

Viking Artefacts

This is a guide to help learners investigate specific items on the SCRAN database through the detailed study of the materials, design, form and function as well as in the context of individual items or groups of items. The guide comprises a list of things to consider when examining an object, together with a set of sample answers based on a steatite bowl, a bone/antler comb, a gaming piece from Caithness, a silver hoard, an oval brooch and a Viking sword.



Things to consider when looking at an object:

1. Describe what you are looking at.
2. What is the object used for?
3. What material is it made from?
4. How was it used?
5. How was it made?
6. Where was it made?
7. What might it be associated with?
8. Do you know of other examples of the type?



9. What kind of site might it be found on?
10. How do we know it is Viking?
11. Related links within SCRAN
12. Further reading



1. Steatite bowl Westness, Rousay, Orkney

SCRAN ID no: 000-180-001-686-C



Related SCRAN references:

000-000-142-884-C Catpund Quarry, Cunningsburgh, Shetland
 000-000-000-254-C Catpund, Shetland, square vessel
 000-000-142-985-C Freswick Links, Caithness
 000-000-142-897-C Houbie, Fetlar, Shetland
 000-000-472-802-C Fetlar, Shetland
 000-000-142-874-C Jarlshof, Shetland
 000-000-110-416-C spindle whorl

Hemispherical stone bowl, complete.

Used for cooking or holding food.

Made from stone, in this case the pale bluish grey colour indicates it is steatite or soapstone. This is a metamorphic stone which is talc-based. This is a soft stone, easily carved and often used for making cooking vessels. It was quarried in Norway and in Shetland (Catpund and Fetlar for example).

Sometimes these bowls had iron handles and they were suspended over a fire. Traces of food have been found inside and the outside is often burnt from the soot.

It was made from being carved from a block of stone cut at the quarry face. The object was finished to have a smooth surface inside and outside away from the quarry face, possibly using an abrasive such as sand, and then sent to the settlement for use.



It might be found in a house by the fire, with iron cooking tools such as a spit or a flat stone baking plate. It could also be found in a grave where it has been deposited as a grave offering.

These items were valuable and exported to places where there was no steatite, such as the Viking towns of England and Ireland, York and Dublin. When a bowl broke, the soft stone could be reused to make smaller items, such as spindle whorls or weights which could be fashioned with a simple iron knife. Other examples have been found at Jarlshof, Birsay and Freswick Links.

We know it is Viking because of the other things found at the same time and because there was an established export industry within Norway for this type of object and the Shetland industry exported probably to other Scottish markets and within the British Isles. However, steatite was also used in the Bronze Age as well, although the vessels were of different forms (see 000-000-110-437-C). This shows how important it is to consider the context for the object rather than just the material

Further Reading:

S Buttler 1989
Steatite in Norse Shetland. *HIKUIN* 15, 193-206

CL Curle 1982
The Pictish and Norse Finds from the Brough of Birsay 1934-74. Edinburgh, Society of Antiquaries of Scotland Monograph Ser no 1.

JRC Hamilton 1956
Excavations at Jarlshof, Shetland. Edinburgh Ministry of Works Archaeological Rept no 1.

SHH Kaland 1993
The settlement of Westness, Rousay, in CE Batey, J Jesch and C D Morris eds *The Viking Age in Caithness, Orkney and the North Atlantic*, 308-17



2. Bone/Antler Combs, Freswick Links, Caithness

SCRAN ID no: 000-100-043-928-C



SCRAN links:

000-000-110-310-C Antler comb
 000-000-110-315-C Buckquoy, Orkney
 000-000-110-429-C Brough of Birsay, Orkney
 000-000-142-989-C Freswick Links, Caithness
 000-000-136-635-C Jarlshof, Shetland
 000-000-097-361-C Skaill, Deerness, Orkney
 000-000-097-239-C Scar, Sanday, Orkney

The captions state it is from Freswick Links, Caithness and dated to the 13th century. ie Late Norse

This is a comb made of bone or antler. It is double-sided and has bronze rivets. Both sets of teeth are offset to each other. It is complete apart from some missing teeth

Used for combing hair or beards

It is made of bone or antler and bronze

It would have been used the same way as we would do today, and the close teeth may have been very good for personal grooming and the removal of food from beards or lice from hair.

It is made from several pieces. There are separate plates for the teeth and the long back bars. The teeth are cut after it has been put together, we can see that because it has grooves from the cutting on the edges of the back plates.



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The form of comb is unusual and has parallels in Scandinavia and North Germany. We therefore think it was an imported item. There is no evidence for such combs being made in the British Isles.

It might be associated with other domestic items such as spindle whorls, beads etc which would suggest that it belonged to a woman. However, both men and women used these combs, so if it was found in a grave with a sword it could have belonged to a man. The fact that the caption advised that this was found at Freswick Links indicates that it is from a settlement site, and because it is broken, it is most likely that it had been thrown away and therefore is from a midden.

We know this is Viking, or in fact later than this, Late Norse because of the associations at the site and also because the Scandinavian parallels have good dating evidence from C14 dating etc. Many other styles of combs have been recorded as well, but these also include Pictish pieces which date to the period before the Vikings – the style is different. Describe the differences.

Further Reading:

C E Batey forthcoming

Viking and Late Norse Combs of Scotland, in I Riddler ed *Combs and Comb Making, London*. CBA Research Monograph

C L Curle 1982

Pictish and Norse Finds from the Brough of Birsay 1934-74. Society of Antiquaries Monograph Ser no 1, Edinburgh

J Graham-Campbell and C E Batey 1998

Vikings in Scotland: An Archaeological Survey, Edinburgh, 222-3 inter alia



3. Gaming Piece, Freswick Links

SCRAN ID no: 000-100-043-887-C



Related SCRAN references:

000-000-144-335-C Scar, Sanday, Orkney *in situ*

000-000-136-630-C Brough of Birsay, whalebone gaming board

000-100-040-604-C Brough of Birsay playing piece of antler

000-100-042-678-C Jarlshof, Shetland

Circular flat disc of bone, complete and with incised decoration in of parallel circles .

It is a gaming piece and looks like a modern drafts or chequers piece.

The bone appears to be very rough and the vesicles of the bone can be clearly seen, this suggests that it is made from whalebone. If we could handle the piece, it would be very light in weight.

It would have been used in a board game as a counter. The board would have had simple incised squares for this kind of gaming piece.

The bone would have been roughly cut by hand and then smoothed, perhaps using a file and then a sharp tool could have been used to carve the design.



This piece was probably made in Norway, there are many others found which look just like this one from Oslo. It may have been traded or a gift.

It would have been associated with a gaming board or other pieces of similar styles. Depending on the game to be played it might have had pieces of different styles.

It could have been found on a dwelling site or perhaps even as part of a set in a grave. Simple gaming pieces in sets have been found at Westness, Orkney and Balnakeil, Sutherland in grave contexts.

It is dated to the Late Norse period based on the context where this one was found and on the parallels from Scandinavia.

Further Reading:

C L Curle 1982

Pictish and Norse Finds from the Brough of Birsay 1934-74, Society of Antiquaries of Scotland Monograph Ser 1, Edinburgh

J Graham-Campbell 1980

Viking Artefacts: A Select Catalogue. Items 93-95



4. Silver Hoard, Skail, Orkney

SCRAN ID nos: 000-190-004-107-C; 000-190-004-110-C; 000-100-043-548-C



Related SCRAN references:

000-000-001-015-P Iona Hoard
 000-190-004-100-C Burray Hoard
 000-000-099-806-C Kiloran Bay weighing scales

Simple metal bracelets, twisted metal rings and brooches with ball terminals. Some of the brooches no-longer have their pins and therefore cannot have been used in this form.

All these items could be jewellery, but the combination of all the types could suggest a deliberate deposition of a group of metal. This is termed a hoard.

It is all made of silver.

The original use of the objects is clear, mostly are for personal adornment. In the case of the simple arm rings with tapering ends, these were actually a form of currency unit called "ring money". There were also coins found with these pieces, some were from Arabic sources and were favoured because of the good quality of the silver they contained. They were not used as coinage but as bullion and the broken brooches were destined to be melted down and / or cut up for



reuse as well. The Vikings would have used weighing scales to measure out the weight of the silver (see Kiloran Bay 000-000-099-806-C)

Many of the pieces seem to have been made in Scotland but others are from Scandinavia and further destinations.

The group of material, we can class as a hoard, is not likely to have been associated with anything other than other pieces of the same deposit. Items were buried for safe-keeping, used like banks, and in the case of such a hoard as this one –it weighted approximately 8.1 kgs in total, was not recovered because it was lost or the owner died before it could be retrieved.

In Scotland there are many examples of silver hoards from the Viking period, for example Burray in Orkney and a small example from Iona. They had all been buried for safe-keeping. The location of the hoard may not be particularly important, although a memorable spot would be useful, such as at the foot of the Old Man of Storr on Skye, where a small Viking hoard was hidden.

We can date a hoard if it has distinctive types of artefacts within it, but the best evidence of all comes from the coins. These can be dated and the deposition date of the hoard can be assessed because the hoard cannot have been put in the ground earlier than the date of the newest coin. In the case of the Skail hoard, this date would be c 950-970AD

Further Reading:

J Graham-Campbell 1995
The Viking-Age Gold and Silver of Scotland (AD 850-110), Edinburgh

J Graham-Campbell and C E Batey 1998
Vikings in Scotland: An Archaeological Survey, Edinburgh

S E Kruse and J Tate 1992
XRF analysis of Viking Age silver ingots, *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 122, 295-328



5. Oval Brooch: Westness, Orkney

SCRAN ID no: 000-000-099-749-C



Related SCRAN references:

000-000-099-739-C Clibberswick, Unst oval brooch
 000-000-099-737-C Clibberswick, Unst trefoil brooch
 000-000-099-670-C Reay, Caithness

These two decorated oval brooches are made of copper alloy or bronze. They are called oval brooches and were worn by Viking women as a pair, one brooch placed at each shoulder to secure clothing and to enable small items for common daily use to be suspended eg needle case, knife and scissors. The upper surfaces are sometimes decorated with animal motifs or silver wires and plant decoration; more complicated brooches are made in two pieces, with the upper part being highly decorated in an openwork style enabling the upper surface of the lower brooch which was gilded to show through. The attachment pins were made of iron and the corrosion has sometimes preserved remains of the clothing it originally fastened. The two images of the Westness brooches, are a side view and the underside showing the remains of the pins.

Brooches for securing clothing at the shoulders. They brought together front and back loops of the pinafore worn over a pleated shift-like dress.

Copper Alloy or bronze with iron pins

The brooches were made in clay moulds in Scandinavia, for example at Ribe in Denmark or Birka in Sweden. At the moment we do not have any evidence for their manufacture within the British Isles, so all finds are imported and probably brought as part of the national dress of the Viking woman. In some cases, where the brooches are made up of two main pieces, each was cast separately and the

decorated part could have been carefully removed from its mould to enable it to be reused to make a matching brooch. They were often worn as a matching pair, but sometimes there are differences and if the same mould was used, one will be slightly smaller because the mould has shrunk as it had been fired in the oven.

Made in Scandinavia, but we cannot tell precisely from which town they derive.

They would be associated perhaps with other female items, possibly another type of brooch which would have been worn at the throat, such as a trefoil (shaped like a clover-leaf) or equal-armed brooch (roughly rectangular in shape). Another type of brooch which the Viking women used was called a penannular brooch and was made in the British Isles (see Westness 000-100-043-906-C). Also possibly found with beads which had been strung between both brooches.

There are many examples of oval brooches from the British Isles and Scotland in particular, such as Clibberswick (which are made in two pieces with the upper being highly decorated) and a new find from Fetlar, found in a boat grave and excavated in 2002 as part of the television programme *Time Team*.

In the British Isles, this type of brooch would be found as part of a female pagan Viking burial group.

We know it is Viking because the type is commonly found on sites in Scandinavia where the production centres can be distinguished. The style develops through time and becomes increasingly decorative and complex, although of the same general form. Using these style changes we can decide whether it is a brooch from the 9th or 10th century AD.

Further Reading:

J Graham-Campbell 1980
Viking Artefacts: A Select Catalogue, London

J Graham-Campbell and C E Batey 1998
Vikings in Scotland: An Archaeological Survey, Edinburgh University Press.

S H H Kaland 1993
The settlement at Westness, in Batey *et al* eds. *The Viking Age in Caithness, Orkney and the North Atlantic*, 308-17



6. Viking Sword, Scar, Sanday, Orkney

SCRAN ID nos: 000-000-144-326-C; 000-000-144-207-C; 000-000-144-219-C



Related SCRAN references:

000-190-001-232-C Eigg sword reconstruction
 000-000-099-708-C Kiloran Bay, Colonsay sword
 000-000-192-292-C Isle of Bute sword
 000-000-099-767-C Balnakeil, Sutherland sword
 000-000-099-772-C Reconstruction of Balnakeil sword
 000-000-099-765-C Swandro, Rousay, Orkney sword

Fragmentary Viking sword which includes part of the lower guard of the handle and blade. It is made of iron with inlaid decoration on the guard which is in alternating bands of silver and brass. In this case, the upper part of the handle, or pommel, was missing.

The Viking sword was the weapon of a warrior, used as a slashing tool. The sword blade was sharp on both sides and protected when not in use by a scabbard or cover. The example from Scar has been examined in great detail and discovered to have had a wooden scabbard (000-000-144-219-C), other examples may have suggested the use of a sheep-skin liner as a preferred material to ensure natural lubrication of the metal – as well as cleaning after use – by the lanolin in the wool.

The manufacture of Viking swords was a skilled profession. Some swords have been found which have the name of the blade-smith inlaid into the upper part of the blade. A prolific workman or perhaps school of workmen signed as ULFBHERT; such swords have been found widely in the Viking world. Such an example can be seen on display at the Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum in Glasgow. Sometimes the blade can be seen to have been made by “pattern welding” where the metal for the blade is hammered out and almost plaited together again to make a braid-like pattern visible on xray. This made the blade



both strong and pliable, and with the tempering of the blade edges by hammering and heat to form steel they were the best produced weapon of the era.

It was probably made in Scandinavia since it was a specialist tool, much valued and in cases handed down between generations as an heirloom. There are also examples known of where the sword was ritually destroyed by bending or breaking when deposited in the ground, such as at the Viking cemetery of Kilmainham-Island bridge in Ireland or at Hesketh Forest in Northern England.

Such a prestigious weapon as a sword would not be lost lightly. It could be lost in battle or deposited in the ground as a ritual measure to ensure good fortune in battle. However, the most common context for the discovery of a Viking sword is in a male pagan Viking grave. Although isolated items have been found, they are nearly always interpreted as representing a grave (eg 000-000-192-292-C Bute). In a grave context other finds could include the following: an axehead and remains of a shield, such as those from Kiloran Bay on Colonsay 000-000-099-685-C and 000-000-099-680-C and 000-000-099-706-C or Balnakeil in Sutherland where a shield boss (000-000-099-768-C) was found with the sword and range of grave goods including a knife and whetstone (000-000-099-771-C). In a boat burial at Westness on Rousay, Orkney, the pagan warrior had been buried with his weapons which included a sword and shield boss. One of the women at the site had been buried with a great range of grave goods which included a weaving sword – this was used in the manufacture of textiles and is not to be confused with the weapons associated with male grave assemblages (000-000-099-680-C). The sword from Scar was found with an unusually rich grave group for three people, and included a whalebone plaque for the lady (000-000-144-341-C), a gaming set (000-000-144-335-C) and comb for the man in addition to a set of arrowheads (000-000-144-217-C).

There are a number of other examples of this particular type of Viking sword from Scotland, including that from Bute (000-000-192-292-C) which, when x-rayed, was found to have a similar type of decoration on the guard of the handle. A similar sword guard is also known from Sanday in the collections of the Hunterian Museum, Glasgow. It is interesting to compare the shape of the guard from Scar and Bute with that from Kiloran Bay (000-000-099-708-C) and from these examples it is clear how it was possible to make a typological sequence for this type of artefacts by Petersen in 1919.

It can be identified as Viking because all the parallel examples have been found in Scandinavia and because in this case, it was associated with several other items which can also be typologically dated to the Viking period. In addition carbon fourteen (C14) dating has confirmed this.

Further Reading:

J Graham-Campbell and C E Batey 1998
Vikings in Scotland: An Archaeological Survey. Edinburgh and references therein



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Kiloran Bay: A Viking pack (Multi media CD-Rom). Edinburgh SCRAN. 2000

O Owen and M Dalland 1999

Scar. A Viking Boat burial on Sanday, Orkney. East Linton, Tuckwell Press.

J Petersen 1919

De norske vikingesverd. En typologiske – kronologisk studies over vikingetidens vaaben. Kristiania



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