

Gender equality dates back to the Vikings

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The Scandinavian countries are regarded as models of equality between the sexes. A new study indicates that this may go back a very long way. Dr. Laura Maravall and Professor Jörg Baten, economic historians working as part of the Collaborative Research Center "ResourceCultures" at the University of Tübingen, compared the health

of men and women from the past thousand years, using data gathered from historical teeth and skeletons. If the data in a population showed that women had the same or even better health values than men, Maravall and Baten assumed that girls and boys had relatively equal access to food and other resources. The data from Scandinavia indicated that women in rural areas there were in a comparatively favorable position as early as the Viking Age—in the late 8th to 11th centuries—and in the medieval period which followed. For the society overall, this greater gender equality appears to have led to long-term positive development. The study has been published in the latest edition of *Economics and Human Biology*.

The study was based on European data from the Global History of Health Project (GHHP). It incorporates data from studies on human skeletons from more than one hundred European sites from the past 2,000 years. The researchers looked especially closely at the information provided by teeth. If a person is undernourished or seriously ill in early childhood, their tooth enamel sustains [permanent damage](#), known as linear enamel hypoplasia. "We hypothesized that if girls and [women](#) received less food and care than the male members of society, they would have more such damage," explains Laura Maravall. "The extent to which values differ between men and women is therefore also a measure of equality within the population." The close connection between the relative frequency of enamel damage and the general state of health was demonstrated by measurement of the corresponding thigh bones. The length of the femur provides information about height, which is relatively greater in individuals with good health and a good diet.

Animal husbandry as a job for women

The detailed analysis of the dental data for Scandinavian men and women in the countryside suggested a high degree of equality even in Viking times. "Such women in the Nordic countries may have led to

popular myths about the Valkyries: They were strong, healthy and tall," says Jörg Baten. But the picture in Scandinavian cities was different. "The Swedish towns of Lund and Sigtuna—on the site of today's Stockholm—and in Trondheim in Norway, had developed a class system by the Early Middle Ages. Women there did not have the same equality as their sisters in the countryside." Equality outside of the cities appears to have been linked to specialization in raising livestock. "Raising crops was something primarily done by men because it required greater muscular strength; but raising animals enabled women to contribute a great deal to the family income. That probably raised their position in society," says Baten. Scandinavian women were also well-off compared to other women in Europe. Women experienced significantly less equality in the Mediterranean region and in Eastern European cities.

"The research has provided us with a great deal of evidence on the relationship between gender equality and a country's economic development. Gender [equality](#) not only increases women's prosperity, it also has a positive impact on economic growth and development in general," Baten notes. The researchers in the project speculate that Scandinavian women have been able to maintain their strong place in society up to the industrial era and beyond. Maravall and Baten say it may be one reason that Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland are prosperous and economically stable nations.

More information: Laura Maravall Buckwalter et al. Valkyries: Was gender equality high in the Scandinavian periphery since Viking times? Evidence from enamel hypoplasia and height ratios, *Economics & Human Biology* (2019). [DOI: 10.1016/j.ehb.2019.05.007](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ehb.2019.05.007)

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