



HOUSEHOLD GOODS

IN THE EUROPEAN MEDIEVAL AND
EARLY MODERN COUNTRYSIDE

edited by CATARINA TENDE & CLAUDIA THEUNE

RURALIA XIV



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Household goods for winter travel and leisure in Norway – objects, games and processes of enculturation

Marie Ødegaard* & Kjetil Loftsgarden**

Abstract

In this paper, we shed new light on winter travel; our point of departure is the household goods related to medieval winter transportation in Scandinavia. Because most areas lacked cart roads, there was a network of trails between farms and hamlets, and waterways were exploited wherever possible, using boats in the summer and sleighs and skis or ice skates during the long winter months. Medieval winter transportation made use of some very well-suited equipment – skis, bone skates, sleighs and snowshoes and ice cleats for both people and horses – all of which made winter travel not only possible, but often a preferred way of transport and communication. Skiing and skating were not only a fast way of traveling, they were fun. However, the winters could be harsh, and environmental knowledge, physical fitness and technical abilities were essential preconditions for safe travel in wintertime. Children could acquire this knowledge and these abilities by way of enculturation. Through games and leisure activities children would learn to master different conditions, as well as skills for travel, hunting, cooperation and teamwork. Processes of enculturation and socialisation through play and games served to introduce children to the social ideals and norms of society, while conditioning them for both the hardships of life in Scandinavian agrarian society and safe winter travel.

Keywords: *Winter travel, transportation, leisure time, enculturation, socialisation.*

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Résumé

Articles ménagers pour les voyages et les loisirs d'hiver en Norvège – objets, jeux et processus d'enculturation

Dans cet article, nous apportons un nouvel éclairage sur les voyages hivernaux ; notre point de départ est l'analyse du mobilier domestique lié au transport hivernal médiéval en Europe du Nord. En l'absence de routes carrossables, il y avait un réseau de sentiers entre les fermes et les hameaux, et les voies navigables étaient exploités autant que possible, en utilisant des bateaux en été et des traîneaux et des skis ou des patins à glace pendant les longs mois d'hiver. Les moyens de transport bien adaptés aux voyages hivernaux – skis, patins à glace en os, traîneaux, ainsi que raquettes et crampons à glace, tant pour les

personnes que pour les chevaux – ont rendu les voyages hivernaux non seulement possibles, mais ils étaient souvent un moyen de transport et de communication privilégié. Le ski et le patin à glace n'étaient pas seulement un moyen rapide de voyager, mais c'était aussi amusant. Cependant, les hivers pouvaient être rigoureux et les connaissances environnementales, la forme physique et les capacités techniques étaient essentielles pour voyager en toute sécurité en hiver. Les enfants ont pu acquérir ces connaissances et capacités par le biais de l'acculturation. À travers des jeux et des activités de loisirs, les enfants ont pu apprendre à maîtriser ces différentes conditions, ainsi que des compétences pour voyager, chasser, coopérer et travailler en équipe. Les processus d'enculturation et de socialisation par le jeu et les jeux ont servi à initier les enfants aux idéaux sociaux et aux normes de la société tout en les conditionnant aux difficultés de la vie dans la société agraire scandinave et aux voyages hivernaux en toute sécurité.

Mot-clés : *voyage hivernal, transport, loisirs, inculturation, socialisation.*

Zusammenfassung

Haushaltswaren für Winterreisen und Freizeit in Norwegen – Gegenstände, Spiele und Prozesse der Enkulturation

In diesem Artikel werfen wir ein Licht auf Winterreisen; unser Ausgangspunkt ist der Haushaltsgegenstand der

Introduction

In this paper, we shed new light on winter activities; our point of departure is the household goods related to winter transportation in medieval Scandinavia. In Scandinavia, where winters can last nearly half the year, traveling on snow and ice was a necessary part of everyday life. The best-suited means of transportation for winter travel – skis, bone ice skates and sleighs, in addition to snowshoes and ice cleats, for both people and horses – made winter travel not only possible, but often a preferred way of transport and communication. Despite their importance, communication and transport on snow and ice have yet to receive much attention in historical and archaeological research.

The aim of this paper is to look closely at the significance of certain winter household goods in relation to travel, economic activities and structures of social organization in medieval Norway. Specifically, we ask what these household goods can tell us about the interaction between households and communities. In addition, a special focus will be on the role children's play and leisure activities played in providing informal learning opportunities in the use of

mittelalterlichen Wintertransporte in Skandinavien. Da es größtenteils keine Straßen für Karren existierten, gab es ein einfaches Wegenetz zwischen Bauernhöfen und Weilern; das zudem Wasserwege nutzte, wo immer es möglich war – im Sommer mit Booten und in den langen Wintermonaten mit Schlitten, Skiern oder Schlittschuhen. Die für Winterreisen sowohl für die Menschen wie für Pferde gut geeigneten Transportmittel Skier, Knochenschlittschuhe, Schlitten sowie Schneeschuhe und Eisstollen machten Winterreisen nicht nur möglich, sondern waren oft ein bevorzugtes Transport- und Kommunikationsmittel.

Skifahren und Eislaufen war nicht nur eine schnelle Art der Fortbewegung, es machte auch Spaß. Die Winter konnten jedoch hart sein und Umweltkenntnisse, körperliche Fitness und technische Fähigkeiten waren unerlässlich, um im Winter sicher zu reisen. Kinder könnten sich diese Kenntnisse und Fähigkeiten durch Enkulturation aneignen haben. Durch Spiele und Freizeitaktivitäten sollten Kinder lernen, verschiedene Bedingungen zu meistern sowie Fähigkeiten für Reisen, Jagen, Zusammenarbeit und Teamarbeit zu erwerben. Enkulturations- und Sozialisationsprozesse durch Spiel und Spiel dienten dazu, Kinder an die sozialen Ideale und Normen der Gesellschaft heranzuführen und sie für die Härten des Lebens in der skandinavischen Agrargesellschaft und für sichere Winterreisen zu konditionieren.

Schlagwörter: *Winterreisen, Transport, Freizeit, Enkulturation, Sozialisation.*

these household goods for winter travel and in training children to handle the challenges of winter. A number of medieval leisure activities are well known – however, these took place indoors, for example board games, or during the summer, for example, wrestling or horse racing (e.g. *McLean – Hurd 2011; Gardela 2012; Rebay-Salisbury 2012; Loftsgarden et al. 2017; Ødegaard 2019*). Winter leisure activities are seldom mentioned in earlier studies. The only winter household items thought to reveal a leisure activity are bone skates (*Thurber 2020, 66-68*). Moreover, historical research has, insofar as it has concerned itself with winter transportation, seen it almost exclusively in relation to hunting and transport (*Finstad et al. 2016, 56*).

We believe this is a narrow approach, and here we explore the association of games and leisure with learning and education (*Walks 2012*). In particular, we emphasise the process of enculturation, by which an individual learns the cultural requirements and socially acceptable values of a society in order to identify with and fulfil the roles required of them (*LeVine 1990*). Children had to learn to ski and skate. This may have been achieved through

games and leisure activities, where they developed and refined the necessary physical fitness, teamwork and technical skills (Blanchard 1995; Light 2011; Maxwell et al. 2000). Nevertheless, the role of sports and games can be paradoxical, because it is not a question of children's being only exposed to them as purely leisure activities (Bateson 1972); sports and games also require embodied responsiveness (Ingold 2000, 375-376) and practice until automatic responses are obtained (Ericsson 2003).

By combining archaeological, cartographical and historical sources with iconography and anthropology, we firstly aim, as explained above, to take a close look at those household goods that were essential for winter travel and assess their significance for transportation for the rural population of Norway. Secondly, by focusing on theories of learning and processes of enculturation, we discuss the role that play and leisure activities must have had for engendering among young people the social, environmental and technical skills necessary for the use of this equipment and, indeed, for living so far north.

Data and methods

The amount of data available for archaeological and historical research has multiplied in recent decades. However, with ever-increasing data capacity and more user-friendly software, we are able to systematise and analyse archaeological data at an unprecedented speed and on an unprecedented scale. All Norwegian archaeological collections, as well as almost all surveyed archaeological sites and monuments, are digitised and available online (unimus.no and askeladden.ra.no). In addition, we utilise spatial and topographical data available from the Norwegian Mapping Authority.

However, to explore winter travel and leisure activities in medieval Scandinavia we are dependent on utilising and triangulating information from a wide range of archaeological, written and geographical sources. The household goods enabling winter travel include skis, bone skates, sleighs, snowshoes and ice cleats, the latter two, as already mentioned, for both people and horses. These are all represented in the archaeological record as we know it at this moment; however, we should note that only a fraction of what was used has been preserved and that it does not necessarily reflect the real distribution of such artefacts. Factors such as taphonomy and archaeologists' sampling strategies influence the representativeness of the archaeological record.

The household goods for winter travel

Sleighs, skis, bone skates, snowshoes and ice cleats are designed for different winter conditions and all were essential parts of the household (see Fig. 1a-e). A real

advantage of winter travel was that heavy loads could be transported using sleighs (see Fig. 1a). The lack of roads meant carts were of little use in most of Norway until the 18th century (Schulerud 1974, 81). However, the snow cover during the long winters provided excellent conditions for sleighs and sledges. There are two main types, one larger type dragged by horses (or reindeer in northern Norway and Sweden) and smaller sledges dragged by people using, for example, skis, bone skates or cleats.

Of all the household goods that were related to winter travel, skis were the most important. Skis were made of wood with a binding of withe and leather (Fig. 1b). Around 30 skis are known from Norway, mostly having been found in bogs with low levels of oxygen and thus preserved. In the last 10 years, several skis have also been found at high altitude in mountain areas, melting out of snow patches (Finstad et al. 2016). Skis prevented you from sinking into the snow and enabled rapid movement. The oldest known ski in Scandinavia is from approximately 3200 BC (Sørensen 1993), while rock carvings depicting skiers go back as far as the Neolithic or even Mesolithic periods of the Stone Age (Weinstock 2015).

Skates had a narrower range of use than skis and could only be used on frozen lakes or rivers with little or no snow. However, in comparison to skis, they were quite easily made. You drilled holes in a shinbone of either a cow or a horse and used leather strings to fasten it to the shoe (Fig. 1d). Skates may date back to the Bronze Age in Europe; they are widespread from the Viking Age (Thurber 2020, 49). Because of the good conditions for preservation, bone skates are especially prevalent in medieval towns, such as Birka, Hedeby, Dublin, York and London (Colm 2016).

For increased mobility in loose, fresh snow snowshoes were used, both on people and horses. They enabled the user to 'float' on top of the snow. Snowshoes were made of withies, often of birch, and consequently few are preserved in an archaeological context. But some have been found melting out of mountain snow patches. The design of the oldest preserved Norwegian snowshoe (3rd century AD) is remarkably similar to the ones used until the modern era; see Fig. 1c. The world's oldest snowshoe has recently been radiocarbon dated to between 3800 and 3700 BC (Lobell 2017).

Ice cleats were strapped to the sole of the shoe and used on ice or hard-packed snow to give a better grip (Fig. 1e). Cleats could be used by both people and horses, and are known from the early Iron Age (Peterson 1951, 62-66). They were made of iron and are thus relatively well preserved in the archaeological record. Cleats also appear as burial finds, such as in the Gjermundbu grave from the end of the 10th century, a grave best known for being the only Viking Age burial with a preserved helmet (Stylegar – Børshem 2021).

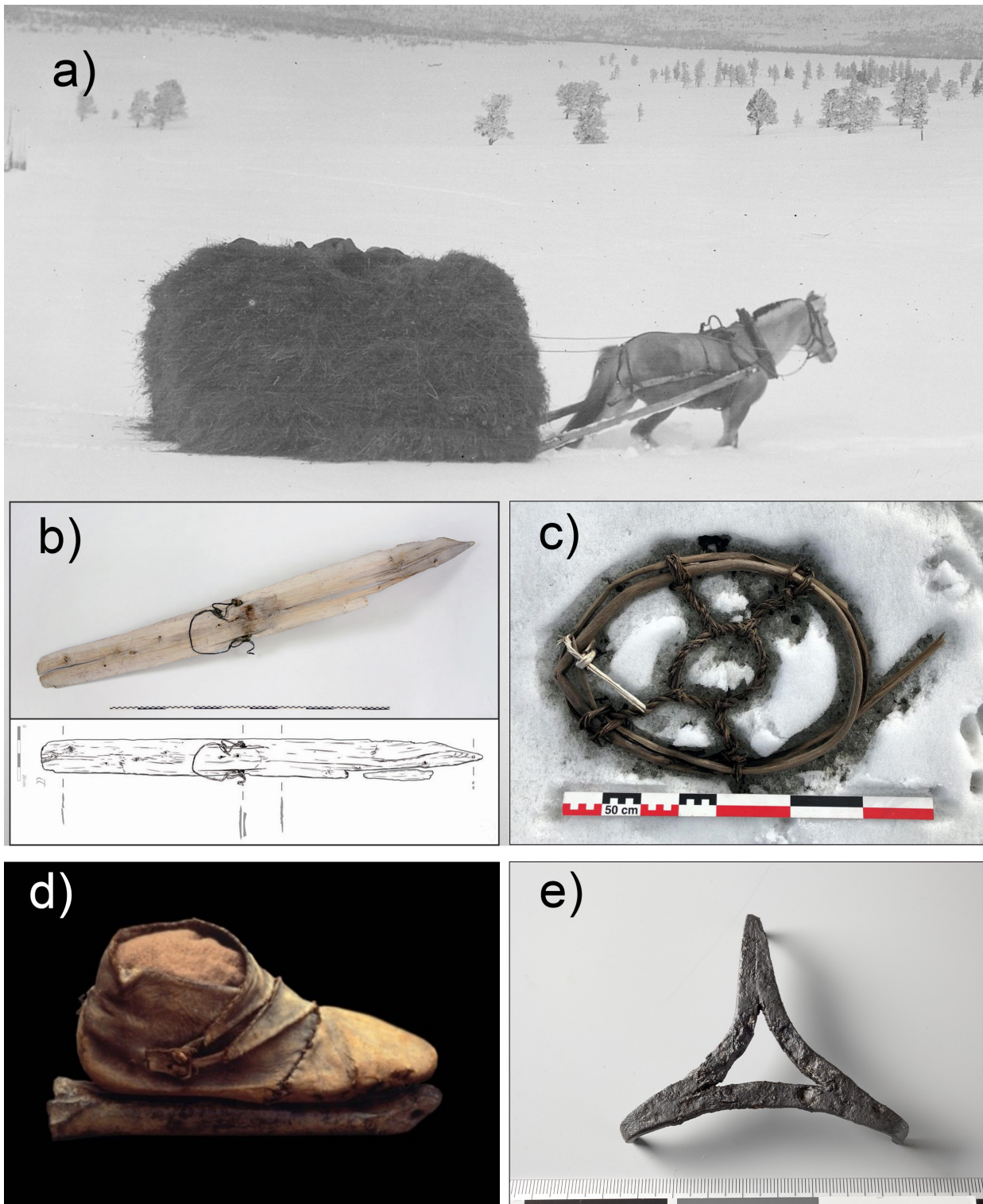


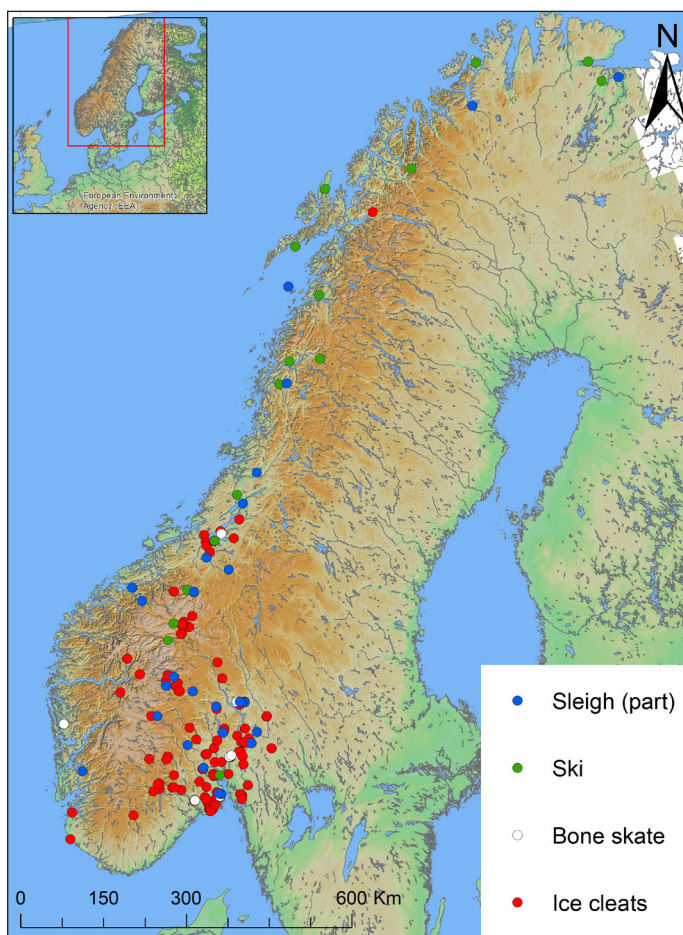
Fig. 1. Sleighs, skis and bone skates, in addition to snowshoes and ice cleats for both people and horses, were essential items in a household: a) transporting winter fodder, Fefor, Nord-Fron, 1908 (Photo: A.B. Wilse, CC0 1.0); b) a ski, dated to c. AD 750, melted out from a snow patch in the mountain area Jotunheimen (Photo: Vegard Vike, Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo; drawing: Ingvild Tinglum Bøckman, <https://secretsoftheice.com/>); c) a horse snowshoe, dated to the 3rd century AD, from Jotunheimen (Photo: Espen Finstad, secretsoftheice.com); d) Viking Age shoe and bone skate, from York (Photo: <http://jorvik.city-insights.com/en/page/636>); and e) an ice cleat from the Viking Age grave Gjermundbu (Mus. no. C27317) (© K. Helgeland, the Museum of Cultural History, UiO/CC BY-SA 4.0).

Fig. 2. The spatial distribution of archaeological artefacts relating to winter travel, within the modern borders of Norway, based on data from the university museums of Oslo, Stavanger, Bergen, Trondheim and Tromsø (Map by the authors. Base map: GioLandPublic DEM from the European Environment Agency).

A network on snow and ice

The few, relatively small, towns in medieval Norway were mostly located along the coast. There were no villages of the sort known in Denmark and further south. People mostly lived on single farms, scattered throughout the landscape (Øye 2002; Gjerpe 2019). Still, no one lived in isolation. There was extensive trade and communication between farms, valleys and regions. Very few cart roads existed before the 18th century (Nedkvitne – Norseng 2000, 183), but there was a network of trails between farms and hamlets, exploiting waterways wherever possible – by using boats in summer and sleighs, skis or skates in the long winter months. Lakes and rivers were frozen all winter, from November to April (Myrvoll 1984, 50). The climate, especially the stable low temperatures, in much of Norway often made winter travel preferable to summer travel, as it was usually faster and you could transport heavier loads.

The spatial distribution of archaeological artefacts relating to winter travel is shown in Fig. 2. There are 241 cleats, mostly distributed in eastern Norway. They are often found in furnished graves and as stray finds. Their distribution thus coincides with the area with a stable cold climate and snow in the wintertime. There are even more bone skates, in all 393; however, they are not broadly distributed, having been found in the medieval towns of Oslo, Skien, Hamar, Bergen and Trondheim. Skis are thinly represented in the finds: only 26 skis, or parts of skis, are shown in Fig. 2. In addition, there are several old finds without coordinates. A total of 56 sleighs or parts of sleighs are distributed in eastern Norway, in the valleys leading up towards alpine regions. In addition, a few finds are known in the valleys of mid-Norway. The skates, skis and sleighs are of easily decomposable material – bones, wood and leather – and will therefore rot and perish. The pattern of distribution thus partly reflects conditions for preservation. Skates are prevalent from urban cultural layers, which are compressed and low in oxygen and thus preserve the material better. Nevertheless, the distribution of these household objects, as indicated by Fig. 2, corresponds, not surprisingly, with the areas of Norway where we have long cold winters and areas with communication networks between settlements.



Discussion

We have presented the most common household goods related to winter travel in medieval rural Scandinavia, and we have emphasised the advantages of winter travel and transportation. The archaeological find material indicates the importance of winter travel in the snow-rich parts of Norway. However, while we recognise the importance of winter travel in relation to economic activities, such as hunting or the transport of goods, we wish to further explore the social aspects. In the following, we slightly shift our focus, and take an altogether larger view of those household goods that were of relevance for winter travel. In the modern era skiing and skating are fun, leisure activities. This is an aspect seldom explored in relation to medieval Scandinavia.

Leisure activities, sports and games have been thoroughly studied in anthropology, less so in archaeology. Nevertheless, within both fields, there has been little focus on sports and games for learning and education (Walls 2012). When games have been discussed in archaeology, scholars have mainly studied summer activities such as wrestling, horse racing, etc., which are especially known from ancient sources and archaeological

traces (e.g. *Martin 2003; Gardela 2012; Loftsgarden et al. 2017; Ødegaard 2019*), and strategy and board games (*Hall 2016*). In addition, the identification of games has been more or less restricted to material contexts that focus on the recreational aspects, separated from normal artefacts of daily life (*Blanchard 1995, 97-98*). The importance of learning through games and sports, through a simulative environment, and how this can help youngsters to acquire technical skills that mirror those required in day-to-day activities (*Walls 2012*), has thus been downplayed in research, especially within an Iron Age context (but see *Raffield 2019*). However, these aspects are more explored in studies on hunter-gatherers (e.g. *Carroll 2000; Sternke – Sørensen 2009; Dugstad 2010*).

Much of the hard work at a farm was carried out during the snow-free months, and there was more spare time during winter when the farmers were not occupied with haymaking and agriculture (*Løve 2004*). Given what we know of past social interactions and the human disposition, we believe that games and leisure activities constituted an integral part of everyday life during winter in Scandinavia. Although an ordinary day stretched from dawn to dusk, work was intermittent and there was no specific separation between work and spare time. The misconception that life in the Middle Ages was all toil and no fun may originate in the 80-hour workweeks of the 19th century (*Schor 1991, 47*). The medieval calendar was filled with holidays; in England, for example, holidays took up as much as one-third of the year (*Rodgers 1940*).

Here we explore the place of leisure in the Middle Ages a bit further, with enculturation being our point of reference. Enculturation is the process by which people, especially children, learn the cultural dynamics and the values and norms of their surrounding society and what is expected of them (*Grusec – Hastings 2007, 547*). Childhood is a time when humans acquire a wide spectrum of knowledge and is an essential time for learning and enculturation processes. Child raising involves teaching, but how this is done and the extent of teaching varies between cultures (*Kamp 2001*). David Lancy (*2010*) has recently argued that adults rarely play a prominent role in children's skill acquisition: children learn through observation and imitation of adults or siblings, make-believe, and carrying out different chores. Learning, then, is a social process, situated within sociocultural contexts that shape it through participation in its practices (*Lave – Wenger 1991*).

Learning through games and play is an important part of the enculturation process. It allows for education as well as socialisation. Through toys and games, children will imitate and try to comprehend the adult world and test the roles they will fulfil as adults. In addition, children will make their own subcultures marked by specific rules and social norms (e.g. *Orme 1995; Handel et al. 2007; Crawford 2009; Ember –*

Cunnar 2015). Enculturation takes place at multiple social levels, such as the household, peer group and community, and serves to influence an individual's perception of the self (*LeVine 1990*). While enculturation is to some extent an unconscious process, it is also reflective and innovative (*Shimabara 1970*). Enculturation and socialisation are often equated. However, while the latter relates to how children develop into competent social beings or members of their society, the former relates to how children learn to make a living (*Lancy 2012*).

An example of effective enculturation can be found in Inuit society, where studies have shown that enculturation plays a large part in preparing children for future roles. In Inuit society, which is heavily dependent on fishing and hunting with a kayak, parents start rocking their children on their lap when the latter are babies and, on the cue of specific words, they make the child throw an object, mimicking the throwing of a weapon during a hunt (*Walls 2012*). Another game that involves an enculturation process uses an arrangement of stones on the ground that resembles the outline of a kayak, within which people would sit, and they would have throwing games, aiming at, for example, movable objects that resemble a seal. Through these practices, children acquire valuable aspects of physical fitness and the technical ability to hunt, as well as learn social relationships and gain extensive environmental knowledge (*Walls 2012*). We believe processes of enculturation would also have played a part relating to winter household goods in Scandinavia. Following this, one must assume that by riding, using sleighs and other winter household goods, and going to markets with parents and other adults and siblings, children would learn valuable social and environmental skills needed to survive in the cold North.

Children can be difficult to trace in the archaeological material (*Lillehammer 1989, 2015*). Nevertheless, there is an increasing interest in the study of childhood within the discipline (e.g. *Dommasnes – Wrigglesworth 2008; Coşkunsu 2015; Murphy – Le Roy 2017*). The winter object most easily associated with children is skates, as several children's skates have been found in medieval cities such as Oslo, Birka and London (*Edberg – Karlsson 2016*). By skating, children not only learn balance and how to move quickly on ice, but also gain knowledge about ice quality and how different weather conditions and open channels affect the ice, as well as what to do to prevent accidents and what the appropriate responses are if an accident occurs. This sort of information is also highly relevant and important for anyone using sledges for transporting goods or engaging activities on ice like fishing and hunting. That accidents could happen while skating on ice is documented in a 16th-century text from Sweden, where it is reported that four young laborers drowned in Lake Vättern (*Calenda Caroli IX; Edberg – Karlsson 2016*).



Fig. 3. Illustrations from Olaus Magnus (2010 [1555]) depicting a snowball fight (top), winter travel using snowshoes (middle) and horse racing on ice using cleats, in the foreground, and ice skating, in the background (bottom) (© Olaus Magnus. Public domain via Wikimedia Commons).

The use of bone skates is mentioned in three early sources that describe games and competition on ice: William Fitzstephen's description of London, written in about 1180 (*Gourde 1943; Edberg – Karlsson 2016*), Snorri Sturluson's Saga of the sons of king Magnús, written before 1241 (*Soga om Magnussonene*) and Olaus Magnus's *History of the Nordic Peoples* (2010 [1555], 52-57) (see also Fig. 3). Ethnographic sources testify that bone skates were used for fishing and on long journeys – and even on icy roads, for example for going to church. Long voyages on bone skates, however, would not have been very convenient, considering that even a thin snow cover makes bone skating impossible (*Edberg – Karlsson 2016* with references). Edberg and Karlsson

(2016) state that all historical and ethnological sources refer to bone skates as being used by mostly children and youths for fun and games. The cleric William Fitzstephen described youngsters outside the city walls of Canterbury during winter, skating on bone skates and using iron-shod poles to propel themselves. He states, they 'fit to their feet the shin-bones of beasts, lashing them beneath their ankles, and with iron-shod poles in their hands they strike ever and anon against the ice and are borne along swift as a bird in flight or a bolt shot from mangonel' (*Gourde 1943, 16*). He goes on to state how suddenly playful skating could turn more violent, and, he writes, result in broken arms or legs, and in this way mimic battles.

A more direct mimicking of battles occurs in snowball fights, described by Olaus Magnus in the 16th century. Magnus gives a detailed account of how the youths of Scandinavia loved snowball fights. They made elaborate fortresses of snow and ice, and divided themselves in two teams, attackers and defenders; see Fig. 3. The only weapons permitted were snowballs, and there was a punishment for spiking the snowballs with pieces of iron or with stones: namely, to be plunged into freezing water, naked. Nevertheless, Magnus notes that the snowball fights often ended with fistfights (*Magnus 2010* [1555], 52-53).

Quarrels, serious injuries, and killings, even among children, are recorded in Old Norse textual sources (see *Raffield 2019* with references). Raffield (2019) has recently investigated how sports and games, especially those involving vigorous physical activities, were important for enculturation processes towards the goal of participation in warfare in the Viking Age. Observation and imitations of adults' organisation of defense and weapon practice was important for conditioning children for martial ideals and the hardship of life. In the same manner, children, by playing snowball wars, would learn organisation of and cooperation with peers, team dynamics and strategy, aspects important for hunting and fishing as well as for interaction with other community members at, for example, markets, assemblies, ritual activities and in everyday life.

In archaeological and historical accounts of winter transport and communication, women are often sorely missing. But there is no reason to assume that women did not take part in skiing, skating or other types of winter travel. The Catholic patron saint of ice skating is St Lidwina of Schiedam, who supposedly fell while ice skating with friends (*Albers 1910*). From the Viking Age, the Oseberg burial, which is a burial for two women, contained not only a Viking ship, but also three richly carved and decorated sleighs (*Brøgger et al. 1917*).

Conclusion

This paper has sought to investigate what winter household goods can tell us about structures of social organisation among household members and about interaction between households and communities in Scandinavia. Winter travel in inland Norway was crucial for communication between farms and settlements and for the transportation of goods. Parts of Scandinavia were covered in snow and ice nearly half the year. The winters could be harsh, and one had to have environmental knowledge and to have learned about physical fitness and the technical demands of how to travel safely in winter.

Children could acquire this knowledge and these abilities by way of enculturation. Through games and leisure activities children would learn social skills needed for cooperation

and socialisation, how to master different environmental conditions and would learn about the dangers associated with winter climate, such as avalanches and ice conditions on frozen lakes. Games must have made a substantial contribution to the learning of skills for travel, hunting, cooperation and teamwork. Through play and games, processes of enculturation and socialisation would have played an important part in the learning of these skills at an early age. Having snowball fights, skiing, learning how to master riding and skating and participating in physically challenging games would have introduced children to the social ideals and norms, while preparing them for the hardships of life in Scandinavian agrarian society and safe winter travel.

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