



Terry O'Connor

The Vikings kept much the same animals as we breed nowadays: cattle, sheep and pigs, plus a few horses and goats. There would probably have been rather more cattle and fewer sheep than in Yorkshire today.

Sheep and cattle were raised on farms out in the countryside, and driven into York 'on the hoof' to supply meat and hides. Pigs seem to have been kept inside the city — probably some houses had a pig in the backyard, along with a few hens and geese.

The Vikings also kept cats and dogs — quite a variety of dogs in fact. Judging by the size of their bones, some were as large as a Labrador or Alsatian, and would have made good hunting or guard dogs. Others were a lot smaller, more the size of a sheepdog.

The cats were much the same as ours today, but a few bones of wildcats have also been found in Viking York, having probably been hunted for their skins in the surrounding countryside.

One important difference between the Viking dogs and cats is that although there are a lot of bones of kittens and young cats, we find very few puppies. This may mean that dogs were carefully bred and tended, while cats had less care and protection, and many died young.

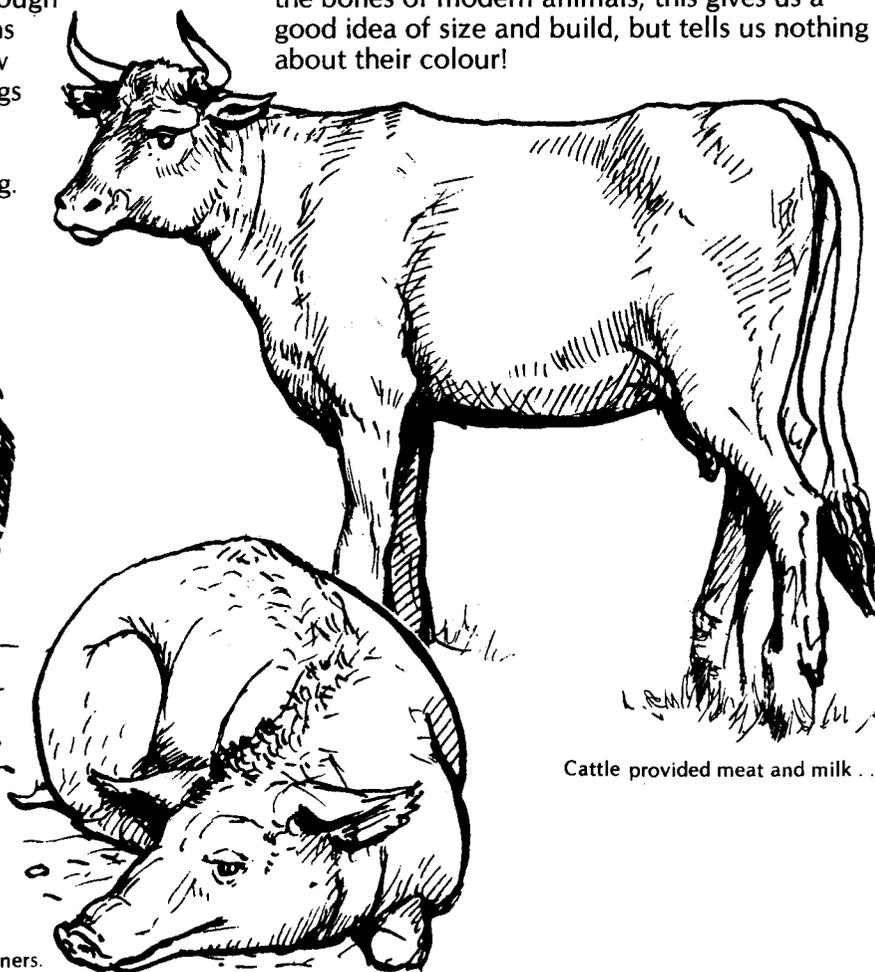
Some of the Viking domestic animals, like cats and dogs, would have looked much the same as ours today, except that special modern breeds like Dalmatians and Siamese did not exist then. Other animals were mostly rather smaller than today, especially the Viking pigs. Cattle stood only 1m to 1.2m high at the shoulder, and would have seemed very lean and long-legged, not at all like our Friesians and Herefords. Sheep were also small and slim, like the smallest modern breeds, but probably had more variety in the colour of their fleeces. Nearly all would have had horns.

Most of the Viking horses would have been like Dales ponies today. Hens were kept around the house, to supply meat and eggs. Domestic geese were quite common too, and there may have been domestic ducks, but this is not certain because their bones are difficult to tell from bones of large wild ducks such as the Mallard.

We can take detailed measurements of the bones which are dug up and compare them with the bones of modern animals; this gives us a good idea of size and build, but tells us nothing about their colour!



Sheep provided meat and wool ...



Cattle provided meat and milk ...

... and pigs provided dinners.