

PART I

OPENING DOORS TO THE VIKING AGE

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-108-49722-0 — Architecture, Society, and Ritual in Viking Age Scandinavia  
Marianne Hem Eriksen  
Excerpt  
[More Information](#)

---

## ONE

### ENTRY POINTS

#### ON THE THRESHOLD

Most of us take doors for granted. We pass through doorways tens of times each day, without reflection. The door is, however, a powerful feature of human mentality and life-practice. It controls access, provides a sense of security and privacy, and marks the boundary between differentiated spaces. The doorway is also the architectural element allowing passage from one space to the next. Crossing the threshold means abandoning one space and entering another, a bodily practice recognized both in ritual and language as a transition between social roles or situations. Doors and thresholds are thus closely linked with *rites de passage*, the word ‘liminality’ itself stemming from Latin *limen*, ‘threshold’. This does not imply that each and every crossing of a threshold constitutes a liminal ritual, but rather that passing through a doorway is an embodied, everyday experience prompting numerous social and metaphorical implications. A volume on thresholds in fiction asks why the threshold exercises such a riveting grasp on human imagination; why it is such a resonant space (Mukherji 2011:xvii). The characterization of the threshold as a resonant space precisely captures its affect. The threshold is evocative, a locus of heightened anticipation.

The seeds for this book were sown nearly a decade ago when, during data collection for my master’s thesis, I noticed a strange concurrence between two written sources related to the Viking Age. One text, ibn Fadlān’s *Risāla*, was

from the Arabic Caliphate, containing an eyewitness report of a ship burial of a Viking chieftain on the river Volga in 922 CE. The other was an episode from *Flateyjarbók*, a late Icelandic saga of which the oldest surviving copy dates to the fourteenth century, recounting a strange fertility ritual on a remote farm in Viking Age Norway.<sup>1</sup> Even though the texts were transcribed centuries apart and in vastly different geographical and cultural contexts, they both touched on the same, eerie topic: a woman being lifted – or asking to be lifted – above a doorframe, to enable her to *see* into a different realm.

This image took root in me; I started wondering if doors were related to ritual practices in the Viking Age. Simultaneously, I had started realizing the vast and largely untouched potential in considering the archaeological remains of the built environment of the period not only as functional-economic constructions but as social expressions, producers, and agents. Gradually, these two themes forged one question: How can an in-depth study of an everyday material object – the door – generate new knowledge of social, ritual, and affective experience of the Late Iron and Viking Ages? In answering that question, this book offers a fresh approach to the (pre)historic period often termed the Scandinavian Late Iron Age (c. 550–1050 CE); it is a social exploration of the houses and homes of the Vikings in a pivotal period of European history. The crux of the book is that it uses a highly charged architectural element as an entryway to explore the households, hierarchies, and rituals of the Viking Age.

#### NEW GATEWAYS TO THE VIKINGS

The Vikings are well known to us. We can conjure images in our minds without blinking – long-haired, bearded, frenzied warriors, swords in hand. And, equally obvious, the conjured image is to some extent false, or at the very least it is one-dimensional and stagnant. In a thought-provoking article, Neil Price points out that the Vikings we study today are very different from the ones under scrutiny twenty years ago – or even further back. ‘They have grown’, he writes, ‘they have gained more depth and resolution’ (Price 2015:7). To my mind, that is only partially true. In arenas such as religion and ritual, dress and gender, and especially mortuary practices, the Vikings have gained more depth. But in terms of everyday life, in the Vikings’ households, and their use and conceptualization of domestic space, I argue that there is still room to grow. In a recent assessment of Viking archaeology, Sarah Croix (2015) claims that Viking studies are to some extent regressing. After the last decades’ gender critique and a focus on Viking ritual, craft, and especially trade, an international exhibition launched in 2013 unapologetically focussed on the stereotypical Viking: the male raider and warrior (Williams et al. 2014). With the enormous popularity of the Vikings in mainstream

culture, Croix (2015:93) contends that the field of Viking studies is feeding the public what it expects, ‘and repeating itself within a simplified and ever more narrowing frame’. In my opinion, while the perceptions of Vikings as warriors, traders, and colonists are in the forefront of public discourse, as well as the object of a substantial amount of research on the Viking Age, the domestic sphere is still perceived as an unproblematized, familiar, and somewhat trivial sphere.

In contrast, the empirical basis and the point of departure of this work are the fragmented remains of the doors, but also the dwellings, of the Vikings. Even though the door will be on centre stage in this study, it makes little sense to discuss entryways without considering the space to which they lead. I thus draw on the latent possibility in using architecture and the built environment to answer questions of social organization, architectural templates of movement, ideology, affect, and ritual behaviour. The question of how one particular material construction can elucidate the social fabric of the Viking Age relates to a broader attempt to develop more theoretically engaged perspectives in Viking archaeology. More important, though, is the question: How does the Viking Age look from the point of view of the house?

In recent years, developments in excavation technique have unearthed thousands of prehistoric houses in Scandinavia. This new dataset provides novel opportunities to examine the practice of dwelling through physical remains of architecture. This book draws on the generally unexploited potential embedded in the archaeological record of house remains from Late Iron Age Scandinavia, with a primary focus on Norway. The corpus, presented in the Appendix and referenced throughout, consists of 99 longhouses and 17 shorthouses, in total 116 buildings interpreted as dwellings, from 65 archaeological sites. Embedded in the corpus is a substantial archaeological material of doors and entrances, with a total number of 150 doors. The primary attention on Norway is a strategy to limit the scope of inquiry, and to present Norwegian settlements of the period into one publication, as this material has not been compiled previously. However, I will use settlement material from other parts of Scandinavia, mainly south Scandinavia (Denmark and Scania), and the Norse worlds comparatively, in order to explore differences and similarities between the south and central Scandinavian architectural expression. I will also briefly discuss other building types such as courtyard sites, cult buildings, and mortuary houses.

Research on Iron and Viking Age settlement has traditionally focused on functional, economic, and agricultural aspects of settlement. While these topics are clearly important, there are still unrealized possibilities in using the material remains of houses in discussions of the spatiality and social organization of dwellings. By drawing on the potential embedded in postholes, doors, and hearths, this study complements existing research by considering access and

entry to domestic space, the composition of the household, and the affective webs of the house. It investigates the ritualization of doors and thresholds in the Viking Age, the relationship between houses, doors, and the dead, and the significance of everyday, domestic life. Material objects are herein considered as more than economic commodities, status symbols, or, in the case of architecture, climate shelters; and are rather explored as social entities forming relational assemblages, in line with much of current archaeological thinking (e.g. Fowler 2013; Jones and Boivin 2010; Lucas 2012, 2016; B. Olsen 2010). I will repeatedly argue that Viking longhouses have forms of agency and vibrancy, that they can have social lives, and that the inhabitants' lives were very much entwined with that of the house. Significantly, I hope to map a more comprehensive universe of the Vikings, where the people of the Viking Age are fleshed out and embodied.

I therefore aspire to see the Vikings as more complete human beings *specifically through their relation to and use of social space*. This work cannot and will not be a complete social archaeology of the Viking Age; it does not consider for instance the Viking raids, colonization, or trade. The aim is rather to carve out, from the grey block often termed 'the domestic sphere', a higher-resolution picture of lived experience in Viking Age Norway. Everyday life is the foundation of this work; consumption, seating arrangements, sleeping patterns, everyday movement through domestic space. In some chapters, the slaves of the Vikings are considered, and their everyday life experience. Viking children, and women, and males of different status are brought into the picture. In other chapters, I consider rituals, and deposition, and the house as an active agent in the creation of a social world. I hope to portray the Vikings to a higher extent as *real people*, with desires and aversions, agendas and affects, anxieties and beliefs. I embed them within a physical, architectural frame that not only significantly shaped their movements, thoughts, and actions, but that was part of them and of which they were a part in turn. In short, the aim is to contribute to the development of a social archaeology of the Viking Age. And my gateway for doing so is through the door of the domestic house.

#### THE HOUSE: ORDERING SPACE, BODIES, AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

... the house we were born in is physically inscribed in us. It is a group of organic habits. After twenty years, in spite of all the other anonymous stairways; we could recapture the reflexes of "the first stairway", we would not stumble on that rather high step. ... The house we were born in is more than an embodiment of home, it is also an embodiment of dreams.

(Bachelard 1994 [1964]:14–15)

Whereas social anthropology, sociology, and several subfields of archaeology have long been interested in houses and households as analytical categories, as

well as the connections between the built environment and social organization, such issues have arguably received limited attention in Scandinavian Iron and Viking Age studies. People, and their everyday social, political, and ritual practices, are often more or less invisible in discussions of houses and settlements. Ruth Tringham's famous statement that the inhabitants of prehistoric houses are merely 'faceless blobs' (1991) rings no less true in the late 2010s than it did in the early 1990s.

The earliest studies of Iron and Viking Age settlement in Norway were rooted in a cultural-historical framework, and generally of a descriptive character (Grieg 1934; Hagen 1953; Petersen 1933, 1936). A particular research strand in Norwegian archaeology has been the tradition of using written records, cadastres, maps, and toponyms to chart Iron and Viking Age settlement, as historical farms are seen as the natural successors to postulated prehistoric farms (Gjerpe 2014; Pilø 2005). This relates partly to Norwegian archaeology's emergence in a national romanticist framework in the nineteenth century (see also Chapter 3).

Subsequent works in the second half of the twentieth century became increasingly attentive to questions of economy and subsistence, in line with the developing processual framework (e.g. Jacobsen 1984; Kaland 1987; Randers 1981). Publications primarily focus on calculations of produce, cultivation intensity, and the number of livestock, and rarely contain plans of the houses and settlements. In line with the predominant archaeological thinking of the day, this points to an underexplored analytical consideration of the house structures themselves. Yet, there were other voices in the settlement debate. Through several works, Bjørn Myhre considered the settlement of southwest Norway (1980, 1982a, 1982b, 1982c, 1983). Even though Myhre was influenced by the processual and functionalist way of thinking, he also pinpointed socially oriented questions of settlement and used models from social anthropology. Likewise, Trond Løken's work on the Bronze Age to Early Iron Age site Forsandmoen, Rogaland, incorporates more socially oriented questions springing from the architecture itself (Løken 1998).

Other works have taken a political angle, focusing on the development of estates and petty kingdoms, and the role land ownership played in state formation (Iversen 2008; Skre 1998). Especially the works of Dagfinn Skre (1997, 1998, 2001) significantly rejected the idealized egalitarian perception of Viking settlement and illuminated the role of freed dependants and slaves in large-scale settlement patterns. Skre opens for a debate of ideological and political aspects of settlement, where his focus is primarily on landholding, tenancy, and social economy explored mainly through burial material and written sources (Skre 2001). Yet, there is limited consideration of everyday, domestic life, or indeed the house structures themselves; the estates identified in later written sources are the important elements, as pawns in large-scale power plays.

In the same period the number of excavated settlements in Norway started to increase dramatically due to the methodology of excavating with mechanical diggers underneath cultivated land. However, accumulating a larger dataset of houses from the Iron Age did not in itself increase explorations of social aspects of space. In contrast, British prehistoric archaeology, especially during the peak of post-processualism, has offered cognitive takes on architecture, such as tracing symbolic spaces or viewing houses and monuments as cosmological expressions (e.g. Bender et al. 2007; Parker Pearson 1999b; Tilley 1994), yet, I would argue, again often at the cost of lived experience. Such approaches moreover rarely seeped into Scandinavian considerations of architecture and households, at least in Iron Age scholarship. In Scandinavia, limited consideration of the British-centred phenomenology of space has taken place, or the lived experience of architecture. I argue that there has been a tendency of a dichotomy between mortuary archaeologists focusing on ritual, social organization, and ideology; and settlement archaeologists – at least those working with non-elite settlements – concentrating on typology, economy, and function. As a result of this division of research agendas (and here I am painting with a broad brush), a picture emerges where the manner in which a past society handled their dead may provide knowledge of ideas, rituals, and ontology, while the built environment is reduced to a neutral backdrop to social practice.

In recent years, however, studies of built environments in Scandinavia and the wider Viking world that transcend a *homo economicus* perspective have started generating new knowledge in a range of areas: social and political process (Boyd 2013; Dommasnes et al. 2016; Hadley and Harkel 2013; Herschend 2009; Holst 2010), structure and practice (Webley 2008), ritualization (e.g. Carlie 2004; Eriksen 2015b; Kristensen 2010), the relationship between the living and the dead (Eriksen 2013, 2016, 2017; Thäte 2007), and gender relations (Croix 2014; Milek 2012). A key Scandinavian scholar has been Frands Herschend, who in a series of works has explored notions of ordered space and considered landscapes as social agents in the Iron Age (Herschend 1993, 1994, 1997, 1998, 2009).

It is also increasingly accepted that many, if not most, agrarian, economic practices, such as planting crops, ploughing, grinding, cooking, or weaving, had ritual and mythological overtones in the Iron Age world view (e.g. Fendin 2006; Gräslund 2001; Kristoffersen 2000; Welinder 1993). The house was also the central locus of many forms of feasts and seasonal celebrations, as well as *rites de passage*: burials, births, and weddings took place within the house. All deities in the Norse pantheon had their own, named hall buildings over which they ruled; when warriors died, they expected their bodies to go live in another house – *Valhöll* or *Fólkvangr*. Moreover, the world itself is in kennings and Eddic poetry likened to a hall or house, the sky as a roof, and so on (e.g.

*Rígsþula*, *Völuspá* 64). A foundation of this book is thus that the longhouse not only had ritual connotations, but was deeply entwined in the Late Iron Age ontology, and moreover, that social, ritual, and economical practices were interwoven into a tapestry that could not be unravelled (sensu Bradley 2005).

The built environment is an accumulated and influential assemblage of social practice, repeated actions, spatial ideals – in other words, of *lived space*. Architecture is always the result of past action (e.g. McFadyen 2013). The house and its *praxis* has been placed in the very centre of the social fabric of pre-industrial societies, as it has been argued that in cultures without literacy, inhabited space and the house constitute the primary objectifications of social schemes (Bourdieu 1977:89–90). The house is, in Bourdiean terms, both a *structuring and structured structure* – i.e. both a cause and effect of social process, and a primary field for inscribing the body with a specific habitus. However, John Robb suggests that instead of simplistically applying ideas such as habitus in prehistory or ‘look for agency’ in the archaeological record, we should rather understand action as *genres of behaviour*: ‘a set of institutionalized practices recognized as a distinct activity’ (Robb 2010:507). Feasting, warfare, mortuary rituals, or cultivation would constitute different *genres of behaviour*. Moreover, Robb stresses that agency is not necessarily embedded in disparate individuals but in *relationships*, and that these relationships are fundamentally material. Agency can thus be defined as ‘the socially reproductive quality of action’ within relationships among human and non-humans (Robb 2010:494). Houses create the contexts for many different fields of action and genres of behaviour. Moreover, the influence of the built environment is certainly part of a reciprocal relationship between the house and its inhabitants, and their daily, unreflected and embodied practices; the house as the product of the social choices of the builders and inhabitants, and a reification of past action, in turn affecting new generations emerging within the house.

To consider the lived experience of dwelling it is necessary, I argue, to consider bodies in space: bodies building space, using space, navigating space, and transforming space. Increased attention has been directed towards the senses and the body recently, within the Iron Age (e.g. Hedeager 2010; Lund 2013) and especially in European later prehistory at large (e.g. Borić and Robb 2008; Hamilakis 2013; Rebay-Salisbury et al. 2010; Robb and Harris 2013). Bodies are ambiguous, simultaneously objects and subjects, a site where both the self and the other are negotiated and performed. Bodies are places of desire, but also of violence, biological processes, abjection, and alienation. Embodiment can be defined as the way people engage with the world through their bodies. The way we experience the built environment, as the rest of the world, is through our corporeality (Bourdieu 1977; Merleau-Ponty 2012 [1958]). Mauss (1979) famously observed that the techniques of the body: the way we walk, sleep, dance, run, and make love, are all socio-cultural

idiosyncrasies. Children in particular are inscribed with, or rather, imitate, the adults' movements of the body, and thereby acquire sets of socially conditioned body movements that constitute culturally specific strategies for experiencing and mediating the world (Bourdieu 1977; Mauss 1979; Wilson 1988:153).

The perspective of bodily learnt practice and experience is highly relevant for a study of doors and dwellings. Movements through domestic space, seating arrangements, the order in which food is served, the room you are not supposed to enter, the threshold only some are allowed to cross – these small, household practices are both executed by and absorbed into the body, creating and recreating the social world. And as the social systems are institutionalized in the architecture, differentiated power structures are legitimized and euphemized (Bourdieu 1989). Harris and Robb (2013b:3) offer the useful working concept *body worlds*, which they define as 'the totality of bodily experiences, practices and representations in a specific place and time'. Emanating from embodiment, some scholars emphasize the performativity of architecture, of how it is only when bodies, architecture, and things come together that a space becomes a place (Kaye 2016). Other scholars stress that the built environment can be understood as a producer of affective fields (Harris and Sørensen 2010), engendering certain forms of emotional responses in its users (Harris 2016; Love 2016), or specific atmospheres (Sørensen 2015). I consider doors, doorways, and the house at large, not only as mediators of habitus, but as things which shape, move, and merge with people, in a process where houses and people together engage in an embodied process of dwelling.

#### TOWARDS A SOCIAL ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE VIKING AGE

Novel theoretical perspectives have opened the door to new questions and new answers in Viking archaeology. The eclectic internally conflicted wave of approaches hurtling forth from the beginning of the third millennium has been collectively termed 'new materialism' (Thomas 2015). Although controversial and provocative, this shift to relational thinking offers a vast range of new perspectives in archaeology. Among the perplexing strands of symmetrical archaeology (Olsen 2003; B. Olsen 2010; Witmore 2007), meshworks (Ingold 2007), Actor-Network Theory (Latour 2005), assemblages (Fowler 2013; Hamilakis and Jones 2017), entanglements (Hodder 2012), vibrancy (Bennett 2010), and the ontological turn (Alberti et al. 2011; Marshall and Alberti 2014) I wish to emphasize three points because they explicitly and implicitly cast the story of this work.

The first is that material culture, animals, landscapes, things, and people form *relational assemblages* (Bennett 2010; Fowler 2013, 2016; Hamilakis and Jones 2017; Lucas 2012); a wave of thinking in current archaeological discourse