The Vikings: Evidence From The Sagas.

The Vikings wrote Sagas. These were stories not only told of battles and conquests, but also of everyday life and how to behave. These sagas have been written down and left to us. They can give us lots of clues about how the Vikings used to live. Here are a few examples from the sagas that give us information about how the Vikings lived. Remember to use your web-links list if you want to read any of the sagas fully online. Also remember that a good historian uses more than one source, so your evidence should not come from the sagas alone.

Buildings:

The Viking Sagas come from Scandinavia and settled in Iceland too. The Viking Sagas come from Iceland. There was not much wood there, so to have a home made out of wood meant that you were rich. Laxdaela and Njal's sagas tell us that there were houses made of wood and that had grass covering the roof. Egil's saga says that the roof had Tar on it and was then covered with birch tree bark.

Some houses were large. In the saga of Gisli, it talks about a large hall that had a separate entrance hall.

The Vikings also had toilets, often opposite their houses. There were also sewing rooms for the ladies to work in. Njal's and saga and the saga of Gisli both talk about sewing rooms.

For special occasions, like feasts, the house would be swept and tapestries would be hung up. The men would always take their weapons to the meal. Egil's saga tells us that the men would hang their weapons on the wall behind their seats.

How to Behave:

The Vikings behaved pretty badly by our standards today, but even they had their standards! If a boat was shipwrecked, the Vikings thought it was their duty to help the survivors.

They also knew that they should be generous. In Laxdaela it talks about a man called Geirmund the Noisy, a rich and powerful man who invited Olaf, a visitor to stay at his house with as many men as he liked. It was also the custom to help those in need – a bit like giving to charity today. You were expected to help people who had no money, especially if

they were a member of your family. The Saga of Gisli talks about a man who expects help from his brother because he is "hard-up."

Feasts were a matter of great excitement and involved large numbers of people. The saga of Gisli talks about a feast for 60 people. Egil's saga also tells us that some feasts could get out of hand with drinking competitions and people being sick.

Costume:



Most pictures show the Vikings wearing horns in their helmets – in fact there is no evidence to suggest that they used horns at all! In Njal's saga, Hallgerd, a woman, wore two different outfits. Once she wore a woven blue cloak and a red tunic. She wore a silver belt around her waist and she tucked her long hair into the belt to stop it getting in the way! Her best clothes were a bit nicer. She wore a red decorated tunic and a red cloak which had lace on it.

In Laxdaela, Gudrun wears a tunic with a tight bodice (the bodice is the part that covers the upper body) and a tall headdress with a sash around her waist.

Clothes were often given as gifts. In Egil's saga, a Christmas present of a silk gown, embroidered with gold and with gold buttons down the front was given.

Most of the clothes written about in the sagas were scarlet red or blue, so it is thought that these were favourite colours. Blue was worn by rich people and many sagas talk about rich characters wearing blue, for example in Njal's saga, Skarp-Hedin wears blue, and in Egil's saga, Egil wears blue.

Women:

Viking women were quite scary! They were often very strong and wanted to do things for themselves. A Viking woman could divorce her husband very easily and her husband had to give her a divorce settlement of money or goods. Although fathers had the final say in whom a girl should marry, Viking women had quite a big say in the matter. A girl could show who she wanted to marry by making clothes for him.

A good example of this is Gudrun's daughter in Laxdaela. At the age of 15, she was married to s rich man called Thorvald. This was her father's choice and she did not want to be married. Their marriage contract said that half of Thorvald's property would become hers when they married. After the marriage, Gudrun soon ran off with another man and declared herself divorced, taking half of Thorvald's property with her! Later on, Gudrun then married another man, and forced him to murder his brother! She sounds like a woman not to be messed with!

Women were also shown in the sagas as causing wars and taking revenge. In Heimskringla, when King Olaf gave his wife a gift that she did not like, she angrily tossed it aside and demanded that he should start a war. In Njal's saga, when Gunnar was defending their house from attack. His bow and arrow had broken, so he asked his wife for a piece of her hair to fix his bow. Before she would let him have it, she made him say sorry for a slap he had given her some years ago.

Children:



Children grew up rather quickly in Viking society. There is talk in the sagas of children being on ships during Viking battle raids. In Egil's saga, Hallvard has 2 children on board his ship; one aged 12 and one aged 10. When the ship was captured, both children jumped over-board rather than be captured.

Laxdaela also shows Gudrun telling her children aged 12 and 16 that they should go into battle to take revenge for the death of their father, but probably the most horrible episode takes place in Egil's saga. When 7 year old Egil joins in with a ball game, an older boy pushes him around.

Egil loses his temper and hits the older boy with his bat. The older boy just makes even more fun of him, and so Egil runs off to find Thord, who gives him an axe. Egil then runs back onto the field and sinks the axe into the older boy's head!!!

Viking children were also taught morals; in Heimskringla, Olaf favours one of his sons because he wants to stop his brother from being greedy. In Njal's saga, a boy is told off for making fun of people.

Kings:

Kings in Viking Sagas are often portrayed as generous people who wear nice clothes and have lots of money. They also often are seen doing amazing things. In Heimskringla, Olaf climbs mountains for fun and could also juggle with 3 daggers at once!

Law:

The laws were made at meetings called Things. Various people tried to keep the law; there were official lawmen and rich farmers. Priests also sometimes tried to keep law by refusing to allow people to take revenge. Revenge was a big part of Viking law. If you had been wronged, you could take revenge on the family or person that had wronged you.

Religion:

The Vikings originally worshipped gods until Christianity took hold, but more than anything, the Vikings were just very superstitious! If your horse stumbled, this was a sure sign that whatever you were doing would fail according to the sagas of Njal, Harald and Vinland.

Sometimes, magic was used. In Egil's saga, Egil set up a stick carved with runes (letters/symbols from the Viking language) and put a horse's head on top of the stick, pointing in-land, away from the sea. This was called a scorn stick. The idea was that it would drive the nearest king and queen away from their land. Egil's people also believed in werewolves. People who performed magic were also common. They were known as sorcerers. They cast spells while singers chanted around them. The best description of a sorcerer is found in Vinland. There is a sorcerer called Little Sybil who was invited to a feast by Thorkel so that she could tell his fortune for the coming year.

Games:

One of the most popular games was a game a bit like ice-hockey, played with bats and pucks. A game like this is described in the saga of Gisli. There were also horse fights between specially trained horses. Men also wrestled in water and would hold each other under the water until they asked for mercy. This kind of wrestling is described in the sagas of Gisli and Laxdaela.

At Christmas, people would tell each other stories and play chess, but even this could lead to trouble, as described in Heimskringla. When Canute was playing chess with Earl Ulf, he made a false move and Ulf took his knight. Canute was cross and told Ulf to put the knight back on the chess board and make a different move. Ulf refused and left the table. Canute told him he was a coward. Ulf shouted back at him, and the two men had a fight. Then later on, Canute ordered Ulf to be murdered!

Ships:



Viking ships were usually rowed, which took a lot of men and oars! The saga of Njal says that when ships left, the towns were emptied of all their best men.

The biggest ship was the Royal Dragon, which had around 60 oars and would have had a big figure-head.

The king would steer his won ship, and he would decide who should be in charge of the other ships in the fleet. Smaller ships, known as Karfi and Scuta had around 30 oars.

The Vikings were not always good at navigation. In Laxdaela, when Olaf sailed from Iceland to Ireland, he and his crew were lost for most of the time and argued about whose fault it was!

Trade:

The Vikings from Iceland went to Ireland on journeys for trade. In Egil's saga, it talks of ships loaded with dried fish, hides, woollens, and squirrel skins sailing to Ireland where it was exchanged for wheat, honey, wine and clothes. The sagas of Njal and Laxdaela tell us that any profits made from trade were usually either loaned out or invested in land or cattle. Often, trading missions also involved stealing and plunder. A good example of this is from Egil's saga. Egil had stayed with Thorir on good terms, but in the summer, he sailed there to raid and steal. He landed at the mouth of a river, and marched his men into the surrounding settlements, where they attacked and stole all the wealth they could. They were captured, but broke free.

Fighting:



A soldier's weapons were very important, especially his sword. A good sword was most important. Egil had a sword called Adder which had a loop on the hilt, which meant that he could have it hanging while he used his spear. A good soldier also had a banner. In Harald's saga, Harald called his "Land-Waster."

An army would be called by splitting an arrow head into four and sending pieces to all four points on the compass.

Heimskringla describes battle well:

"They would set hazel poles to mark out the battlefield and would sleep the night before under their shields; in the morning a man would be chosen to tend to the wounded and bury the dead. Then the trumpet would sound for battle to begin. They would fight with a special cry, and paint a sign on their helmets to show whose side they were on. At the centre, would be a shield wall surrounded by a fence of spears, and the general with his banner."