FOOD CULTURE IN SCANDINAVIA

Henry Notaker

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Series Foreword

The appearance of the Food Culture around the World series marks a definitive stage in the maturation of Food Studies as a discipline to reach a wider audience of students, general readers, and foodies alike. In comprehensive interdisciplinary reference volumes, each on the food culture of a country or region for which information is most in demand, a remarkable team of experts from around the world offers a deeper understanding and appreciation of the role of food in shaping human culture for a whole new generation. I am honored to have been associated with this project as series editor.

Each volume follows a series format, with a chronology of food-related dates and narrative chapters entitled Introduction, Historical Overview, Major Foods and Ingredients, Cooking, Typical Meals, Eating Out, Special Occasions, and Diet and Health. (In special cases, these topics are covered by region.) Each also includes a glossary, bibliography, resource guide, and illustrations.

Finding or growing food has of course been the major preoccupation of our species throughout history, but how various peoples around the world learn to exploit their natural resources, come to esteem or shun specific foods, and develop unique cuisines reveals much more about what it is to be human. There is perhaps no better way to understand a culture, its values, preoccupations, and fears, than by examining its attitudes toward food. Food provides the daily sustenance around which families and communities bond. It provides the material basis for rituals through which

people celebrate the passage of life stages and their connection to divinity. Food preferences also serve to separate individuals and groups from each other, and as one of the most powerful factors in the construction of identity, we physically, emotionally, and spiritually become what we eat. By studying the foodways of people different from ourselves we also grow to understand and tolerate the rich diversity of practices around the world. What seems strange or frightening among other people becomes perfectly rational when set in context. It is my hope that readers will gain from these volumes not only an aesthetic appreciation for the glories of the many culinary traditions described, but also ultimately a more profound respect for the peoples who devised them. Whether it is eating New Year's dumplings in China, folding tamales with friends in Mexico, or going out to a famous Michelin-starred restaurant in France, understanding these food traditions helps us to understand the people themselves.

As globalization proceeds apace in the twenty-first century it is also more important than ever to preserve unique local and regional traditions. In many cases these books describe ways of eating that have already begun to disappear or have been seriously transformed by modernity. To know how and why these losses occur today also enables us to decide what traditions, whether from our own heritage or that of others, we wish to keep alive. These books are thus not only about the food and culture of peoples around the world, but also about ourselves and who we hope to be.

Ken Albala
University of the Pacific

Introduction

This book is about food culture in four Scandinavian countries: Denmark, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. Finland is left out, partly because of the difficulty with sources, as most of them are in Finnish, a language very different from the other Scandinavian languages, and partly because Finland has many similarities to food culture in Russia.

The Scandinavian countries do not have a uniform food culture, but given the close contact between these countries through the centuries, certain important similarities are evident. In this book these similarities will be pointed out as well as the many different traditions, due to variations in nature and climate and in social, cultural, and political history.

Food habits are quickly changing. Studies in the 1980s and 1990s showed a great stability in meal structures and food choices, but some new trends were detected among the young and urban. In the first decade of the new millennium the changes seem to be faster and more visible. Most important is the impact of the supermarket, offering a wider and wider range of convenience foods. Fast food restaurants, kiosks, gasoline stations, and take-away outlets are increasingly important in the distribution of food. These trends strengthen standardization and reduce the real choices for the consumers.

At the same time an interest in food culture is growing, which has led to experiments with both national and foreign food traditions. Many old national or regional products have been revitalized and are often produced and sold by small local companies. A new small-scale production

has also begun in food products, animal species, and fruit and vegetable types that had almost disappeared through standardization in agriculture and demands for uniformity in supermarkets in the twentieth century.

In the cities the new immigrants from southern Europe and Asia have introduced new ingredients and dishes through shops and restaurants. A high proportion of the Scandinavian population travels to foreign countries and adapts more easily than before to new foods and preparations. A new wealthy elite, often representing prosperous enterprises in finance and industry, is the client base for a new group of luxury restaurants of very high quality. A strong interest in healthful food and, particularly in Denmark, for production of organic foods is also evident.

LAND AND CLIMATE

The interior parts of Norway and Sweden have a continental climate, characterized by cold winters and warm summers. The coastal areas of Norway, as well as Denmark, Iceland, and the other North Sea islands, are influenced by the warm Gulf Stream and have a more humid climate with less temperature differences between summer and winter.

Scandinavia has long coasts to the North Atlantic and the Baltic Sea. There are deep fjords, long and narrow valleys, rivers and lakes, thousands of islands, enormous forests, high mountains, rolling hills, tundra, glaciers, geysers, volcanoes, and flat fertile plains.

The total (ice-free) land area is 600,000 square miles (compared with three and a half million in the United States), but in addition are ice caps and glaciers, in Greenland alone covering more than half a million square miles. Arable land makes up 18.8 percent of the ice-free area, about the same as in the United States, but big differences exist among Denmark (with 54% arable land), Sweden (8%), Norway (3%), and Iceland (1%). The natural conditions for farming are particularly harsh in Iceland, Greenland, and the Faroe Islands.

In the agricultural sector, small holdings of less than 75 acres dominate, and most of the large holdings are in Denmark. Denmark produces three times as much food as its inhabitants need and has an important food export.

Historically, a dividing line went between a southern area (Denmark and southern Sweden), where grain was the most important product, and a northern area (Iceland, Norway, and northern Sweden), where milk was the most important product. Through the ages, other lines became more important, between coast and inland, between town and countryside.

POPULATION

Scandinavia today has a very high standard of living, and the percentage of very poor is low. Life expectancy is 77 years for men and 82 for women, a little higher than in the United States. The gross domestic product (GDP) per capita is 31,855 euros, and the total taxes, as a percentage of the GDP, 48.2 percent (United States: 26.8%). People spend an average of 13 to 14 percent of their total household expenses on food.

Denmark (population 5.4 million) is 10 times as densely populated as Sweden (8.9 million), Norway (4.5 million), and Iceland (0.3 million), and more Danes live in big towns and cities. The populations of Greenland and the Faroe Islands are each about 50,000.

A very low percentage work in the primary sector (agriculture, fishing, hunting), most of the workforce is in the tertiary (service) sector, about 30 percent in the public sector. The average hours worked per week is between 35 and 38 hours (United States: 41 hours).

NATIONS, STATES, AND LANGUAGES

Sweden (with Finland as an incorporated part since the mid-twelfth century), Denmark, and Norway were independent kingdoms until the late fourteenth century, when they were united in the Kalmar Union. Sweden ended the union by breaking out in 1521, but Denmark-Norway, under the Danish king, continued as an entity until 1814, when the Norwegians declared their independence. After Napoleon's defeat, Sweden had to cede Finland to Russia but was compensated with Norway. Norway was united with Sweden under the Swedish king until 1905, when full independence was established.

Iceland and the Faroe Islands were colonized by Norwegians in the Viking Age and passed some centuries as independent areas, but they were brought under Norwegian rule in the high Middle Ages. The same happened to Greenland, colonized by Icelanders from the tenth century. In the late fourteenth century, all these areas were brought with Norway into the Kalmar Union and subsequently under Danish rule. Iceland remained part of Denmark until 1944, when independence was declared. The Faroe Islands obtained status as autonomous territory in 1948 and Greenland in 1979. Sweden, Denmark, and Norway are kingdoms, Iceland a republic, but all have democratic constitutions and parliamentary systems. Sweden and Denmark are members of the European Union (EU); Norway and Iceland participate in the European Economic Area (EEA).

Scandinavian countries are represented by three language groups. Most important are the Germanic languages of the Indo-European group: Swedish, Danish, Norwegian (two different forms), Icelandic, and Faroese. Swedish is spoken in Sweden, in Åland an island, and in some coastal regions of Finland. The Samic language dialects, spoken by groups in northern Scandinavia, belong (as does Finnish) to the Finno-Ugric languages. Greenlandish (Kalaallisut) is related to other languages in the Inuit-Aleut family, spoken in Canada and Alaska.

THE CONCEPT OF SCANDINAVIA

The word *Scandinavia* is derived from names used by classical writers in the first centuries A.D. One such name is *Scadia* or *Scandia,* probably used originally for the southern tip of Sweden, still called Skåne. The meaning of the name is disputed.

The Scandinavian Peninsula is a designation of the region consisting of Sweden and Norway, but the name *Scandinavia* is generally used today to designate the Nordic countries, or *Norden,* as the region is called in Danish, Swedish, and Norwegian. Scandinavian cooperation is led by a Nordic Council, where the members are Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Denmark (with the autonomous territories Faroe Islands and Greenland), and Finland (with the autonomous territory Åland).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To write a book like this, covering many aspects and several countries, has only been possible thanks to research in various fields by Scandinavian scholars. The Select Bibliography provides a sample of these works and is also to be considered a credit to these scholars.

More particularly I want to express my gratitude to Unni Kjærnes and Annechen Bahr Bugge at the National Institute for Consumer Research in Oslo (SIFO) for their ideas and suggestions; Ove Fosså (Sandnes, Norway), who has read my book in manuscript and come up with important criticism and advice; Barbro Henning (Stockholm, Sweden) and Lone Jensen (Årup, Denmark), who have helped me with national traditions described in chapters 4 and 6; and Lars Johansson at the Norwegian Directorate of Health for his invaluable comments on the material in chapter 7. I also want to thank Beate Velde Koren, Atle Koren, and Kari Anne Hoen for their generous help with some of the illustrations. The recipe for fish cakes on page 124 is from Liv Grønningssæter.

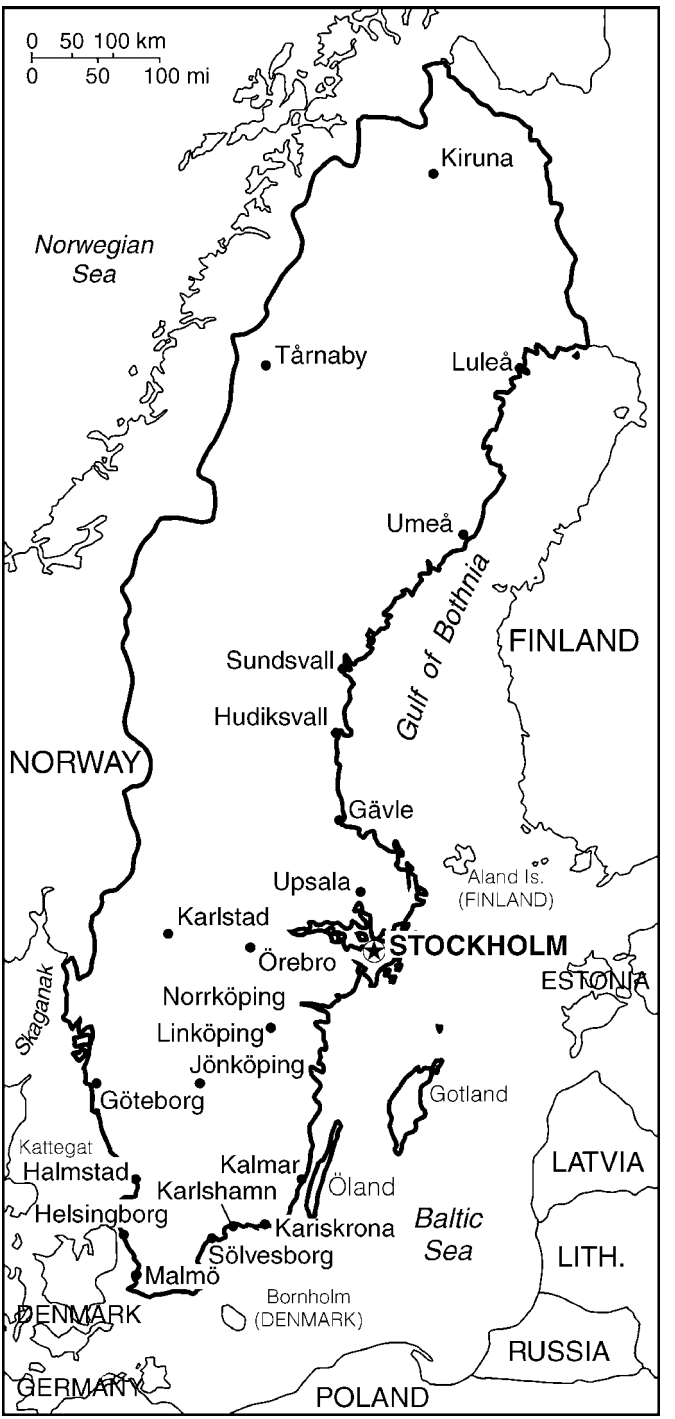
Timeline

12,000 B.C.	Reindeer are hunted in southern Scandinavia.
9000 B.C.	Elk are hunted.
8000–6000 B.C.	Pre-Boreal and Boreal period with fishing, hunting, and gathering of nuts and starch-rich roots.
7000–3000 B.C.	Kitchen middens of sea shells and early examples of pottery can be traced to this period.
4000–3000 B.C.	Beginning of the late (Neolithic) Stone Age, with introduction of animal husbandry and agriculture.
1800 B.C.	Beginning of Bronze Age, with land more intensely exploited for cultivation, fishing and seal hunting along the coasts, and the import of bronze vessels.
500 B.C.–800 A.D.	Iron Age, with agrarian societies spreading north and more contact with Europe.
500–1 B.C.	Pre-Roman Iron Age, with increased importance of animal husbandry and agriculture (barley, oats, a little rye); in the North combined with hunting, fishing, and gathering.
1–400 A.D.	Roman Iron Age, strong influence from Roman culture, more social inequality, elite importing bronze vessels, glass beakers, and high-quality kitchenware and tableware pottery.

400–800	Germanic Iron Age, introduction of new tools had resulted in a more efficient cultivation and an improvement of the methods, for example, through crop rotation; founding of town and commercial centers; imports of cereals, wine, and spices.
800–900	Export of stockfish (dried cod) from Norway documented.
800–1000	Viking Age (preserved meat and fish, porridges and gruels, and curds are dietary staples).
1000–1100	Christian laws against consumption of horse meat.
1000–1349	High Middle Ages (imports of luxury foods to the elite).
1100–1200	Herring fisheries in Danish towns along Ôresund.
1283	First law regulating inns along the roads.
c. 1300	First known recipe collection in a Scandinavian language.
1300–1500	Water mills and thin, flatbreads found in the North.
1348	*Gravlaks* (cured salmon) mentioned in a medieval document.
1349–1350	Black Death and beginning of the late Middle Ages.
1500	Sami nomads start domestication of reindeer.
1538	The Swedish *ostkaka* (cheesecake) mentioned for the first time.
1540	Dried cod in lye *(lutefisk)* mentioned in Sweden.
1555	Publication in Rome of Olaus Magnus's Scandinavian history, *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus*, where lutefisk and flatbread are described.
1565	Orangerie built in royal gardens in Stockholm.
1600–1700	Strong alcohol (spirits) become more and more common.
1616	First printed Danish cookbook.
1642	*Spettkaka* (a pyramid cake of eggs, sugar, and flour) mentioned for the first time in Sweden.
1650	First printed Swedish cookbook.

1664	First French cookbook in Scandinavian (Swedish).
c. 1700	Production of *Klipfisk* (dried salted cod) starts in Norway.
1710–1720	First coffee house in Sweden.
1733	The drink *punch* mentioned in Sweden for the first time.
c. 1750	Potatoes introduced and grown in Scandinavia.
1774	Treatise about traditional Norwegian milk products.
1787	Operakällaren restaurant opens in Stockholm.
1791	First inn opens in Iceland.
1800	First printed Icelandic cookbook.
1800–1850	Coffee is a daily drink in most cities and towns.
1814	Norway in union with Sweden.
1831	First printed Norwegian cookbook.
1870s	Norwegian brown cheese is commercially produced.
1876	The first margarine factory, Aug. Pellerin Fils & Co., Oslo, opens in Scandinavia.
1879	Publication of Scandinavia's most prestigious cookbook, the Swedish *Kok-konsten*, by Ch.-Em. Hagdahl.
1886	First café opened in Iceland.
1901	Publication of the twentieth-century Danish cookbook classic, *Frøken Jensens Kogebog*.
1903	First Swedish Vegetarian Society (Svenska vegetariska föreningen) is founded.
1905	Norway becomes independent from Sweden.
1914	Publication of the twentieth-century Norwegian cookbook classic, *Stor Kokebok,* by H. Schønberg Erken.
1945	Iceland becomes independent from Denmark.
1958	The Swedish Gastronomic Academy (Gastronomiska akademin) is founded.
1964	The Danish Gastronomic Academy (Det danske gastronomiske akademi) is founded.

1973	First McDonald's opens in Scandinavia (Sweden).
1991	First Scandinavian medal won in the Bocuse d'Or world cuisine competition (silver, Norway).
1993	The start of the Meal House in Grythyttan, Sweden, with academic culinary studies.
	First Scandinavian gold medal winner won in the Bocuse d'Or world cuisine competition (Norway).
2000	Opening of the Cookbook Museum in Grythyttan, Sweden, with a collection of ancient European cookbooks.
2004	The Manifesto for a New Nordic Cuisine is published by Scandinavian cooks.
2008	First European Bocuse d'Or is held in Stavanger, Norway.



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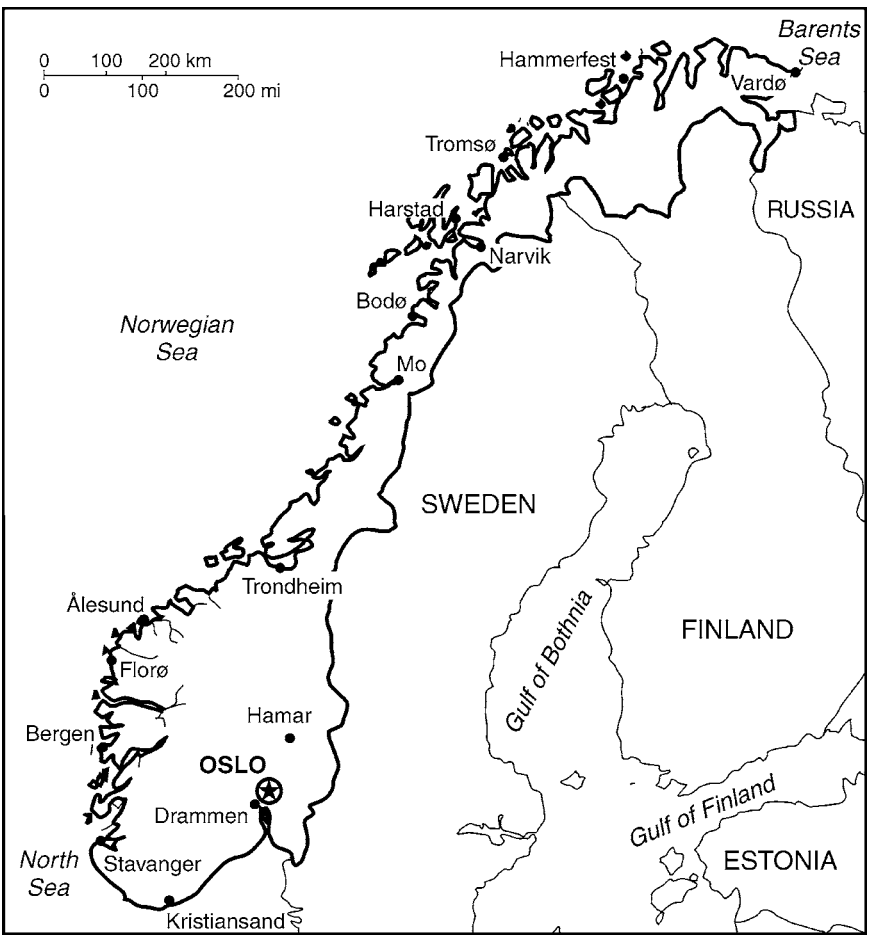

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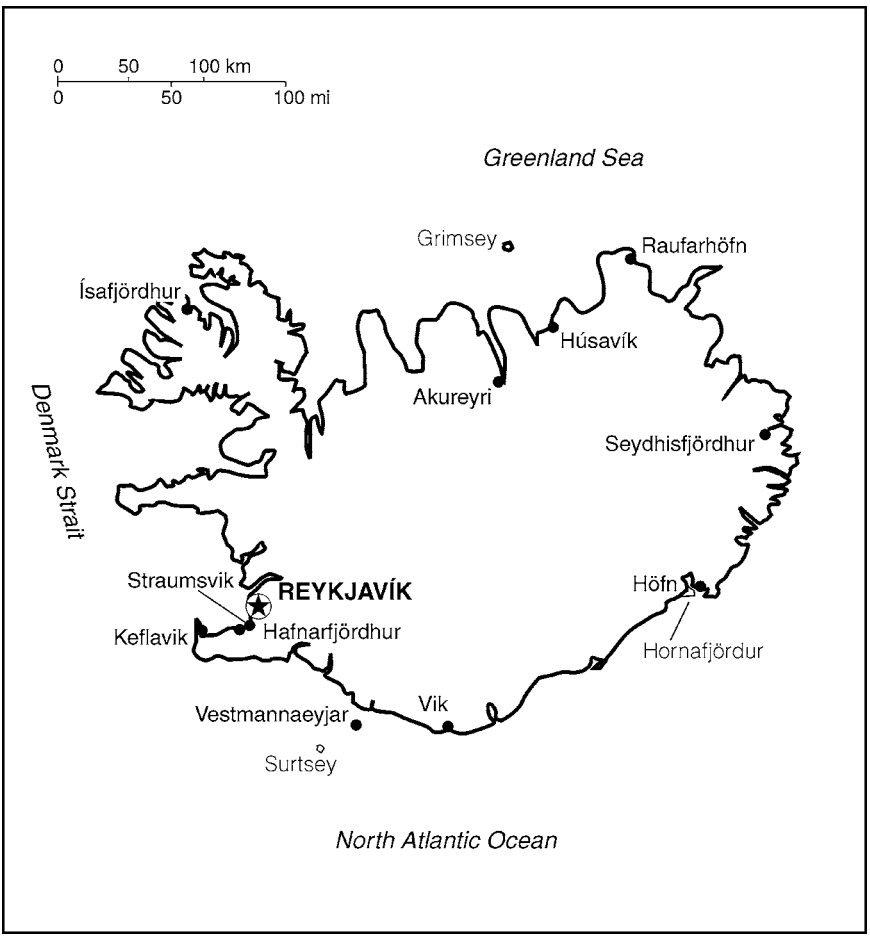

Iceland. Cartography by Bookcomp, Inc.

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Historical Overview

The sources for food culture in the prehistoric period are primarily archaeological, and the culinary practice may be concluded from a general knowledge about how different foods were prepared by simple means in early civilizations. More specific details about diet and cooking are easier to obtain through the written sources available from the Viking Age and in particular from the Middle Ages.[1]

VIKING AND MIDDLE AGES (800–1500)

A quick profit was a strong motive behind the Viking raids into eastern and western Europe. There were goods of immense value to rob and bring home, also culinary goods that could not be produced in Scandinavia. Wine is one example, and treaties with French towns demanded delivery of wine as a condition for withdrawal. But extortion and plunder were not the sole forms of Viking activity. Swedish, Danish, and Norwegian Vikings settled in the British isles and in western France as merchants, artisans, or even farmers. Many of them mixed with the local population and became gradually integrated. One of the reasons for the expeditions and emigrations across the seas was a strong population growth. In Scandinavia itself this growth led to the clearing and preparation of new areas for agriculture.

The cultivation of grains was most successful in the southern parts of Scandinavia, but livestock was important also here, not only to give food,

but the necessary manure. Animal husbandry became, nevertheless, of particular importance in the areas where there were natural obstacles to an effective cultivation of the land, such as steep and rugged terrain, cold and rough climate, and less fertile soil. These conditions were especially the case in the northern and western areas, in the fjords, the mountains, and the vast forests.

Scandinavian Nations

The Viking Age ended in the early eleventh century. At that time Scandinavia had already started a political development, and a patchwork of small kingdoms became large national entities with central administrations, as had occurred in other European states. The geographical borders established in the process were roughly the same as they are today, with certain small but important exceptions. The introduction of a new religion, Christianity, led to the building of churches and cathedrals and the establishment of a professional clergy with ideas that would affect the food culture for centuries.

During the last part of the twelfth and the beginning of the thirteenth century the Scandinavian kingdoms entered the European scene as strong powers with dominion over large areas. At the same time the aristocracy strengthened its position. It was not as in the Viking Age with a group of chieftains and powerful farmers, but a chivalry in the European tradition, with privileges assigned by the king and a court culture of their own. Next in rank came the peasantry, who constituted the large part of the population. At the bottom of the hierarchy were the thralls (slaves), who since the Viking Age had been an important economic factor, but from the thirteenth century slavery disappeared and was substituted by different forms of hired, paid labor.

Like many other areas, Scandinavia went through a demographic crisis at the end of the Middle Ages, mainly as a consequence of the Black Death (bubonic plague) and later epidemics. Large parts of the population were exterminated and many farms were laid waste. The political unrest that followed the crisis ended in an attempt to create a large political entity, partly as a result of dynastic factors. The Kalmar Union between Norway, Denmark, and Sweden lasted until the beginning of the sixteenth century.

Written Sources of Food History

The Viking Age is a transitional period when written documents begin to supplement the archaeological evidence from prehistoric time. But it

is difficult to interpret the old texts, particularly poems and religious literature, where the purpose is not first and foremost to describe historical facts. The Icelandic family sagas probably reflect daily life better than any other medieval Norse literature, but they started as oral traditions and were written down a long time after the events they describe. The food culture these texts reflect may therefore be more typical of the food culture of the time of writing, normally the thirteenth century. Most of the law texts—another important source—are also from this period. But with the necessary reservations in mind, it is still possible to point out some foodstuffs that certainly were eaten during the Middle Ages, and many of them seem to have their roots in traditions going back to the Viking Age or earlier. From the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the source material is much richer in account books, wills, inventories, and purchase records.

A Culinary Poem

The social hierarchy in medieval Scandinavia is described in an intriguing way in one of the old mythological poems. It is called *RigsÞula* and relates the story of the god Rig, who in his earthly wanderings visits three different houses, each representing a different social category: the slave, the farmer, and the nobleman.[2] The three houses are characterized by the number of livestock, the interior decoration, and dress and food. In the first house, Rig is given a hunk of coarse bread filled with husks and a simple broth. In the next he receives a bowl with boiled veal. But in the last house, the table is laid with linen and silver, and he is served thin loaves of white bread, wine in adorned goblets, and meat consisting of juicy pork and roast birds on silver platters.

The description of the noble table may be taken from some of the chivalric novels that were translated into Old Norse. However, many other sources describe early imports of luxury foodstuffs, and there are small recipe collections in Scandinavian languages with refined dishes from the thirteenth century. These sources clearly show that an elegant cuisine existed, but as the *RigsÞula* poem demonstrates, there were deep social differences at the time.

MAIN FOODS

Cereals

Two sorts of bread are mentioned in the *RigsÞula*, the white loaves of wheat in the home of the nobleman and the heavy loaves of coarse bread in the thrall's cabin. Very little wheat was cultivated in Scandinavia, and

importing it was necessary. Wheat products were very exclusive and primarily enjoyed by the elite for festive occasions, and wheat was used in the holy bread at the communion table in the churches.

Neither was rye extensively cultivated, even if this grain, so well suited for bread baking, steadily increased in importance, especially in Denmark and southern Sweden, where it has dominated since c. 1500. The cultivation of rye was accompanied by new baking techniques, the use of leaven and ovens. The first and simpler ovens were made of brick, but solid stone ovens were built in palaces and manors, and also in the northern parts. From the late Middle Ages commercial bakeries and guilds of professional bakers are documented.

The coarse loaves in the poem may be representative of the earliest breads. As in other parts of the world, they were simply made by shaping a flat cake of dough, made from flour or crushed grains kneaded with water or another liquid, and put in the ashes or on the embers or on a flat stone beside the fire. This process is a natural interpretation of names such as *ashen bread* and *ember cake*, words used in both Norwegian and Swedish.

Early on, these breads were mainly baked from oats and barley, and they were unleavened because those two grains don't contain the necessary gluten for leaven baking. In hard times they might be unsavory and coarse in poor homes because of the substitutes for grains added to the dough: husks, crushed and dried bark, and in Iceland also reindeer moss.

Barley is the oldest grain in Scandinavia and dominant in the North and in the mountainous regions, while oats were introduced in more humid areas. Barley or oats were also the basic ingredient in porridge and gruel, the most common of daily dishes, and the main source of starch besides bread in the nutrition of ordinary people. Porridge was considered so important in the diet that the old medieval Borgarthing law defined it as *hæilagr* (sacred or legally protected),[3] which meant it was permitted to be cooked on religious holidays when other forms of work were banned.

Meat from Domestic Animals

Cattle were kept over the entire region, but meat from hogs (pork) had a higher status. Animal bones found during archaeological excavations in Oslo indicate that pork constituted only 10 percent of the total meat consumption. A proof of the high opinion of pork is the fact that it is the food eaten in paradise (Valhall) in the old Norse myths: "But never is so vast a multitude in Valhall that the flesh of that boar shall fail, which is called Sæhrímnir; he is boiled every day and is whole at evening."[4]