, monuments and raised stones in the area, there was also evidence of a sequence of buildings, dating back as early as the 6th century. The actual location in which the houses were built shifted sometime around the end of the 7th century to a new place, where it continued up to the 10th century. During the last phase, the settlement grew more prominent with larger buildings and more exclusive finds, indicating that this was the home of a wealthy and powerful chieftain.

However, the sagas and chronicles suggest that the people living here were more than just local chieftains, but rather kings of the young Danish state. Or at least, this was one of the places in which they used to stay. The site seemed to have lost its status at the end of the 10th century, around the time Harald Bluetooth was supposed to have founded a trading site at Roskilde – the modern town can still be seen from the site of the old hall of Lejre.

Though such royal claims are difficult to back up through archaeology, it was nevertheless a rich and prominent hall. The high status is indicated not only by the monumental halls themselves, but also by the rich finds. Archaeologists have uncovered several valuable artefacts, including some gold and an intricate silver statuette thought to depict an androgynous Odin.

The Food

The special role of Lejre can also be seen in the food remains found at the site. Here, the cuisine appears to have been rich if somewhat rustic, compared to most other sites of the same time. Few exotic ingredients have been found; instead, the site could offer both larger game and butchered horses, indicating that the hall was important in both the profane and ritual worlds.

Although, in many ways, Lejre can be said to represent an archetypical large farm, certain differences suggest that this site had a special role. While barley seems to have been commonplace in the pit houses and halls, rye was the predominant crop found in the ovens themselves. In addition, some oats and wheat could be found in the material. Remains of charred rye in the oven may be due to an attempt to roast or dry the rye before grinding it into flour, or as a result of bread baking. Other plants that have been identified in the material from Lejre include hazel, broad beans, peas and some sorrel.



As in most other sites, bone material is dominated by common household animals which, if calculated on the number of fragments, would correspond to roughly one part mutton, two parts beef and three parts pork – coincidentally, the ratios for a rather good sausage.

Horse remains make up roughly 3% of the bone fragments, this would make the remains of horse bones slightly more common than at other sites from the same period. In contrast to what one may expect from a royal farm, wild animals are scarce and make up only about 2% of the total amount of land mammals. Of these, remains from roe deer are in a clear majority, which may either reflect the medieval tradition of considering roe deer a royal or lordly game, or simply that it was the preferred material for diverse crafts.

In addition to the larger animals, people would have kept and hunted different kinds of fowl. Despite being more perishable, and thus difficult to compare with the evidence for larger animals, we can still get a picture of the animal life of the farm. Apart from chickens, there seems to have been a large stock of geese, and even some ducks. Being situated about five kilometres from the coast, we lack the hunted sea fowl that can be observed in other coastal settlements.

Nevertheless, there would still have been access to and a demand for fish. The finds indicate that the inhabitants mainly consumed herring, cod and a little plaice. Almost no freshwater fish has been indicated in the reports so far.

In Lejre, fire-cracked stones were found in a massive mound within the settlement, suggesting recurring activities that either involved boiling or possibly cooking pits. The massive size of the mound, 20 by 40 metres, suggests that it was more than a mere dump site. A possible interpretation is that it was used for ritual purposes. Soil, found in pits adjacent to the mound, showed evidence of exposure to fire or heat. This may indicate that some of the stones came from cooking pits. Fire-cracked stones may also have originated from activities that require large amounts of heated water, such as brewing or dyeing. Just as in Norway, it is possible to assume that the wort was heated with stones rather than simply allowed to simmer in large cauldrons.

If Lejre was indeed a king's hall, drinking and feasting would have played an important and recurring role. In order to sustain numerous retainers and henchmen the owner would have had needed to provide large volumes of ale, which makes the latter suggestion plausible.

Alu Laukar — a Sauce for Smoked Meat

50g wild leek or spring leek

½dl chopped thyme

½dl chopped dill

2dl geuze, a Belgian spontaneously-fermented beer

2 tbsp malt vinegar

500g salted and smoked fatty pork

- Chop all the greens together as fine as you can; you might even mortar or crush them.
- Mix the greens with geuze and malt vinegar.
- Cut the meat in thin slices and place it on a serving dish.
- Pour the green sauce over the meat and serve it at room temperature.

In order to make sure that the surplus slaughtered at the start of winter should last the full year, it had to be smoked, dried or otherwise prepared. In the rich hall of Lejre, fresh meat would have been available at feasts from time to time, but the more common fare would still have been cured meat. This meat could be served as a side dish to some bread or milk; it could have been added to porridges and stews to give some taste, or, as in this rather exclusive dish, served with a suitable sauce. The inspiration for this dish came from a Danish cookbook from the 13th century. In that cookbook in particular, and in medieval cooking in general, sauces seem to have played an important role. At that time, people seem to have preferred rather acidic sauces with their meat, a preference that was probably already in fashion during the Viking Age.

For acidity in this sauce, we are using a slightly acidic beer, geuze, and malt-vinegar. The latter was likely to be available to farmers of the time, as it would have been a by-product of making beer. The combination of beer and leek is inspired by some of the earliest runic inscriptions. A handful of those early inscriptions simply state “Ale & Leek”. The combination seems to have had a symbolic significance in Scandinavia during the Viking Age.



Food and Runic Inscriptions

A contemporary source of information about the Viking Age, or late Iron age can be found through many runic inscriptions. Some of those even refer to food in one way or another.

Among the earlier inscriptions, dating back before the Viking Age, some are found including the words alu or laukaz (ale or leek) either each word by itself or in some combination. As they appear on bracteates and other objects that are not generally associated with food, the meaning of this inscription is difficult to interpret.

A more mundane inscription, dated to the late Viking Age, can be found on a rib excavated in Sigtuna, Sweden, stating that “the king is most generous with food”, *konungr er matar beztr*. This kind of statement is rather common, though usually carved as an epitaph over the person to whom a runic stone had been erected. In such cases the inscription would state something like “so and so was free with food” (*mataR goðan,*) and an eloquent speaker.



Hedeby



Although Hedeby was a large trading place during the Viking Age, it would have been dependent on the farms in the surrounding area for meat and vegetables. Smaller villages like this may have lined the inlet of Schlei.

“From Sciringes heal he said that he sailed in five days to the trading-town called Hedeby, which is situated among the Wends, Saxons and Angles and belongs to the Danes.”

Othere's account (1983 transl. Christine E. Fell)

Sailing past the many islands of Denmark, one would sooner or later reach the point where Jutland joins the continent. There an inlet eats into the base of Jutland, almost cutting it off from the mainland. As one slowly rows further down the reed-lined inlet, one cannot help but to notice the stark contrast to the Norwegian landscape. Where just a week earlier one has been surrounded by a raw, mountainous landscape, here one is greeted by a low, flat land dotted with copses and swamps.

By the end of the inlet the outlines of a fortified settlement can be traced against the lingering light. This is Hedeby, the most southern of the Danish trading sites, and a stop for most traders going from Scandinavia to the continent or back.

With the ships securely moored at the jetties, it would have been a short walk over to the main trading area. Here the town would be buzzing with activity, with traders and craftsmen side by side. If one was affluent enough, this would be the place to buy a good slave, some salt or objects or goods from the continent. Though officially protected by the Danish king, the language spoken was Slavonic rather than Danish, but as in most other trading places the traders all talk the language of barter with bits and pieces of the languages of their colleagues.

When leaving for the continent, one would do best to drag the ship on land, following the mighty wall west until one reaches the waterways on the other side. Though hard work, it was a safer and faster trip than sailing around the north of Jutland, and there would always be a farmer willing to make an extra coin by hiring out a few oxen to help pull the boat.

According to Frankish chronicles, Hedeby was created in the early 9th century when a Danish king raided a Slavonic trading place and forced the traders and craftsmen there to settle on a new site, north of the great earthwork wall or *Danavirke*. Being situated on the threshold to the continent, it soon grew to become a busy trading spot, with traders coming from near and far with their goods.

One of these far off traders, was “Ibrâhîm ibn Ya`qûb al-Tartushi”, a merchant from Cordoba, who was far from impressed with the town. Upon returning home, he described Hedeby as an exotic, squalid and generally strange place. But, at the time, almost any place in Europe would have been poor and miserable in comparison to his home town.

However, despite al-Tartushi's rather bleak view of Hedeby, for the local trader it must have appeared both rich and well-provided. In the history of Denmark by Saxo Grammaticus, Hedeby is still described as an important town with a quite independent role. Situated close to all the trade routes of northern Europe, it would have provided whoever controlled it with both political and economic might. The importance of the site is indicated not only by its rich archaeological finds, but also by the fact that it was furnished with both defensive walls and wooden jetties. The walls were built to join the large defensive earthworks that spanned the base of the Jutland peninsula: the *Danavirke*.

The Food



Al-Tartushi describes the inhabitants of Hedeby as living almost exclusively on fish, yet the archaeological evidence suggests a more complex diet. The geographic location of the town would have provided it with some strong continental influences when it came to the culinary practices, something that Saxo considered decadent in his descriptions of early Danish court life. A dependence on the surrounding lands and trades gave the town an unusually large variety of vegetables, and even exotic fruits and plants. The archaeological record indicates that meat was dominated by domesticated animals such as pigs and cattle, although both domesticated and wild animals were consumed.

In general, the composition of the crops in Hedeby was similar to the rest of Scandinavia, with a clear dominance of barley, but with more rye than one might find in other places. A major discrepancy, however, would have been the amount of millet found in the area – this may indicate an influence from the nearby Slavonic regions, where millet was a major crop during the medieval period.

For fruits and berries, there are mainly finds of sloe, plums, raspberries, and blackberries. Other fruits and berries included sour cherries, bilberries, wild raspberries and crab apples. Karl-Ernst Behre who made the archaeobotanic analyses of the finds in Hedeby concluded that both sloe and plum may have been cultivated near Hedeby. The site seems also to have been quite abundant in hazelnuts. Although hazelnuts have been a part of the diet in southern Scandinavia since the Mesolithic, hardly any of the contemporary sites display the same abundance of hazelnuts as Hedeby. The remains do not tell us how the hazelnuts were used, but none of them appear to have been charred. Another plant that is well represented in the find material is the broad bean.

We can also see the remains of more exotic plants, such as grapes, peaches and walnuts. Another probable exotic import, found in some abundance, was hops, a plant not commonly recognised at the time as a beer ingredient. Although walnuts and hops can be grown without any special aids in Scandinavia today, it is assumed that they were imported rather than grown locally.

Animal remains were heavily dominated by pigs, found at a ratio in excess of 2:1 to the next largest group – cattle. Sheep and goats were scarcer, and make up less than 10% of the archaeological evidence. The ratios may appear odd, however this could perhaps be attributed to the lack of good grazing grounds for cattle in the wetland areas near Hedeby. Although the pig is generally considered to be connected to woodland areas, its dominance in Hedeby could instead be attributed to cultural preferences, or due to the urban conditions in the area. A similar domination of pigs over other

domesticated animals can be found in the early Anglo-Saxon settlements of England. Traditionally the Anglo-Saxons are said to have originated from the area of southern Jutland and north Friesland, which more or less coincide with the location of Hedeby.

While the wild animals are limited to a few individual finds, there seem to have been a more intense hunt for wild sea-birds (e.g. tufted duck, common eider etc.) Though numerous, they were dwarfed by the amount of domesticated fowl, which made up about 80% of the found birds. Most of the remains that can be attributed to domesticated birds was the common hen and to a lesser degree some geese.

Still, there seem to have been some truth to al-Tartushi's description of the fish-eating Hedebyites. Although the remains of fish in no way can be compared to the remains of pigs and cattle, one has to remember that the fish bones usually require sieving or luck to find, and that they are much more prone to be destroyed by a number of things that may happen to them. The most common fish in the archaeological material is herring, which probably was fished in the nearby sea, and pike or perch from local lakes and streams.

The Urban Pig

At first glance the pig seems to only be of less use than the other domestic animals, neither milk nor power can be gained from the pig so one would have to keep it just for the meat, however delicious it might be. But to the large farm or urban settlement the pig had an important role; it was integral in the waste disposal system. As the pig is the ultimate omnivore, it can not only eat the same food as we do, but it can also eat human faeces. In many traditional societies the latrines were built in connection to the sty, effectively reducing the waste problem. In many of the early towns, we can observe how the ratio of pigs to other domesticated animals increases over time. In the cramped situation of early towns, the use of pigs may have been a good strategy to reduce kitchen, latrine and even crafting waste.

Traveller's Porridge

200g smoked pork

75g salted butter

4dl barley

6-8dl stock

A handful of ramsons
or other leek

- In a pot, boil a nice piece of smoked pork, such as a full piece of bacon, save the stock.
- Meanwhile, melt butter in another pot, in which you will sauté the leek or ramsons.
- Remove the pork from the water, and use the resulting stock to cook the porridge.
- Stir the crushed or lightly ground barley into the butter.
- Add 6dl of the pork stock to the barley/leek mixture; if it boils dry before the barley is soft add some more stock.
- Meanwhile, mince the pork small with a good knife, and return to the pot as the grains are getting softer.
- If you want some acidity in the dish, you could let a cored and cut sour apple boil with the barley or add some malt vinegar or whey.



Porridges were one of the staples of Viking Age society, as it they were a dish easily made from easily stored ingredients, and varied with simple means. Cereals are better stored as whole grains rather than meal, and any meat used could be dried or smoked. This also made porridge an excellent dish for travels, as all the ingredients could easily be brought along on the ship. In the sagas, it is actually mentioned as being the food of the Felaghi – cooperatives of boat-faring traders.

This dish is partly based on a recipe from “*Liber Cure Cocorum*”, a cook-book from 15th century England, and partly on cooking techniques described in early Anglo-Saxon medical manuscripts.



Travelling Fare

A convenient fare for travellers, and others, would have been simple savoury porridges, made of dried grains and perhaps some smoked or dried meat. In some of the sagas it is described how traders travelling together, felaghi, take turns in being responsible for cooking. In the few occasions where the actual food is described to be prepared, they are said to be making porridge.

Uppåkra



One of the most imaginative and important structures at Uppåkra has to be the temple. The size of the postholes suggests that the posts were strong enough to carry several floors, similar to this reconstructed house from Ale.

Reaching the Scanian coastline the ships had to be anchored at Trelleborg in order to make the short journey towards the temple and marketplace in Uppåkra. After leaving the ships at the walled ring fort in Trelleborg, the journey north was fairly quick. The wares were reloaded into bags or onto carts in preparation for the short trek north to Uppåkra. The trip would have taken just under two days, as the road north led straight to Uppåkra, and at some places was even paved.

The first sight greeting the visitor would have been the massive old temple. Rising high into the sky, it was a domineering sight. Being built on the only hill in the otherwise low landscape, both the temple and the village provided a good vantage point.

If well planned, the trip to Uppåkra might coincide with one of the larger sacrificial feasts held at the temple. On such occasions, the famous beer would be plentiful, and boiled beef was served to the guests. A lucky few might even hope to catch a glance of the fabled ancient bowls from which the beer of the gods was served.

However, the main reason for this journey was neither the temple nor even the beer, but the good trading opportunities; the marketplace could boast of some of the finest craftsmen, offering gold and silver wares without comparison.

Identified as an important site and partly excavated in the 1930s, the scope of the Uppåkra site was not fully realised until the archaeological department at Lund University invited a group of Danish amateur archaeologists to survey the site with metal detectors in 1996. A huge range of metal objects, spread across a large area, suggested that this was something more than just a rich farm. This began the excavations that are still under way at the site as we write.

Located slightly inland, but at the crossing made up by the north-south road ending to Trelleborg and an east-west stream, Uppåkra seems to have been a trade town of great importance from the 3rd century AD until the foundation of Lund in the 10th century. Not only was Uppåkra quite literally the predecessor of medieval Lund, but it may even have been called Lund or Lundr, named after the holy grove nearby.

At a first glance the site appears to have been a major trading place, but a closer look reveals a much more multifaceted profile. Uppåkra also seems to have been a centre from which the elite exercised their power. This role of the site is suggested by the many great halls, finds of weaponry and exclusive artefacts such as gold foils and bracteates. The site also seems to have been a religious centre. Not only were some parts littered with sacrificial remains such as bones or destroyed weapons, but one of the houses has also been suggested to have had a primarily religious function, possibly paired with being a hall in which feasts were held. Although being rather small for a hall, it had massive pillars, suggesting a quite high building, almost in the style of Norwegian stave churches.

The Food

While one could expect Uppåkra to have a culinary profile similar to other major settlements in the vicinity, it differs in a few aspects. In short one could say that Uppåkra is similar to its neighbours but with just a bit more of everything.

As in most other areas, meat and beer played a central role in festive meals, while pulses, vegetables, dairy products and fish predominated in everyday food. Fish was probably traded with people living closer to the coast, and vegetables grown or collected from the surrounding area. A small patch of



land was identified beside one of the longhouses, in which the earth had been turned over in the manner of a vegetable garden. Several seeds of some kind of turnip (*Brassica rapa*) were found in this patch.



Other plants found at the site include hazel, white goosefoot, sorrel and camelina. Although the first three may have been used in cooking, the last is an oil plant that is generally considered too bitter for consumption. Despite this, oil from its seeds has been used for food and cooking in a traditional context, and is today being reviewed by the health-food industry because of the advantageous fatty acids it contains.



There is no doubt that cereals played an important role at the site. In one of the earliest excavations large amounts of barley were found in what has been interpreted as a storage house. While this is not surprising, the role of barley and other cereals is also indicated by other finds on the site.



A rather unusual find for the time is a large, dome-shaped oven, which according to analyses of the clay, was only used at temperatures suitable cooking rather than other crafts – i.e. it was not a kiln. Being dated back to the first centuries AD it is one of the earliest ovens found in Scandinavia. In contrast to most Viking Age ovens, this one is about twice the size, and is not built in a house to protect it from rain and cold. It is possible that an oven of this size was used to bake bread, even if bread at the time was more likely to have been baked or fried in the hearth rather than in an oven.



Interestingly enough, one may observe some similarities to Lejre in how the cereals are distributed between oven and houses. Generally speaking, barley dwarfs the quantities of other seeds found on the site, with only a small amount from other species. In contrast, the remains of cereals in the above oven present a tangible presence of both emmer and rye.



Another aspect of barley is, of course, beer. Although it was generally drunk in large amounts, there seem to have been a dedicated drinking culture at Uppåkra. We know that beer was brewed here as there are finds of burnt malt among the seeds. Furthermore, finds of stamps for gold foil figures, showing women carrying beakers or bowls, seem to suggest the importance of a tradition of sharing and serving beverages (see *Drinking Culture*, p.29) in various festive activities. A more religious aspect of drinking turned up in the “temple,” where an extraordinarily rich drinking set was found buried between the two southernmost pillars.

Not only beer and drinking, but also the meat-remains seem to indicate that Uppåkra was subject to some serious religious feasts. The ground outside the supposed temple was almost covered with bones. The bones comprised mainly cattle, but sheep, pigs and even horse remains were also found there.

Since Uppåkra was settled for several hundred years, the food did undergo a few changes, mainly visible today in how the composition of the remains

varies from different periods. Perhaps the most obvious sign of these changes can be found in the bone material; in the earlier periods it is clearly dominated by cattle, but more pigs appear over time. Although the grounds around the temple abound with cattle bones, there is a clear predominance of pig bones in the postholes inside the temple. That they were found in such a context may indicate that the pigs had been cooked and eaten during more exclusive circumstances. In the postholes were also the remains of several birds, mainly domesticated goose and some duck. In other areas archaeologists have also found some domesticated hens.

Although the horse-remains were scarce in comparison to other domesticated species, they were actually the fourth most common find. Game seems to have been almost non-existent at the site, with only singular finds of certain species.

Among the cattle bones, osteologists were able to determine that some of the skulls had been split in order to take out the tongues. Such treatment suggests that the tongues were considered a delicacy, giving us a hint to preferences at the time.

Even though Uppåkra is situated about 10 km from the coast, plenty of fish were found there – mainly cod and herring. Although it would have been possible to get down to the coast for some fishing from Uppåkra, it is likely that people were trading fish in this area before the Viking Age. Of the inland, freshwater fish, we have mainly remains of perch, pike and common bream.

Firewood

Central to most households in any pre-modern society is a constant need for firewood, it was not only essential in the kitchen but also needed for heating as well as most crafts. This would mean that one had to make the most of the firewood, both when it came to heat-exchange and on a more overarching level sustainability.

Looking at finds from Uppåkra, it has been possible to determine that the bulk of the firewood was made up of branch-sized or smaller pieces of ash and hazel, indicating that they were mainly using such wood that could be gathered or easily renewed through coppicing. This practice is evident also in later periods, as can be seen in late medieval regulations on the sizes of firewood from the city of London.

Smaller branches and twigs were not only more preferable from an economical point of view. Smaller woods burn quickly and thus produce a strong heat almost instantaneously, which is preferable when heating an oven or bringing something to the boil. An added benefit is that smaller pieces of wood, when allowed to burn vigorously, produce less smoke than the same volume of wood in a large log.

Turnip and Ramsons in Lamb Broth

700g marrowbones
of lamb with some
meat still on
2L water

500g turnip (approx.
5-8 small turnips)

1 tbsp salted butter

2 tbsp malt vinegar

2 tsp fennel seeds

100g ramsons

- Let the lamb bones boil in water for 2-3 hours.
- Scrub the turnips free of dirt and cut them into pieces.
- Pick up the bones after 2-3 hours of boiling and let them cool a bit.
- Pick the meat from the bones and cut or tear it into small pieces.
- Put the meat and diced turnips back in the stock.
- Let it boil for 10 minutes or until the turnips are soft.
- Add butter, malt vinegar, fennel seeds and ramsons.
- Serve the dish with some bread to soak up the good stock.

At the time of slaughter, everything had to be used: including offal, marrow and the bones. By simmering the bones, a good fatty stock could be obtained. While a good stock would have been central to the cooking at the time, it could also have been good for making a simple soup.

Though it would have been likely that people used mutton rather than lamb, we will here take the opportunity to use the same bones as in the previous recipe. This recipe is also based on the early summer greens, and maybe the first lamb for slaughter. Note that the meat in this dish should rather be regarded more as a seasoning than a main ingredient.



Notes

[illegible]