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Multi-genre writer, **Mary Ann Bernal**, treats us to some odd facts about the Vikings and their fascination with cleanliness, board games and rituals.

There are many misconceptions about the Vikings, including the 19th Century portrayals of the men clad in horned or winged helms. The truth is that only a small proportion of the Scandinavian population indulged in raiding and pillaging. Most were home-loving communities, surviving in harsh conditions using age old food preservation techniques and farming.

The following might be known to you, or may come as a pleasant surprise.

1. Vikings were clean.

The Vikings had ear spoons that were used to clean out ear wax, practiced personal grooming and bathed as often as once a week in hot springs. Dark haired Viking men would use strong lye soap to bleach their hair and, in some regions, their beards too. This vanity had the added benefit of reducing headlice. Bristled combs, made from red deer antlers, are one of the more common items found in Viking graves, alongside razors and tweezers.

2. They loved to play.

Vikings enjoyed sporting events such as wrestling, foot races, swimming and skiing to name but a few. They also played board games to keep themselves occupied during the long winter months. One was called hnefatafi and appears to be a form of chess. The pieces include a king-like object, carved from

bone or antler in the shape of a crouched, bearded man, a die and two sets of colored pawns.

3. Women had rights.

Viking women could choose their own husbands and divorce them. Girls were married as young as 12 years old and left to tend the home while their husbands travelled for raiding, trading, hunting or fishing. If they divorced their husbands, they could keep their dowries. Viking homes were referred to as longhouses, because of the shape, the main room being approximately one hundred feet in length.

4. They were mostly farmers and traders.

The ravaging seafarers that attacked the civilized world did not represent the majority of the Scandinavian people, who were peaceful farmers and traders. They grew barley, rye, and oats when the weather was clement and raised cattle, pigs, goats and sheep. In addition to drinking mead (honeyed alcoholic beverage), Vikings drank milk, buttermilk and wine.

5. Some were human traffickers.

Those involved in raiding were active in the slave trade. They would pillage Anglo-Saxon, Celtic and Slavic settlements and gather 'thralls' to be sold in massive slave markets in Europe and the Middle East, accruing vast wealth as a result.

6. No winged helmets.

Viking helmets were plain conical, not horned or winged, and made of leather. Those who went on to form the Varangian Guard wore helms with protective eye and nose sections plus veils of chain-mail.

7. Boats were priceless.

Viking longboats were often referred to as dragon ships because of a carved dragon on the prow head. Their love of boats was such that it was a great honor to be interred in one after death. Prominent women and lauded warriors were often laid to rest in ships, along with grave goods of enor-

mous value. Occasionally, slaves were also sacrificed and interred with the dead.

8. They were smart fire starters.

Vikings used a prepared material to start their fires, made from a tree fungus called touchwood, boiled for several days in urine and pounded until it formed a matted fiber. The sodium nitrate in the urine made the fungus smolder rather than burn. That allowed them to take fire with them on their travels.



MARY ANN BERNAL

Award-winning writer, Mary Ann, creates novels and short stories in a range of sub-genres and eras, including her Dark Ages series the *Briton and Dane*. All her work is dedicated to fallen military heroes who gave their lives defending freedom. Mary Ann lives in Elkhorn, Nebraska where she is working on her next project. Follow her on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).

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