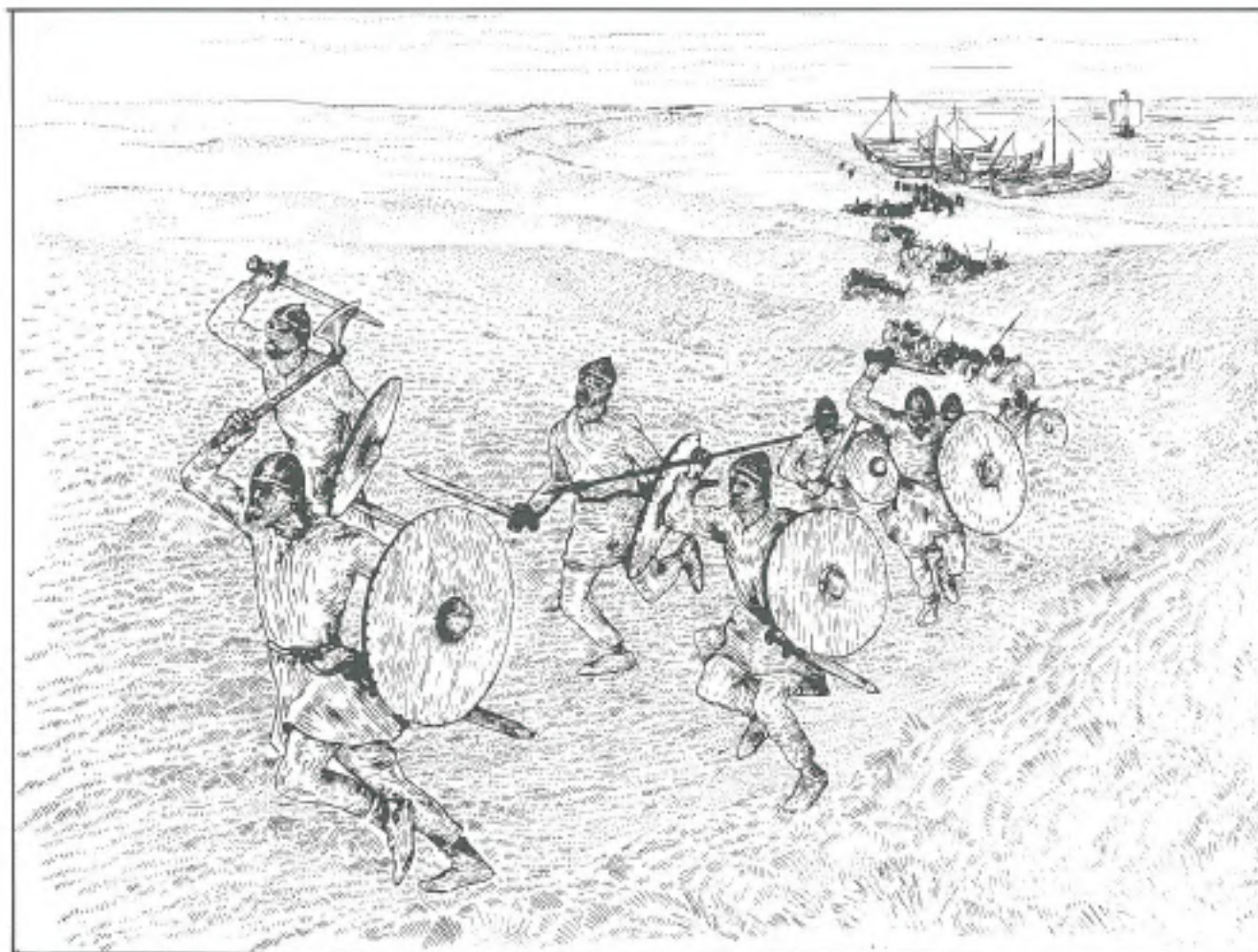


Information Sheet

Archaeology Series No. 20

LINCOLN: A VIKING TOWN



THE VIKINGS

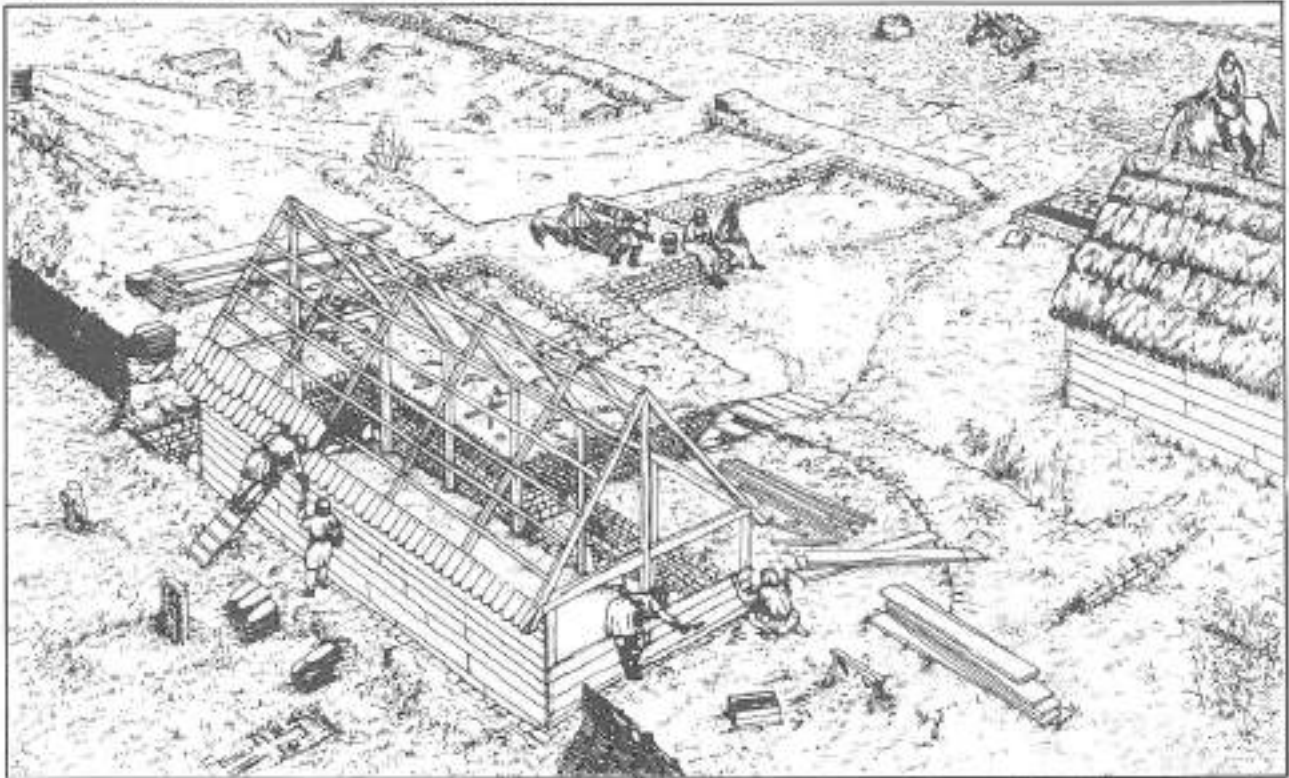
Two hundred years before the Norman Conquest, in the middle years of the ninth century AD, the British Isles were invaded by Vikings.

The 'armies' of Vikings in the ninth century were not centrally controlled or co-ordinated, but their activities were widespread. Bands of Vikings landed on shores across northern Europe. Norwegian Vikings reached Scotland, Ireland, Iceland and Greenland. Swedish Vikings crossed the Baltic Sea, sailed down the rivers Volkhov, Dnieper and Volga and founded the medieval Russian cities of Novgorod and Kiev. Danish Vikings raided the coasts and river ports of present-day France, Belgium, Holland, Spain, Portugal and England.

The Danish Vikings who landed along the coasts and sailed up the rivers of Lincolnshire in the 860s and 870s were essentially farmers, like their Saxon counterparts. But, whereas the farmers of England in the ninth century led a peaceful and prosperous life, the Vikings were members of an agricultural society which had grown too numerous for the scant arable fields and harsh climate of Scandinavia to support. From Roman times, Scandinavian traders had

endured long periods away from home to carry south furs, ropes, fish and timber, in exchange for Mediterranean coins, and jewels. Others armed themselves and challenged their neighbours in Norway and Finland for the right to settle and farm there. Others worked to develop the design of their long, narrow wooden ships. After four centuries of increasing sophistication in the design of mast, keel, strakes and rigging, ships were perfected which could cross the North Sea carrying the warriors with their weapons, horses and supplies, and the Vikings appeared on British shores.

THE VIKINGS SETTLE IN LINCOLN



Reconstruction of timber building set in the ruins of the Roman forum in Bailgate, Lincoln.

Viking raiders may initially have been attracted to Lincolnshire because of its location opposite Denmark, or because of its Saxon monasteries with their rich possessions. But as the summer raids lengthened into expeditions of some years' duration and ultimately into settlement, it may have been the acres of sparsely settled arable land, especially in the Wolds, which made Lincolnshire so attractive to colonize. In the countryside, village names ending in *-by* and *-thorpe*, like Ingleby, Wickenby, Saxilby and Kexby, and Aisthorpe, Kettlethorpe, Skellingthorpe and Friesthorpe, were given by the Viking settlers to land which they were sometimes the first to farm.

We learn from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the only surviving History in English for this period, that the Viking armies made themselves masters of eastern England during the third quarter of the ninth century. Their chief strongholds were the 'Five Boroughs' of Lincoln, Nottingham, Derby, Leicester and Stamford. By the end of the century, England was re-united under a strong king, King Alfred, and eastern England was once again under English control. But the area was still called the 'Danelaw' at the time of the Norman Conquest.

Two of our principal sources for the understanding of Viking Lincoln are the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and place-names in the countryside. Two further sources are Lincoln's many street-names of Scandinavian origin, like Clasketgate, and coins of the tenth and eleventh centuries minted in Lincoln by moneyers with Scandinavian names like Grind, Grim and Hafgrim. A fifth source is that of chance finds, like the Viking weapons on display in the City and County Museum, Lincoln, dredged from the River Witham.

But the most important source of *new* information is archaeology. Since 1972, Lincoln archaeologists have been digging and recovering material of the Viking period, stratified

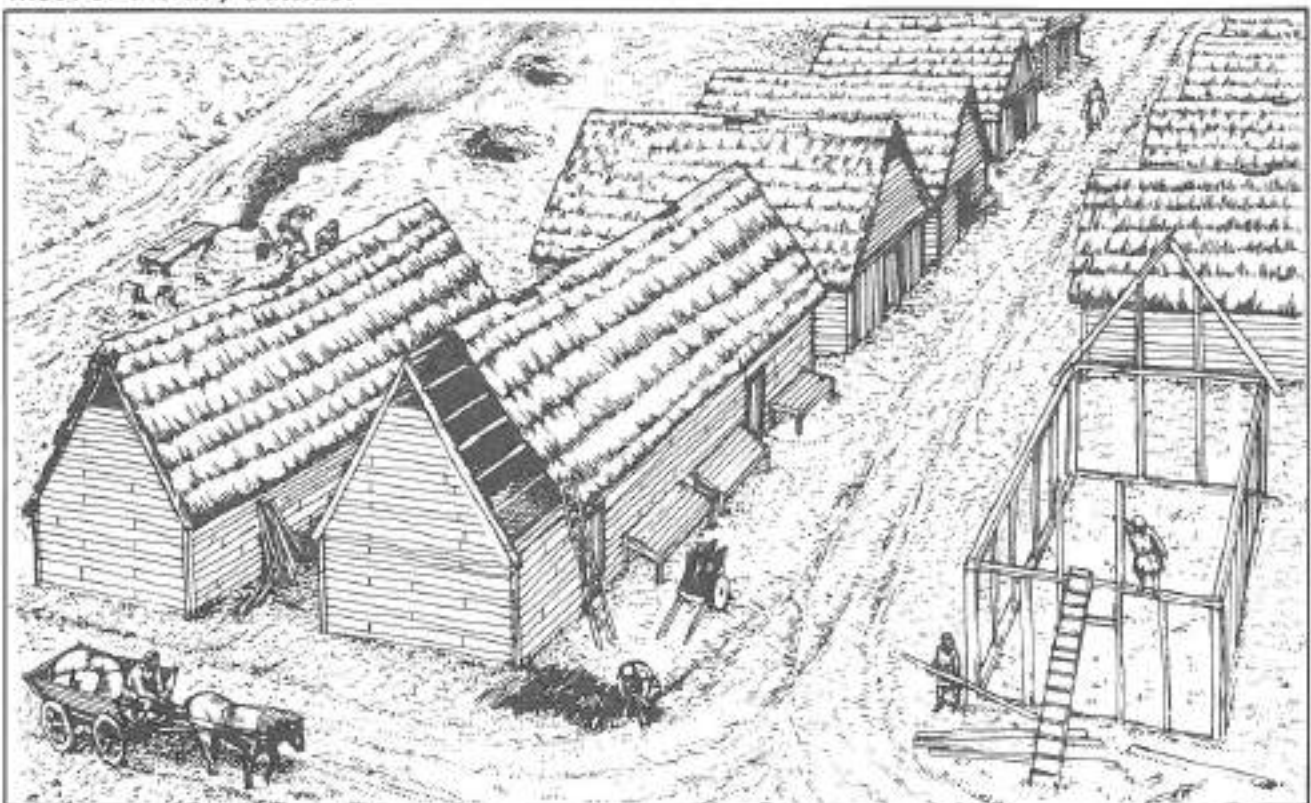
above the buildings of the Roman city and below Norman and Medieval levels. The old Roman city walls of Lincoln had served as a ready-made defence for the Viking army and Vikings erected the timber buildings characteristic of their homeland among the ruins of Roman stone buildings. Timber buildings have now been identified on a number of sites including that beneath the Argos Catalogue showroom, St. Paul-in-the-Bail at the corner of Bailgate and Westgate, and especially a large site at the corner of Flaxengate and Grantham Street.

BUILDINGS IN VIKING LINCOLN

Lincoln had been the centre of a thriving community before the Danish conquest, and a variety of finds illustrates that Lincoln was an important trading centre during the Saxon period. When the Danes arrived they laid out new streets and houses, including Flaxengate and Grantham Street, but they may have respected an existing framework, which perhaps included roads like High Street, The Strait, and Silver Street.

In recent years buildings of the Viking period have been excavated by the Lincoln Archaeological Trust alongside Flaxengate. They were probably single-storey, built of timber with thatch or shingle (wooden tile) roofing. The walls might have been constructed of horizontally laid planks pegged into circular timber uprights. The perishable nature of the material used meant that the building needed to be replaced every twenty or thirty years.

These early buildings were of a fairly simple type. But from about the mid-tenth century onward, more sophisticated techniques were evolved. Uprights were more regularly spaced so that beams at ceiling level could tie the walls together and give the building greater rigidity; Clay-based hearths, placed centrally within the buildings, were used for cooking and heating; smoke would have escaped through holes in the roofs. Benches, which would also have served as beds, would have lined the sides of the buildings. Rushes or straw were strewn over the floors. These could have been cleared out and replaced fairly regularly. Some buildings were divided into rooms but most of the Viking-period buildings were left as open halls (10 to 16 metres long by 5 metres wide). Although gloomy and smoky, these buildings would have been dry and cosy during the winter if somewhat stuffy in hotter weather. Campers today probably live in a similar way to the occupants of these buildings — fetching water from the nearest stream or well, digging pits to bury unburnable rubbish, and spending most of the day outside.



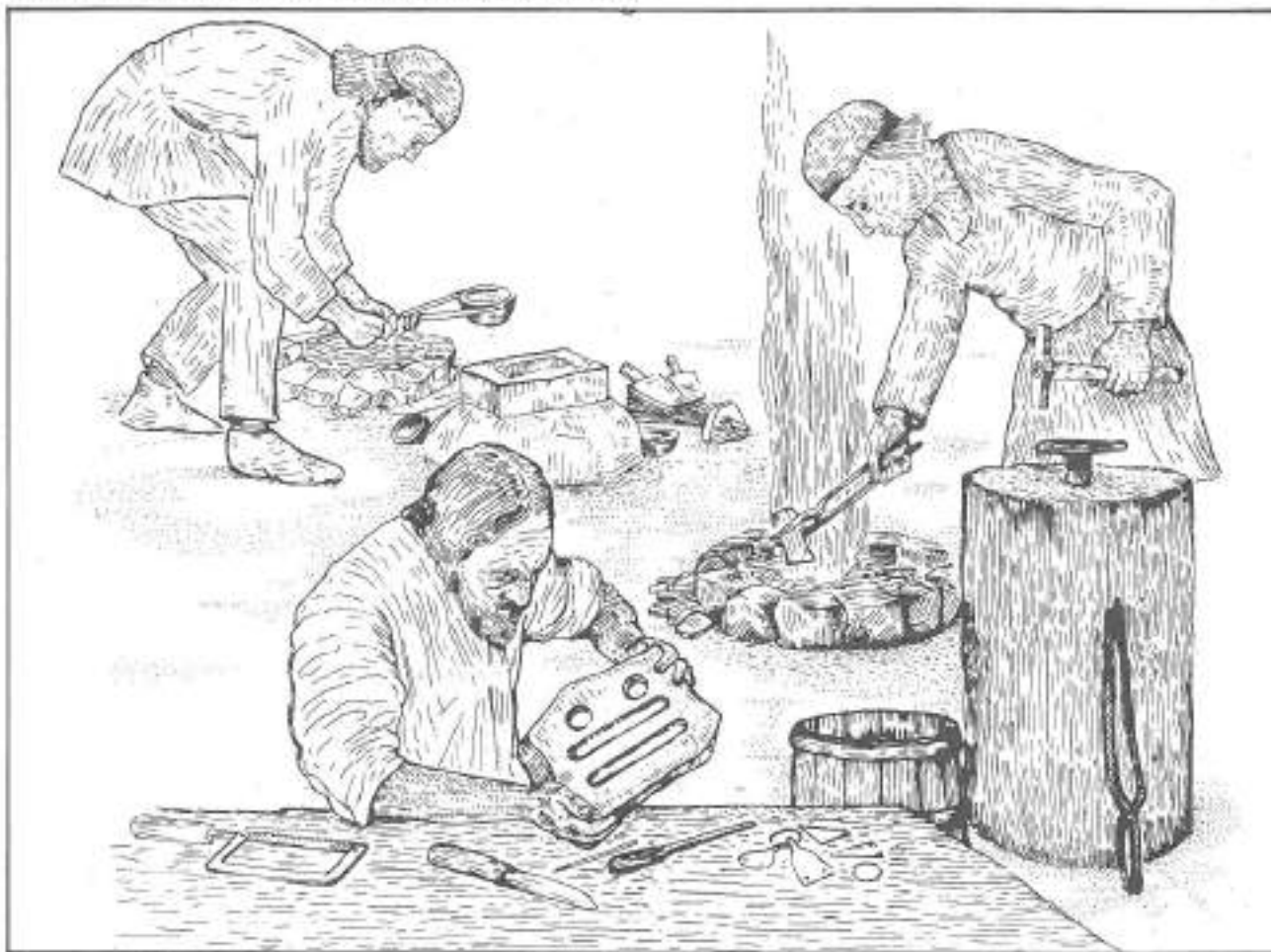
Reconstruction of buildings along Flaxengate and Grantham Street, Lincoln

Three or four of these buildings were constructed within a single property which measured about 30 metres by about 18 metres. It is possible that these buildings were occupied by tenants, and the owner of the property may have lived elsewhere. Similar large properties were probably established throughout much of Lincoln as part of the planned Danish settlement.

Most of our knowledge of the history of this period comes from written sources. But only through excavating the houses of ordinary people can we learn what it must have been like to have lived at this time.

INDUSTRY

Excavations at Flaxengate revealed an exciting glimpse of life and work in a Viking-age town. Many objects and waste fragments lay buried in the soil — clues to how some of the people earned their living. Archaeologists found the remains of successive workshops with a long tradition of use. The earliest activity was the making of finger-rings in green and yellow glass, followed by copper-working on the same site.



Coppersmiths at work.

The copper-smiths collected scrap metal (perhaps old Roman jewellery which they had found) and placed it in small pots called 'crucibles'. Burnt patches of soil in the workshop area showed where hearths had been built. The fires could be made hot enough to melt metal by using a pair of bellows; the crucibles were heated from underneath, or by placing hot charcoal on top. One of the crucibles found still has the marks of the tongs which were used to lift it.

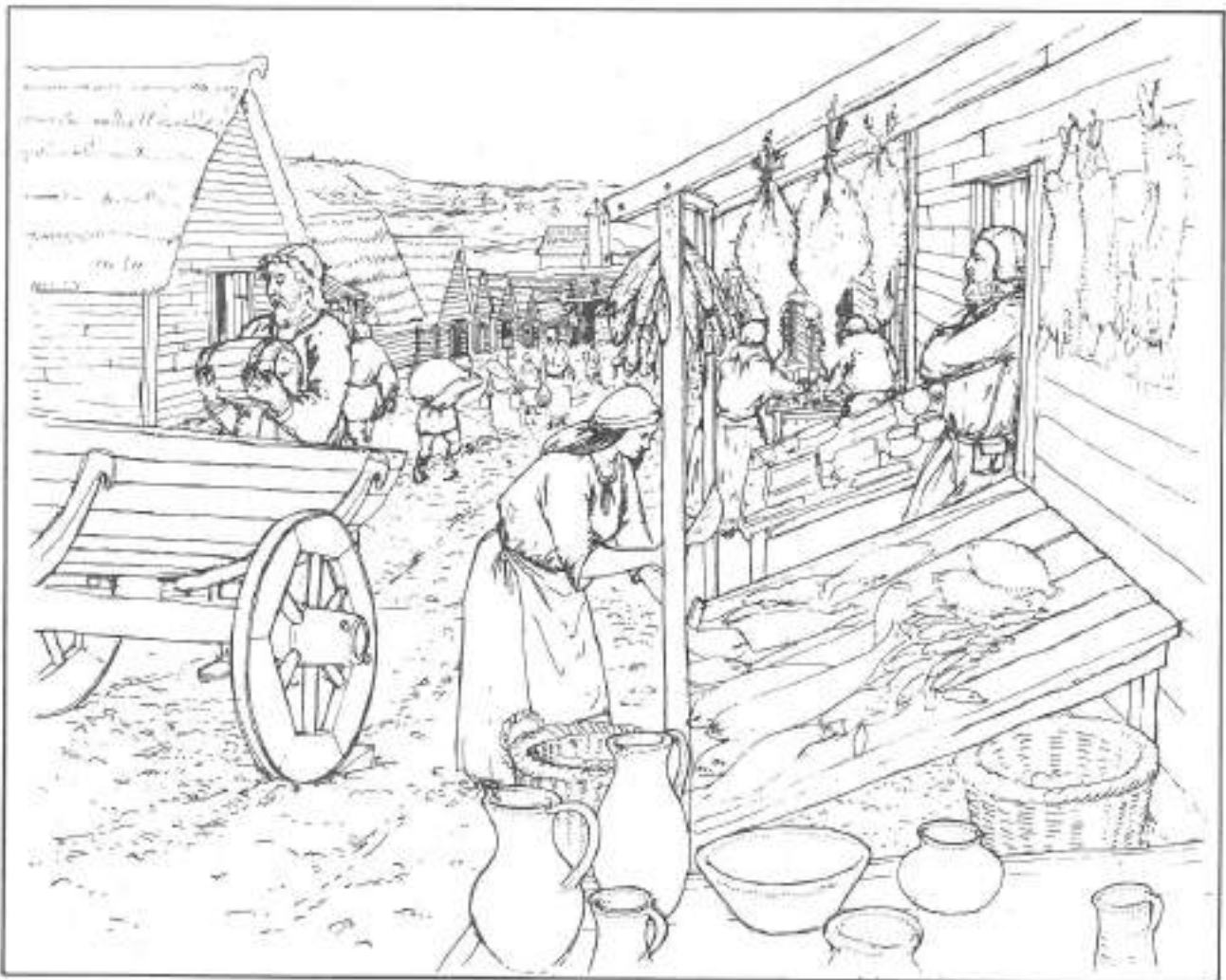
The liquid copper was poured into moulds and sometimes splashed onto the ground; these splashes cooled and solidified, lying there until found by the archaeologists. Only the pure metal was poured off, leaving a glassy waste substance created by the intense heat, called 'slag'. Many fragments of slag and hundreds of broken crucibles were found during excavation; no-one yet knows whether they were only used once, or re-used until they cracked or the accumulation of slag rendered them unserviceable.

Some of the objects made were brooches; their clay moulds had to be broken to remove them. There were also stone moulds for making small bars or 'ingots'; these bars were hammered into thin, flat sheets for making small tags. Disc-shaped or triangular pieces were cut out and given a small hook at the top and two holes at the bottom. Although often called 'garterhooks' they would have been too fragile to support a Viking's garters, and were probably used as clasps. Sometimes whole areas of the site were stained green from the many scraps of sheet and unfinished tags which had been dropped and lost.

Other metals such as lead may have been melted down, and small finger-rings and pendants were made of jet. Spinning and weaving tools showed that textiles were produced, although no cloth survived owing to the dryness of the soil.

COMMERCE AND TRADE

The goods manufactured at Flaxengate could be sold or exchanged for much-needed agricultural produce, especially food, and wool for spinning and weaving. Standing at the junction of two major Roman roads, the Foss Way and Ermine Street, and with waterway links via the Foss Dyke and River Witham to the Humber and the east coast, Lincoln was well situated for local, national and international trade.



The importance of commerce is reflected in contemporary laws, and efforts were made to regulate it. A law of King Edgar (959-975) states that '... no goods over 20 pence are to be bought outside a town ... there is to be one coinage over all the king's dominion and no-one is to mint money except in a town.' Coinage serves as an indication of both wealth and trade. Lincoln had its own mint, and in the late 10th and 11th centuries the number of moneys here was second only to London. Some of the coins found at Flaxengate illustrate the city's trading contacts throughout the country, for they were minted at such places as York, Chester and Hereford. The Flaxengate craftsmen sold their goods to townspeople and travelling merchants, perhaps from stalls specially erected on the site.

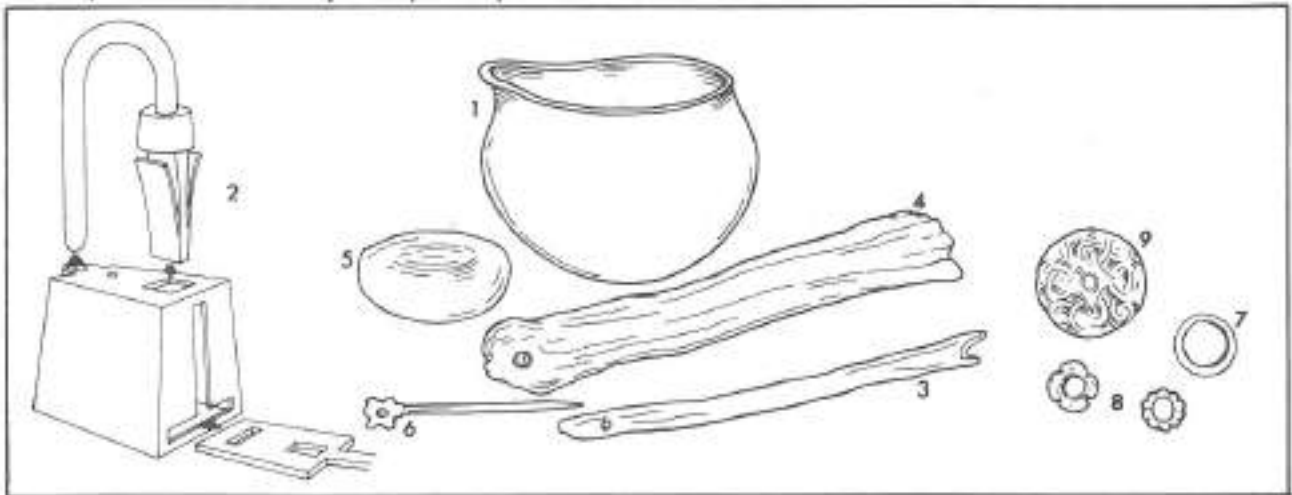
International trade was also of considerable importance; a letter from King Canute to his subjects in 1027 tells of his request to the Emperor and Pope that '... my men, whether merchants or others ... should go and return from Rome in safety with firm peace and just law, free from hindrances by barriers and tolls.' Many of the objects found at Flaxengate demonstrate Lincoln's role in international trade, and include fragments of pottery vessels from France, the Low Countries, the Rhineland, and even the Near East and China. Lava querns (for grinding grain) were imported from the Rhineland, whetstones (for sharpening knives and other tools) from Norway, and a little amber came from the Baltic or the North Sea area. Luxury goods were also imported, such as wine (perhaps contained in some of the French or Rhenish vessels) and furs from the Baltic.

International trade between England and the Continent had been established before the Viking invasions and settlement, but now fresh opportunities were provided by the wide-ranging network of Viking trade-routes. This encouraged the expansion of industry and commerce, and it was in this period that the foundations were laid for Lincoln's prosperity during the Middle Ages.

EVERYDAY LIFE — THE HOME

Little survived at Flaxengate of the internal furnishings of the houses, as the soil was too dry for the preservation of perishable materials such as wood. But some of the objects found, and the remains of houses excavated at other Viking sites give us an idea of family life at home.

Benches along the walls served as seats and beds, covered in furs or woollen blankets. Floors were strewn with rushes or straw, and a central hearth provided fire for cooking, heating and lighting. Although the smoke rose through a hole in the roof, it must have been very dim inside, for oil-filled lamps of pottery⁽¹⁾ and stone were also used.



Viking objects found in Lincoln.

Meat could be spit-roasted over the fire, boiled in iron cauldrons and water-filled pots heated by dropping hot stones inside, or baked in hot embers. Tableware consisted of wooden bowls and dishes, and perhaps fine pottery; forks were unknown but iron knives and bone or wooden spoons and ladles were used for eating. Food could be hung up to dry, or kept in pots on the floor and on shelves; some of the wicker-lined pits found at Flaxengate may also have been used for storage.

Clothing was hung on the walls or kept in wooden chests, secured by padlocks. These were unlike modern padlocks, as they operated on a spring mechanism. Holes in the bronze or iron key compressed the springs, thus releasing the lock⁽²⁾.

Telling stories and reciting poetry helped to pass the time, and music was provided by harps, fiddles and pipes. Part of a small flute⁽³⁾ made of a swan's bone was found at Flaxengate. Board games like chess or draughts were played, and small bone skates⁽⁴⁾ attached to the foot with leather thongs were made for the icy winters.

Many of these objects were probably made at home, from bone which was available from

butchered carcasses, or from shed antlers gathered from nearby woods. Spinning and weaving were also done in the house. Many of the family's clothes were probably made during the winter evenings; glass 'linen-smoothers'⁽⁵⁾ were used for pressing the cloth, much like a modern iron.

EVERYDAY LIFE — THE PEOPLE

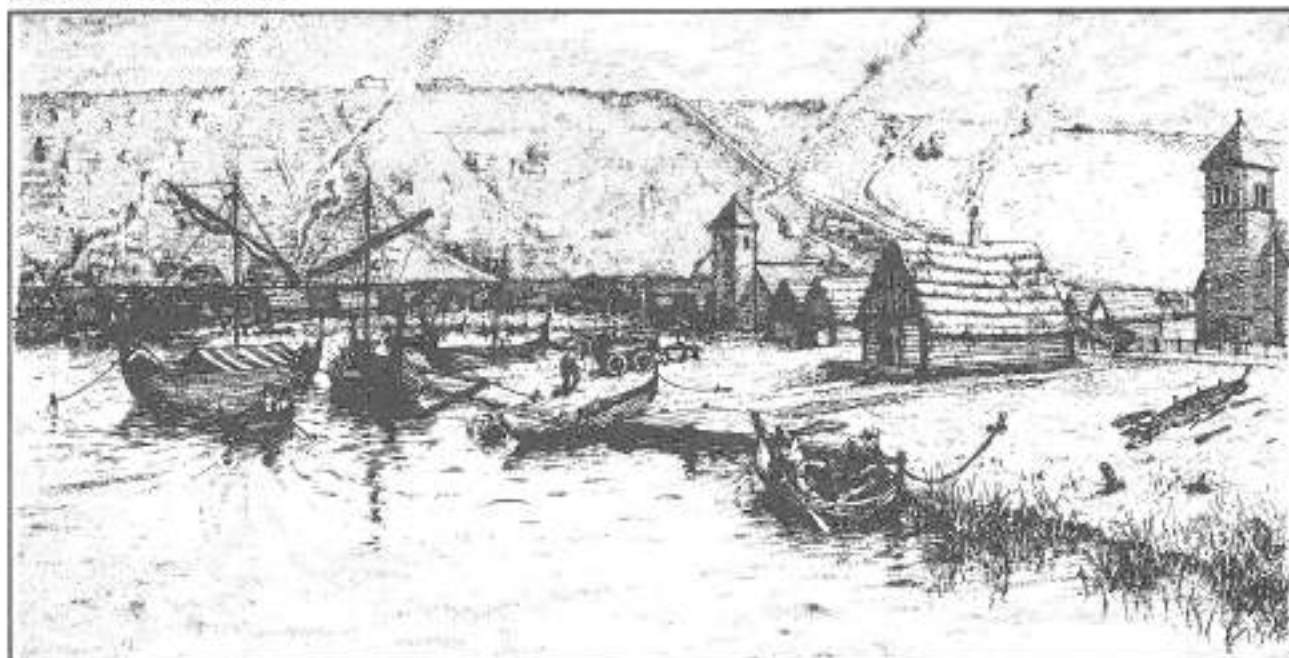
Information about Viking dress comes from a number of sources, including medieval sagas, although these are not totally reliable. There are also representations of historical or legendary events on the 6th to 11th century Gotland 'picture-stones' and on a tapestry from the 9th century Oseberg ship-burial. Clothing occasionally survives in graves and sometimes the impressions of textiles are retained on the corrosion of metal brooches.

Women wore long petticoats beneath a simple shift secured at the shoulder by a pair of brooches, and often a shawl, fastened with a brooch. Men wore trousers, with a shirt, tunic and perhaps a cloak. Belts were fastened with buckles and were often ornamented with decorative mounts. Shoes were of leather, and hats were sometimes worn.

Both men and women wore jewellery as it served a functional rather than a purely decorative purpose — hooks and eyes, zips and buttons were unknown. In an age when there were no banks or safety-deposit boxes it also represented a portable form of wealth, and the status of a man might be measured by the amount of jewellery worn. The Arab Ibn Fadlan, writing in the early 10th century of a party of merchants who he met on the River Volga, commented: 'Each woman carries on her bosom a container made of iron, silver, copper or gold — its size and substance depending on her man's wealth. . .'. Gold and silver arm-rings and massive neck-rings were worn; one gold neck-ring found in Denmark weighs 4 pounds! Finger-rings of precious metal were traditionally given to reward faithful service.

Pendants were occasionally worn, perhaps used as amulets to ward off evil, and strings of beads of all shapes and colours. Other articles were carried suspended from the belt, such as purses, knives, small whetstones, keys and combs. Ibrahim Al-Tartushi, an Arab who visited Hedeby (an important Scandinavian market town) in the mid-10th century, noticed that 'There is also an artificial make-up for the eyes: when they use it beauty never fades; on the contrary, it increases in men and women as well'.

For those who could not afford expensive jewellery, bronze or pewter ornaments were made; these were often tinned and gilded. Some of the objects found and perhaps manufactured at Flaxengate illustrate the variety of ornaments worn by everyday people: bronze and bone pins for fastening clothing or hair⁽⁶⁾, finger-rings of glass⁽⁷⁾, and bronze; glass beads⁽⁸⁾ and bronze brooches⁽⁹⁾.



Brayford Pool about 1000 AD.

THE VIKING LEGACY

By the time of the Norman Conquest in 1066, Lincoln had become one of the foremost towns in the country with an estimated population of 6,000. Her success as an urban centre had been built in large part on the secure economic foundations which the Danes had helped to build from the later ninth century onwards through their commercial and industrial activities. But the regeneration of urban life in Lincoln five centuries after the Roman period is mirrored in many towns elsewhere in England. As political control became increasingly centralized in the tenth century and urban development quickened we find that in Lincoln the sharp distinctions between Anglo-Saxon and Viking begin to blur — a synthesis has taken place, and although by 1066 Danish traits remain in personal names, street names and social organization, the town has become English. Only future archaeological work in the city will show precisely how those changes took place, and tell us more of the Viking contribution to Lincoln's past.

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