

# The unfree

Slavery and serfdom seem objectionable today. The thought of one man owning another offends our concept of morality. But in the world of the Vikings, slavery was probably not “evil” - it was a condition of life. A human being had value only as a part of a group or family.

## **Purchase and sale**

Thralls were unfree. They were owned by another man, and therefore had no right to their own life. They were either bought, or obtained in raids around Europe. The main goal of many Viking raids was the acquisition of thralls for their own use, or for selling. Contemporary sources tell of slave markets in Denmark.

Ansgar wrote in the mid 9th century how thralls were traded in Haithabu (Hedeby). Large farmsteads were partly self-sufficient in thralls, as the child of two thralls automatically became a thrall. We do not know the number of thralls in Viking Age Denmark, but they must have been present in most farmsteads which could afford them. The work of thralls could vary greatly, but it must primarily have involved hard physical labour.

## **The thralls given freedom**

It was possible for a thrall to be given their freedom, or to buy it themselves. The Icelandic sagas describe in several places how a master would free a thrall if he or she had deserved it in some way.