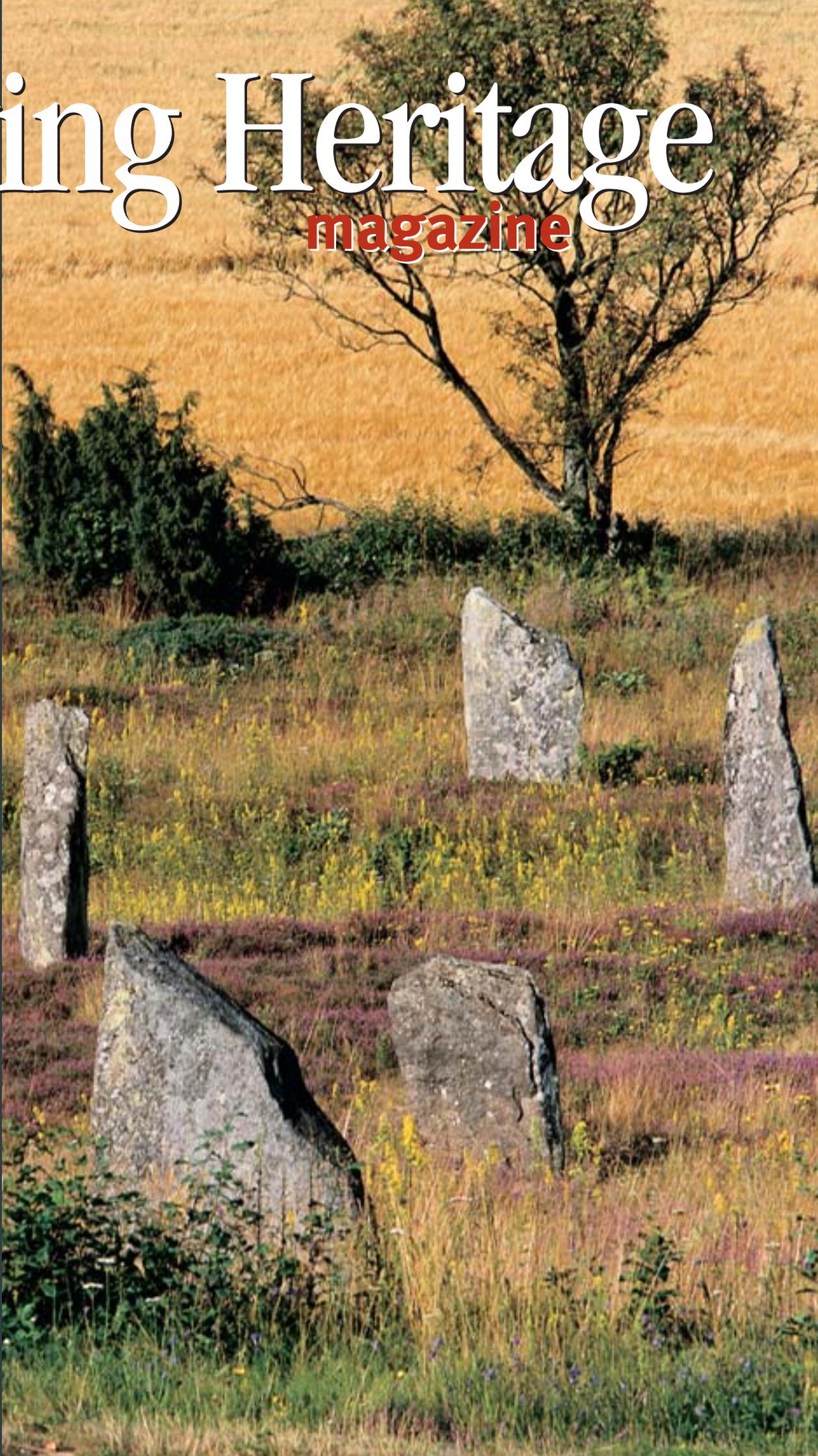


# Viking Heritage

magazine



3/2001



DESTINATION  
**VIKING**  
NORTH SEA

DESTINATION  
**VIKING**  
BALTIC SEA

# Editorial

Dear readers,

The summer season has just passed. I'm sure that many of you have visited the Viking events that have taken place in many different parts of the world. Also several excavations of Viking-related places have been carried out, giving us new information about this special period of our prehistory (ca 800 - 1050 AD) that evokes so much interest among so many. The intention with Viking Heritage Magazine is to keep you updated with what is happening in research and also how we deal with this period today in museums, exhibitions and other public-related contexts.

This time we are proud to be able to present two more lectures held at the Nordic Spirit Symposium, which took place in Thousand Oaks, California in February 2001, on the theme The Vikings: Eastern Traders, Merchants, Empire Builders, Royal Guards. Here you can read what the Birka excavations have brought to light about the Eastern connections.

Games and plays have probably always been a pleasure and relaxation for human beings, and certainly for the Vikings. Malin Lindquist will give you a closer look at the Gambling Vikings.

In this issue we also have a new heading called Ask us. Here we will publish questions and answers from you readers. Please don't hesitate to send us your questions as well as your debate contributions for the Viking Viewpoint page, news, suggestions, articles and ideas. Welcome to take part!

As usual you will find the magazine filled with lots of very interesting articles and news worth reading. So finally, my message to you is: Enjoy!

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## Words of Wisdom



*Mock not the traveller met on the road,  
Nor maliciously laugh at the guest:  
Scoff not at guests nor to the gate chase them,  
But relieve the lonely and wretched,*

From Hávamál  
(Words of "The High One")

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Li grave-field at Fjärås Bräcka, Sweden. Photo: Arne Eklund.  
Read more about this place on page 19.

This article represents a lecture given at the Nordic Spirit Symposium, *The Vikings: Eastern Traders, Merchants, Empire Builders and Royal Guards*, held at California Lutheran University in Thousand Oaks, California, Feb. 16-17, 2001. The symposium was presented in VHM 2/01, along with some of the other lectures held on the same occasion.

# Eastern connections at Birka

BY BJÖRN AMBROSIANI

**In my first lecture of the 2001 Nordic Spirit Symposium Series at California Lutheran University, I focused on the situation in the Baltic area with all of its Viking age towns along with Birka in Lake Mälaren in central eastern Sweden. These were all local centers for the distribution of trade goods and crafts into their hinterlands, and for the mutual exportation and trade of local raw wares.**

**Walrus tusks and whalebone** were exported from Arctic Norway and soapstone, slate whetstones and iron from southern Norway. Birka and Staraya Ladoga were the two centers of fur production; amber was exported from the area around Truso in the southeastern corner of the Baltic; Kołobrzeg was the center of salt production; and from Jutland cattle were distributed to the Continent. Many of these trade goods were consumables and archaeologically not directly visible; Viking age textiles, for example, are today nearly completely decomposed. Fragments of the containers of these goods, pottery and wooden barrels, are sometimes found, and recent chemical analyses of the crucibles and moulds from the Birka workshops have shown that these objects were made with continental clay.

Sea pirates, the Vikings, took their toll from this lively trade, but it was never more than a small part of the total picture.

Without crafts and the activity of trade, there would not have been any Vikings. Economic resources necessary to pay off these traveling mafia groups had to be rebuilt year after year.

**In this lecture**, we will look at Birka from a different perspective, focusing now on its eastern connections instead. In the early Viking Age when the bronze caster's workshop flourished, Birka's contacts were directed totally to the southwest, towards Dorestad and the Rhineland, and perhaps also to Wolin and the Oder area. Almost no objects of eastern Muslim origin, except for a few coins and glass beads, have been found from that period. One group of finds which probably came to Birka from Staraya Ladoga, and which is widely found in their respective hinterlands, is the pottery of Ladoga type. The majority of this pottery is made of Ladoga clay, but Mathias Bäck has shown that some of these pots were made with clay from the Mälaren area. The close contacts between Birka and Ladoga show that both towns, founded at about the same time, figured as points of destination along the trade route from the south and



*Great prince Yaroslav's silver coin with the stylized falcon. Photo G. Hildebrand, RAÄ*



*The falcon from Birka's Black Earth. Photo Carl O. Löfman*

southwest. The origins of these early towns are linked to the control of the forest areas where valuable furs could be hunted.

The southern plot in Birka's Black Earth was excavated down to a level that dated to c. 850 A.D. It is characterized by a series of burnt houses situated one on top of the other. These buildings often consisted of a living area, 5x5 m large, with a central fireplace and an outer room on one side including a workshop or storage area. Astonishingly, in a building at the earliest level, instead of a central fireplace which was common for the Scandinavian area, we found a corner fireplace similar to those described by Dr. Nosov as typically Slavonic.

**Many objects with eastern origins** have been retrieved from these three or four generations of houses, among which were mounts and buttons typical for the Khazarian and Arabic areas. Some of the pottery sherds, however, proved to be problematic. We first suspected that they



*The Khazarian pot from Birka. Photo Carl O. Löfman*



*Carnelian and rock crystal beads from a Birka grave. Photo Carl O. Löfman*

were modern flowerpots; their technology appeared to be very modern, they were well burnt and they had been made using a potter's wheel. Later, one of our Russian scholarship holders recognized them as being possibly Khazarian, if not originating from places even farther away. This pottery is quite fine, and today we know that our material includes at least 15 such vessels. The question of their origin along with other aspects of this material will be analyzed further by Mathias Bäck at the Birka Project.

Some two hundred carnelian and rock crystal beads, both smooth globular ones as well as faceted ones, came to Birka from the Caucasus area or India. Today, beads of this kind are still being manufactured in the same area in India and in shapes that have been used since the time of the Birth of Christ. And still today, these beads can be bought in jewelry shops around the world. In the Mälars area such beads are commonly found in Viking age graves from the early 10<sup>th</sup> century.

**Approximately 500 Islamic coins** were also found in the Black Earth, the majority belonging mainly to two hoards from Hjalmar Stolpe's early excavations. Another 100 coins were retrieved in the 1990–1995 excavations, at which time a small hoard with about 20 coins was found at the southern plot. Gert Rispling in Stockholm has shown that seven of these coins, although they appear to be Islamic, actually were struck in the Volga-Bulgaria area instead. Ibn Fadlan came to Bulgar in the

920s A.D. to instruct the local Kagan in Islamic beliefs. After that time coins of Islamic type began being struck in Bulgar. Some of the other objects from this hoard include a rock crystal bead, two pieces of amber, some ordinary glass beads and some weights. Together with these a copper coin-like object, about 2 mm thick, much thicker than ordinary coins, was also found. One side showed the pattern of a star and on the other was the image of a cross. We don't know today what this object actually represents.

This hoard dates to the 940s or later, which is contemporary with the peace treaty between Kiev and Byzantium as described in the Primary Chronicle. According to this source, until that time, all ambassadors and merchants going from Kiev to Byzantium were obliged to carry a gold or silver seal as evidence that they had come from the Great Prince of Kiev. However, this changed in conjunction with the peace treaty and, instead of a seal, the Great Prince was to send a letter with the names of his ambassadors and merchants. Perhaps this coin-like object from the Black Earth hoard is one such seal, showing that its bearer was permitted to pass between Kiev and Byzantium or perhaps to travel into other parts of the eastern world, to Khazaria or the Caliphate.

**Scales and weights** are common finds

*The copper seal from the Birka hoard.  
Photo Carl O. Löfman*

throughout the Northern world. About 300 weights have also been found in our excavations; 30 spherical, 70 cubo-octahedral, and c. 200 lead weights of simple forms.

Erik Sperber in Stockholm has studied the problem of metrology and corrosion of these weights. The metrological background seems to be Islamic, where the normal silver coin, the *dirham*, has two standards; first as 70% (=2.97g), later as 67% (=2.822g) of a *mitqal* (4.23g). On the other hand, the main unit for weighing seems to be based on 3 *mitquals* (=12.7g) which, in turn, may be divided differently with the smallest units being 0.7 g and 0.795 g, respectively. Multiples of these define the actual physical weights.

Sperber's analyses show that the





Map of Eastern Europe. Drawn by Bernt Forsblad for *Birka Studies 5*.

weights found on Gotland closely follow Islamic metrology. But weights from the Swedish mainland and in Birka have a smaller *mitqual* weight. Ingrid Gustin at the Birka Project has shown that it is

difficult to establish a background for these weights in their supposed Islamic context. Very few certain Islamic examples have been identified, which is also the case for the scales with which these weights were used for weighing silver.

At the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, spherical weights were produced using a technique that was well known both in Birka and in Sigtuna. They were constructed of an iron core covered with bronze using a special mould. Anders Söderberg in Stockholm has tested this technique which shows the high level of workmanship carried out in these workshops.

However, the lead weights seem to use the same metrological system of division but, as Sperber writes, using a "*mitqual*" weight that lies somewhere between the Islamic/Gotlandic and mainland standards. Results of recent isotope analyses by the Oxford laboratories,

specialized in research of this type, have shown that these weights were made of British lead. They belong to the workshop phase in Birka dated to between 780 and 850 A.D. and are, thus, earlier than both the spherical and cubo-octahedral weights.

**A number of unusual finds** have also been retrieved from the area around the southern plot including, among other things, the figure of a small bronze bird in low relief. The two closest equivalents to this are finds from the cemetery at Bolsjoje Timerevo near Yaroslavl by the Volga River in Russia. This figure has been identified by ornithologists as the image of a falcon or hawk, two species which are mutually very similar. The figure's wing position, however, shows that the Birka example depicts a diving, hunting falcon. Bird imagery is found on many sword chapes; the metal mounts used for protecting the tip or point of the sword scabbard. Eight such chapes have been found in Birka and another six are known from other parts of eastern Sweden. Many have been found in the Baltic as well as Russian areas. In Russia, this motif is well known as the symbol of the Great Princes of the old Rus', members of the Rurik family of Novgorod and Kiev.

Depictions of birds appear both on the coins of Vladimir and on those of his son Yaroslav from the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. This is discussed by Elsa Lindberger, Stockholm, in *Birka Studies 5* (forthcoming). This figure is sometimes called a 'bident' or 'trident', but it is obviously the highly stylized representation of a falcon. Each of the Great Princes of Kiev uses this bird motif with tail or wings in different rendition as their personal sign, making it possible to identify immediately which of the Great Princes was represented in the coinage and on the mounts and pendants.

The falcons of the Great Prince Vladimir from the 980s, often more naturalistic than Yaroslav's, are very similar to the Birka example. The similarity between these should be evidence of the Scandinavian background of the princely Rurik family. The many falcons from Birka suggest the close connections between Scandinavia and the Rus'. Perhaps they are evidence of commercial and political ambassadors in the areas where these figures have been found.

Another sword chape shows a very unusual double-motif combination. On one side is the figure of the falcon with its tail, wing and head clearly depicted. On the opposite side is another figure with different wings, enclosing an additional





*The Islamic coins with crosses from the Vårby hoard. Photo Björn Ambrosiani.*

shown in the Primary Chronicle, the new passage through Russia was not opened until Rurik and his family had conquered Khazarian interests and established themselves as rulers.

The Scandinavian settlement in Russia, other than at Staraya Ladoga and Gorodišče, is dated to c. 900 A.D. at the earliest. Thus, a breakthrough along the rivers to the Islamic world could not have taken place before the late 9<sup>th</sup> century. Why, then, do some few eastern objects as coins and glass beads appear in stratigraphically early layers in Ladoga and Birka? We have believed that these, like all of the 10<sup>th</sup> century objects, had arrived via the eastern routes. But, it seems instead that a change in these routes took place in the late 9<sup>th</sup> century.

Professor Mike McCormick of Harvard University has studied written records documenting as many as 600 journeys by saints and religious people between the Middle East and the Frankish Empire during the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries. None of these were made in the travelers' private ships, but were undertaken instead along with merchants and their ships, not recorded in other sources. McCormick has also shown that Venice was the big emporium for this traffic. From Venice, it was easy to reach the Danube in Pannonia, and from there also Dorestad at the mouth of the Rhine and Wolin at the mouth of the Oder. These two were the most important continental harbors at that time, both of which had direct contacts with Birka. The majority of the eastern objects found in Birka and Ladoga may well have reached their destinations this way, as payment for furs, slaves and other raw wares intended for the West European markets on their way to the Islamic world. Also gold coins, *dinars*, were used at that time. They were spread widely throughout Western Europe and have been found as far north as the Hon hoard from the Oslo

figure. Here, the head of this extra figure is situated below the bird's head, and the outstretched legs and arms of the extra figure, intertwined with the body and wings of the bird, can be clearly distinguished. This is not a picture of Christ as on the Jelling Stone from Denmark, but another famous individual. This motif is found in a familiar scene on a picture stone from Gotland with exactly the same figure inside the wings and body of a large bird with the beak of an eagle. This is Odin fetching the mead of poetry from the giant Suttung in order to return it to Valhall. A particular characteristic of Odin was his ability to take on the guise of an eagle and to fly out over the world to see what was happening. Only one other of the gods also had this very unusual characteristic, Odin's wife Frigg, who could take on the guise of a falcon. Perhaps the unusual double-motif combination on the Birka chape depicts Odin and Frigg. The Uppsala kings are often represented by Odin, and Kiev obviously by Frigg, both leading figures in the supreme Germanic family of gods.

Only a couple of the hundreds of sword chapes known today have double-motif combinations; one from Lithuania in addition to this one from Birka. All of the others have identical patterns on both sides. Are these unusual chapes also a kind of 'passport' for persons moving between these areas as the copper seal with the double motif of a cross and star discussed earlier?

**Objects with eastern origin** are clearly absent in Birka before the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Western objects commonly appear during a period of at least 100 to 150 years in the early 9<sup>th</sup> century, and after that time eastern objects totally dominate finds from the town area. Only the Ladoga pottery speaks of earlier contacts, representing a period when Birka and Ladoga were destination points on the route from the southwest where local raw wares were collected for the West European market. After the late 9<sup>th</sup> century, this activity seems to cease, and all contacts appear to be directed toward the East.

As a young student I had learned that

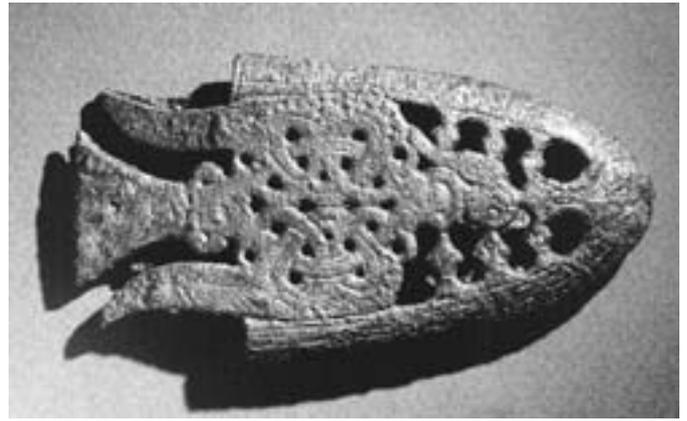
the Viking age towns of northern Europe had been established along a 'new' northern route stretching between the Franks and the Arabs following the Russian rivers. The finds from our excavations led me to reread this literature.

The majority of the ideas on this question can be traced back to the works of Henri Pirenne and Sture Bolin from the 1930s. Pirenne meant that the Mediterranean was blocked in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, marking also the real end of antiquity. Bolin showed, however, that this was not true; merchants transited their goods from the North to the Muslim world via the Frankish Empire. A new northern route along the Russian rivers was established at the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> century at the earliest, in connection with the establishment of the Rurik family in Novgorod and Kiev beginning in the 860s. In the archaeological literature since the 1950s, these ideas appear to have shifted somehow to the view that this route was open already at the beginning of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, some 60 to 100 years earlier.

The reason for this shift in chronological interpretation is unclear since there is no material evidence to motivate such a change. In Birka and Staraya Ladoga, only a few eastern objects have been found in layers prior to the late 9<sup>th</sup> century, although these may well have come via Dorestad and Wolin, at that time both important continental ports in contact with the Mediterranean world. As



*The counterfeit dinar from Birka. Photo Bengt A. Lundberg, RAA*



The sword chape with the falcon on one side and Odin dressed in the guise of an eagle on the other. Photo Carl O. Löfman

region in southern Norway.

In the current excavations at Kaupang in southeastern Norway, c. 30 early, and no later, *dirhams* have been found. This is still more evidence supporting the idea that the majority of these early Islamic coins passed through Dorestad on their way north, before the Russian river routes were opened at the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> century.

Obviously, it was not so much the question of the Scandinavians' great lust for silver as it was the desire of the Muslims to obtain walrus tusks, furs and slaves which was the driving force behind this trade. Goods were paid in gold and silver, of which the gold was used immediately in trade to acquire still more of the desirable luxurious consumables of silks, jewelry etc. brought to Scandinavia. However, silver coins, appearing in amounts that gave it the status of a surplus material, were deposited instead in Gotlandic cellars, some of which remained there and have been forgotten for a thousand years. Today these coins, scrap silver, silver bars and jewelry are found as hoards in the Gotlandic fields. Of course this is a hypothesis, but it is one that may have different social, economic and political relevance than simply claiming that the Scandinavians only wanted silver.

**There is particular evidence** suggesting that Arabic coinage was not struck exclusively in the Islamic areas. Small Christian crosses can be identified above the Islamic inscriptions on the *dirhams* from the Vårby hoard found near Stockholm. This suggests that they must have been struck in a Christian area.

In Birka a gilt copper coin was found, a counterfeit *dinar*, described by Gert Rispling and dated by its inscriptions to the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century. A similar counterfeit *dinar* was found also near Paderborn, Germany. And King Offa of Mercia in England is known to have struck *dinars*. This Christian king had promised to pay

one gold coin each day to the Pope in Rome, and when there were not enough gold coins to pay, he himself began to produce coins in Islamic style. At that time, the role of Islamic coinage was similar to the US dollar today, it was valid and usable everywhere.

**In conclusion**, there now appears to be many different kinds of evidence suggesting why the Arabs pressed northwards and the Scandinavians southwards along the Russian rivers; mainly to shorten the distance between the areas of production and areas of consumption for the important raw wares of the Northern world. Earlier, these goods were sent via the Continent and Western Europe, but following the establishment of the Rurik family in Ladoga, Gorodišče and Kiev at the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, direct contact between these areas became possible.

The majority of the 9<sup>th</sup> century hoards from the area of southeastern Russia, have been shown by Professor Thomas Noonan at the University of Minnesota to have been connected to the Khazarian rule, and they seldom are found in areas beyond the Dnepr-Volga border. In the early 10<sup>th</sup> century, the Volga route through the Khazarian area was dangerous, and in order to avoid it, Ibn Fadlan made his way across Transoxania and the desert steppes to Bulgar where he met and described his encounter with northern merchants. This route between Scandinavia and the Islamic world is direct and much easier to travel than the route along the rivers to the Black and Caspian Seas.

So behind the often romanticized picture of the fearful dragon ships sailing across the seas, with Vikings marauding throughout Europe, there is something more to be understood and something different to be found. A normal society, with all of its rude manners, vibrating with civilian life, transport, and trade, where the

Vikings were just a limited group of sea pirates and a small part of the comprehensive and complex society of the late Iron Age North including Danes, Norwegians, Swedes, Goths, Gotlanders and the Rus', but who were not 'Vikings'.

*Transformed from the original presentation by Phyllis A. Ambrosiani.*

**Note:** Much of the information in this paper can be found in the forthcoming volumes on Birka's eastern connections, the first of which, Birka Studies 5, will be published in September 2001 by the Birka Project at Riksantikvarieämbetet, Stockholm.

Orders for this series or individual volumes may be sent to: Birkagrävningen, Riksantikvarieämbetet, Box 5405, SE-114 84 Stockholm, Sweden. More information may be obtained through the Birka Project's e-mail address [birkproj@raa.se](mailto:birkproj@raa.se).

### About the author

Björn Ambrosiani, PhD, Professor, and employed by the National Heritage Board/the Museum of National Antiquities of Sweden, has been Project Director of the Birka excavations from 1989 to the present. His research has concentrated on problems dealing with settlement history and development in the Mälara area in eastern Sweden, the Viking Age, land upheaval and shore displacement, and Viking Age towns in Northern Europe. His works number about 260 publications, including scientific books and articles, reviews and popular archaeological books and articles.

This article represents a second lecture held by Judith Gabriel Vinje at the Nordic Spirit Symposium, *The Vikings: Eastern Traders, Merchants, Empire Builders and Royal Guards*, at California Lutheran University in Thousand Oaks, California, Feb. 16-17, 2001. The other lecture, *Baghdad Chronicles. The Islamic Record of Vikings in the East*, was presented in VHM 2/01.

*Arabic silver coins. Photo The Museum of National Antiquities, Sweden*



BY JUDITH GABRIEL VINJE

**The silver coin known as the dirham, the coin of the medieval Islamic realm, with its elegant Kufic calligraphy, was one of the most powerful agents driving the Viking Age. It remains a millennium later to cast much light on the period.**

# The Coin that Fueled the Viking Age

## DIRHAMS AS DOCUMENTS

The dirham was “the coin that helped fuel the Viking Age,” according to Thomas S. Noonan, a University of Minnesota historian and numismatist whose pioneering work in the field is widely recognized. Islamic silver was to provide the impetus for the expanding economies of Russia and Scandinavia for most of the Viking Age. Huge amounts reached Scandinavian in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries.

With only a varying and sporadic system of currency in Scandinavia, and no real monetary economy until the end of the Viking Period, the Norse had to look elsewhere for a medium of exchange. Silver had become the key to wealth and power in the area, but with no indigenous sources of the precious metal in the northern forests, Norse traders headed east in pursuit of the coins which Arab merchants had started circulating in the Volga River region in the late 8<sup>th</sup> century. There were

rich silver mines in the east, and the dirham had become the standard medium of exchange throughout Western Asia. It was the appearance of these dirhams in the Staraya Ladoga region of Russia and in various parts of the eastern Baltic which attracted the Vikings to Russia.

“The influx of these dirhams into areas with little or no silver of their own was a powerful change agent,” Noonan noted. “It precipitated Viking penetration into the interior of European Russia, fostered the emergence of a series of new towns there to service this commerce, provided the original impetus for the formation of the Rus’ and Volga Bulghar states, and helped to transform the Khazar economy and state.”

### **Eastern Lure**

The coins lured Viking Age Scandinavians eastward, as Viking and Rus traders hauled huge quantities of furs and other goods to

the markets of the Bulgars and Khazars, as well as to Baghdad and other emporia of the Abbasid caliphate, where they exchanged them for the coveted silver. These Norse merchant-adventurers might first make their way to Staraya Ladoga; then, in pursuit of further lucre, follow the wild, uncharted rivers across the Russia steppe, creating way-stations and political entities along the way. Other peoples of the Baltic may have also have been drawn to the settlement at Ladoga, but Noonan believes it was only the Vikings who ventured into the interior of Russia in pursuit of the silver coins.

### **‘Sarkland’ Markets**

They would connect either with the Dnepr River leading them to the riches of Byzantium, or with the Volga-leading to Near Eastern merchants dealing in Asia’s fabulous wares, and eager to buy Northern

luxury items such as furs and wax, as well as slaves. Thus, many Scandinavians, who along with other peoples were referred to in the region as the “Rus,” traveled to the region they called “Sarkland,” the lands of the Saracens – the Muslim region around the Caspian. Sarkland might also have referred to the Khazar fortress at Sarkel, which had become a major center of trade, a link to the overland trading route known as the Silk Road. Scandinavians would bring furs and other goods to the Khazar capital of Itil, located at the mouth of the Volga, and other teeming market centers, to be exchanged with Muslim merchants for silver coins.

Large amounts of silver also changed hands at Bulghar, located at the confluence of the Volga and Kama rivers, which became one of the most important fur trading centers of the period. Rus merchants went as far south as Baghdad, the headquarters of the Abbasid Caliphate in Mesopotamian Iraq, which the traders reached via camel caravan, as chronicled by Ibn Khurradadhbih in the early 9<sup>th</sup> century. The Abbasids reached their height of power around 800, with an immense empire extending from India to Spain, and it was the Arab peace with the Khazars that paved the way for the wide-spread commerce luring the Vikings east.

The Khazars had become the dominant power in the Caucasian steppe by the middle of the 7<sup>th</sup> century. In the late 8<sup>th</sup> century, there was an end to fighting between the Khazars and the Arabs. It was

### About the author

Judith Gabriel Vinje is a veteran journalist who spent many years covering the Middle East for print and broadcast media. She is currently West Coast contributing editor of Norway Times (*Nordisk Tidende*), a weekly newspaper published in New York.

She writes about Norwegian, as well as Middle Eastern, literature and culture, and has spoken and written articles about the Viking Age connections between the Scandinavians and the East. She is active in Sons of Norway and the Scandinavian Theater Company, and has written and produced programs on Norwegian history. Her published articles include *Among the Norse Tribes: The Remarkable Account of Ibn Fadlan*, in *Aramco World*, November/December 1999.

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*Balance scales and weights in bronze, found in Vårdinge parish, Sö. Sweden. Photo The Museum of National Antiquities, Sweden*

at that time – in the 780s – that the dirhams which entered Khazaria from the Islamic world began to appear in northern Russia, and also in Gotland, where a small dirham hoard dating from the same time has been found.

The Vikings only appeared on the scene after the Arabs and Khazars had laid the foundations for this commerce. As Ladoga began to develop in the early 9<sup>th</sup> century, the volume of trade increased. But it was the mid-10<sup>th</sup> century that saw the eastern trade reaching its peak, with a dramatic hike in dirham imports to Northern Europe.

The coins themselves have remained to tell much of the story. Hundreds of Viking Age graves and buried hoards contain caches of Arab dirhams, with the vast majority deposited in Sweden. Noonan’s catalogue of all the dirhams found in Scandinavian and Western European will be published by the Numismatics Institute of the University of Stockholm. His first book on the subject, a collection of articles titled *The Islamic World, Russia and the Vikings, 750-900: The Numismatic Evidence*, was published by Ashgate in 1998.

At present, there is information on over a thousand individual hoards containing five or more dirhams throughout Scandinavia, the Baltic countries and Russia. The total number of coins in them was more than 228,000. According to

Noonan, some 100,000 dirham coins, most deposited between the years 900 and 1000, have been unearthed to date in Sweden alone, and there are more than a thousand recorded individual hoards of five or more coins recorded through Scandinavia, the Baltic countries and Russia. From Norway there are nearly 600 known pieces, while from Finland there are about 2,000 and in Denmark, more than 5,000 Arabic dirhams have been found.

Since many of the dirhams deposited in eastern and northern Europe were melted down, never reported, or have yet to be unearthed, the actual number imported from the Islamic world was far greater, according to Noonan. During the 10<sup>th</sup> century, he estimates that some 125 million Samanid dirhams were exported to northern Europe from Central Asia, with its top quality silver mines. The amount of Islamic silver reaching the region increased dramatically in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, when vast silver deposits were discovered in the Hindu Kush. This enabled the Khurasan-based Samanid dynasty to mint large numbers of coins and to become, numismatic evidence shows, the main supplier of dirhams that consequently flowed westward, with Viking traders only too eager to haul them back to Scandinavia. The mid-tenth century was the heyday of the eastern trade of the Viking Age.

### Silver Famine

Shortly after 965 the stream of silver came to an abrupt end, coinciding with a scarcity of silver in the Islamic realms. When Islamic silver again started to arrive in Scandinavia at the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century it was only in small amounts and around 1015 it stopped completely. The Viking Age, so dependent on Arab silver, did not survive the silver famine in the late 10<sup>th</sup> as the Samanid state collapsed. The rich Central Asian silver mines were virtually exhausted, and Noonan points out that the silver coins had been increasingly debased as time went on. "A silver content of approximately 90 percent in the year 1000 had declined to a silver content of about five percent half a century later. Understandably, Rus merchants no longer wanted such coins." The silver-seekers retreated west, in pursuit of other sources.

While most of the dirhams came from commerce, others were earned by mercenaries, or collected as tribute from local populations, and some more than likely came by way of plunder and looting as well. However, Noonan points out that raids in the East were far less successful than those along the French and English coasts. Whether they were gleaned in trade or raid, the dirhams today provide a continuous source of evidence, covering a period of two to three centuries. Because the origin and the date of dirhams are determinable, they are not subject to many of the disputes surrounding the written and archaeological material. Evidence from the dirhams is so precise that, in an interview, Noonan likened it to "the read-out from an electrocardiogram."

The dirhams bear inscriptions that contain significant data. Of major importance to historians, the coins show the year they were struck, which is reckoned in accordance with Islamic chronology, dating from the Hejira, Muhammad's flight from Mecca to Medina in the year 622 A.D. This, along with the mint signature, indicating where the coins were struck, provides vital details for modern numismatists and archaeologists. Coins were variously minted in more than 40 towns of the Caliphate. One excellent find in Uppland, Sweden contained a mixture of coins struck in Baghdad, Cairo, Damascus, Isfahan and Tashkent. Numismatists frequently refer generally to all dirhams as Kufic coins, regardless of where they were actually struck. While many of the earlier Abbasid coins were minted in al-Kufa, near Baghdad, the term actually refers to the

early style of calligraphy that developed there.

Some coins carry the name of the ruler at the time of the minting, but there are no regal profiles here; for religious reasons, Arabic coins do not carry images of human representations, thus leaving more room for inscriptions. Many of the coins also bear quotations from the Koran, the Islamic scriptures. Every Islamic coin becomes a miniature document.

The Vikings didn't always care what was stamped on the coins. More than likely, the coins were used according to their face value in the countries of their origin, and in dealing with Islamic traders. But back home, the silver was measured according to its weight and essential value, and the quality was very high in these Eastern coins. The coins were often cut or hewn into smaller pieces to balance the scales, and many were melted down into ingots or fashioned into arm-rings for subsequent "hack-silver" transactions.

To measure the silver, a portable balance scale was used, which was ingeniously designed to fold up, so as to occupy the minimum amount of space when not in use. The hinged arms of the scale collapsed inwards, folding in line with the hanger bar and pointer, which in turn could be laid into one of the measuring pans, which themselves nested into each other. The whole would then be placed into a leather bag or wooden box. Also found with a number of sets of the scales were sets of weights, which were variously made from lead, bronze, clay, glass, or any combinations of these. Most were spherical with a flattened spot, on which the weight would be marked. While the dirham became a virtually universally accepted tender, the actual weight fluctuated from time to time, averaging a little less than three grams.

"The insights gained from the dirham hoards are particularly valuable since there is only one contemporary written Islamic source for this period and it dates to the mid-ninth century. Our knowledge of the great Islamic-Rus' trade prior to the mid-ninth century derives almost entirely from an analysis of the dirham hoards," Noonan noted, adding that because "the written sources are few in number and their content subject to many legitimate differences of opinion," he and others have turned to archaeology and numismatics for help in understanding what took place in European Russia and environs during the period.

## In memoriam: Thomas S. Noonan

Thomas S. Noonan died June 15 of cancer. He was 63. A professor at the University of Minnesota since 1966, he had been chair of Russian and East European Studies, and was internationally respected for his work focusing on the flow of medieval money in European Russia and Northern Europe, originating more than 100 articles based on numismatics and archaeology, including numerous studies of the coins which circulated during the Middle Ages. Among his many publications, a collection of several of his papers was released as "The Islamic World, Russia and the Vikings, 750-900" in 1998, and two articles he completed before his death will soon be published.

Among his many professional accomplishments, he was a contributor to the Modern Encyclopedia of Russian and Soviet History, and was on the editorial board of *Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi*, a history journal. He received numerous awards, including a royal medal from the Swedish Numismatics Society, which will publish his catalogue of dirhams found in European hoards. He wrote a chapter in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings* and also contributed to the *New Cambridge Medieval History*. He is survived by his wife, Dr. Norma Noonan, a professor of political science at Augsburg College in Minneapolis, and a son, Thomas.

While still battling his esophageal cancer last year, Dr. Noonan had accepted an invitation to be a keynote speaker at the Viking Symposium at California Lutheran University, sponsored by the Scandinavian American Cultural and Historical Foundation, but was unable to participate due to his health. His work was referred to by at least two speakers, and indeed, his contribution to the historical niche he virtually shaped will continue to enrich studies of the region.

JUDITH GABRIEL VINJE

# Gambling Vikings!

*Gambling scene on a runic stone (now non-existent) from the church of Ockelbo in Gästrikland (Northern Sweden) dating from the 11<sup>th</sup> century.  
Drawing: Ulla Sjöswärd.*



BY MALIN LINDQUIST

In 98 A.D. Tacitus, the Roman historian, describes the Germans as follows:

*They pursue a game of dice, curiously enough in a sober condition, as a kind of very serious occupation and show such foolhardiness when it comes to profit or loss, that after having lost everything, they risk their freedom and person in the last irrevocable throw.*

The reputation of the Norse concerning drinking and gambling is, as can be seen, of ancient date. Maybe the scene on a now-lost, rune-stone from Ockelbo parish in Hälsingland is a true depiction of the Vikings' joy of gambling: Two figures with drinking-horns in their hands are sitting on either side of a square object which clearly seems to be a gambling-board.

Finds of dice, gaming-pieces and boards in their graves hints at how frequent this pleasure was in life as in death. It clearly seems that both men and women enjoyed this pastime.

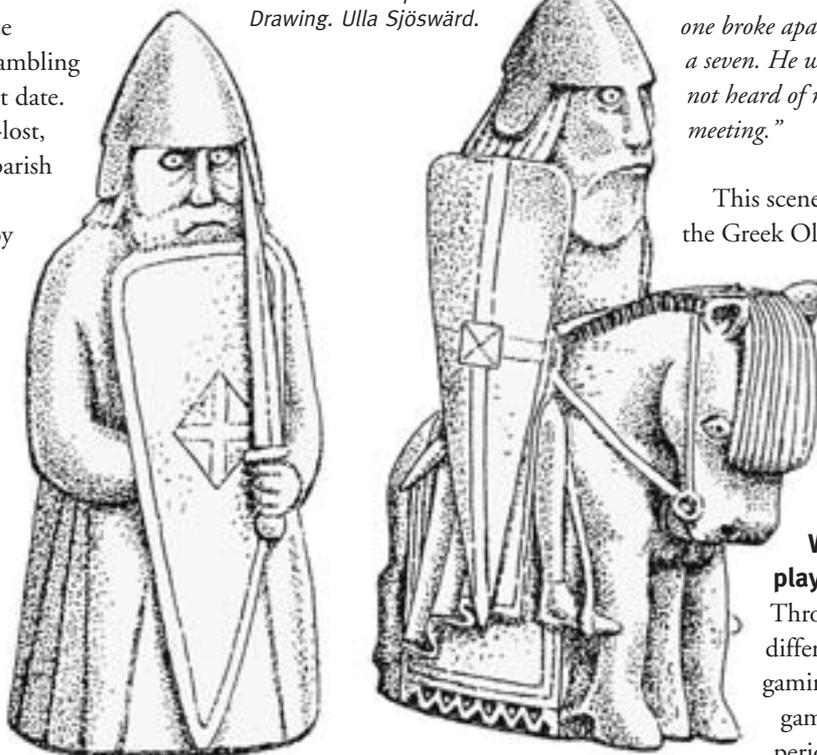
## Icelandic literature

The Icelandic sagas were written down from the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century to the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, but tell about Viking-period Icelanders. Most of the events take place during the middle of the 10<sup>th</sup> century and the hundred years

following. Indeed, they mainly describe life on Iceland 'can also throw some light on' the Viking period in general in Scandinavia.

The stories are full of remarks and references to games and gambling, an occupation which obviously enough was an important part not only of Viking-Age pleasure. Skill at the gambling-table,

*Among the chessmen from the island of Lewis, Hebrides, there is the late Viking-age warrior – here as a castle and a bishop.  
Drawing: Ulla Sjöswärd.*



for instance, resulted in a very good reputation and was something that the son of the Jarl had to learn (Rigsthula).

Gambling was often used to describe different situations in life. In *Saint Olaf's Saga* the author, Snorri Sturluson, tells of

how the two kings, Olov Skötkonung and Olaf Tryggvason, met in Kungahälla and cast dice over the ownership of Hisingen (an island between Sweden and Norway in the Viking period.)

*"He (Olaf?) shook the dice in his hand and said: There are still two sixes on the dice. And for God my Lord it is an easy task to let them turn up. He threw and two sixes turned up. Then the king of Svea cast once more and once again two sixes turned up. Then the Norwegian king cast and on one dice the six turned up but the other one broke apart in such a way as to make a seven. He won the country. We have not heard of more incidents at this meeting."*

This scene is also well known from the Greek Olympus where the gods divided the world between them by rolling dice. The Aesir gods also gambled when they met on Idavallen after Ragnarök

## What did the Vikings play with?

Throughout time dice, different kinds of pieces and gaming boards were used in all games. During the Viking period dice were rather big and made out of bone. There was no rule about how the "eyes" should be placed on the dice contrary to a modern dice where the sum of eyes on opposite sides is always seven! In Birka there are examples of weighted dice, probably used for cheating – human nature never changes!



*Gaming-pieces and dice of antler and horse-tooth from Hallvide, Eke parish on Gotland. 8<sup>th</sup> century. Photo: Raymond Hejdström.*

The pieces were normally made out of bone, antler, horse teeth or glass. They are semi-spherical, sometimes with a little hole underneath. Half of the pieces in some sets are out of bone, half of horse-teeth, so that the gamblers can see the difference between their own pieces and those of their gambling partners. Otherwise they must have been of different colours.

There have been some discussions about the mysterious small holes that can be seen in the bottom of some of the pieces. These can be interpreted as signs of production; the pieces may have been made on a turning wheel. The other thesis, which may be slightly more credible, is that a small wooden plug kept the piece steady on the board, a practical solution if gambling on board a ship at sea!

The glass pieces are either of one colour: black, purple or dark-green or, more commonly sea-green, with melted glass-threads in an contrasting colour. Among the glass-sets you also find the very special "king" – a human-like figure with a crown on his head.

Some late Viking-Age pieces of bone are more pointed at the top like an onion.

Regarding the boards, very few remains have been found. The best preserved is from the well-known Gokstad-ship in Norway. This board is squared on one side with the "the mill/merels" carved on the other side. This game is very simple and exists all over the world back to Egypt of the Pharaohs. The oldest merels in Scandinavia were found in another 8<sup>th</sup>

century boat-grave in Åby, Uppland.

However the most well known board is probably the wooden one from Ballinderry on Ireland – a square with 7 x 7 small holes. The frame has an unmistakable Nordic style. It also has two handles in the shape of heads. It seems clear enough that the pieces must have been kept in place with the help of little plugs.

#### **What games did the Vikings play?**

Normally it seems that they played only



with dice, “The mill/merels” “Fox and geese” and other rather simple games of which the rules are unknown to us.

The word *tafl* is the common name for four different board games. Icelandic names mentioned in the Icelandic sagas are *knattatáfl* or *refskák*, *kvátratafl* and *skákttafl*.

*Grettir's Saga* relates an episode of a woman entering a room where two men are sitting at the gambling table. She starts to quarrel with one of them and, as always in Iceland, soon blood is boiling and she throws a gambling-piece in his eye, which then falls out. Was this the same onion-like piece that was found at the excavations in Fröjel last summer or was it the little plug that damaged his eye? They were probably playing *refskák* i.e. “fox and geese”.

The fourth game mentioned is *Hnefatafl*, which is of special interest to us. In *Frithiof's Saga* there is a game mentioned with a *hnefi* and red pieces played on a board with 9 x 9 squares. The one gambler has a king (*hnefi*) and 8 pieces and the opponent has twice as many, pieces (16). The king/*hnefi* is attacked in his fortress and must try to reach the corners before he gets caught.

This game calls for great skill because no dice were used. Probably this game is identical to another game – *Tablut* – which Carl von Linné describes in his *Travels in Lappland, Iter Laponicum* 1732 and which the Lapps called *dablo*.

The idea of this game with its uneven position of strength is probably unique and may have originated in the north. Some lovely glass-sets for *Hnefatafl* have been found in Birka where the typical *hnefi*/king really looks like one.

Chess, *skákttafl*, must have been known to some extent. It is mentioned in *Saint Olaf's Saga*, and in a cave on the Isle of Lewis, the Hebrides, some 60 chessmen were found. They are made out of walrus tooth and are of an unmistakable Nordic nature. Here we



Gaming pieces from Birka. 10<sup>th</sup> century AD. Photo: The Museum of National Antiquities, Sweden.

have the late Viking-Age Scandinavian warrior with his pointed helmet, the sword and triangular shield, remarkably like the shields on the Bayeux tapestry. Chess took over and *Hnefatafl* disappeared during the Middle Ages - apart from in Lappland where the game of *dablo* survived until at least the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

### The Gotlandic Vikings

Curiously enough no gaming sets known from the Viking period have been found on Gotland. This is rather surprising as quite a few graves from that period have been excavated on the island.

However, in two rather interesting graves from the 8<sup>th</sup> century (the Vendel period) men were buried together with their weapons, their dogs (!) and their gambling sets. In the famous graveyard from Ihre in Hellvi parish, dating from Roman Iron Age until the end of the Viking period, games were found only in

‘graves of warriors from the Vendel period’ graves, not in the Viking-Age graves.

Perhaps this could lead you to believe that Gotlandic Vikings could not enjoy life, that they were too hard-working to take the time, even in the Kingdom of Death, to relax with a game of *Hnefatafl*!!

### About the author:

Malin Lindquist is senior curator and responsible for exhibitions at Gotlands Fornsal (The Historical Museum of Gotland). As an archaeologist, she has worked many years, mainly on Gotland. Throughout the years, she has contributed several articles to Viking Heritage Magazine.

Onion – shaped gaming – pieces of bone from Fröjel, Gotland. 10<sup>th</sup> century. Photo: Dan Carlsson

# The Ladby Ship Museum

BY BODIL HOLM SØRENSEN

In Viking Heritage Newsletter 2, 1997, I had the opportunity to write a short presentation of the Ladby ship grave along with the preservation work that had to be done to save the ship. In the following text I would like to present details of a number of results until the present.

## New research results

During the time that has passed, an extensive, excellent research project based on the ship grave has been carried out. It is a Ph.D. dissertation made by Anne Christina Sørensen, presently under publication, entitled "*Ladby. A Danish Ship-Grave from the Viking Age*".

The results of the dissertation are numerous, for instance it has established that the find contains more fragments of objects than had been assumed up to now. A number of previously unobserved pre-historical artefact types, such as some very distinguished knives, have appeared. X-ray photography of the grave goods has unveiled that many of the iron objects have been decorated with inlays of other metals and it has been proven that the grave contained a wooden bucket as was the case with some other very rich graves (Oseberg, Søllestad on Fyn). Finally, accelerator dating has made it possible to get closer to dating the burial. This is of

great importance, as the grave goods in some cases consisted of "antiquities" which could not be used in dating the funeral itself. The antiquities could be either goods from plundering or those acquired in an honest way and inherited.

Among the many exciting new observations are some that speculate on whether plundering has taken place. For instance Anne Christina Sørensen has been able to prove that a large part of the grave goods has been removed from the actual grave whereupon they were broken to pieces and the smallest parts of them shovelled back into the hole.

This brutal ravaging corresponds to what is known from other big ship graves and everywhere the scenarios indicate that it is a case of power manifestations, not moving of a beloved dead to a Christian grave nor a simple grave plundering.

## Ship-building – small and somewhat bigger

In 1997 a boat-builder, Vibeke Bischoff, made a cardboard model of the Ladby ship in the scale of 1:10, which was seen to be preparation for a wooden model also in the scale of 1:10 and, in the long run, a "real" full-size copy.

The wooden model has been a part of the museum's exhibition for a long time, where it illustrates in a fantastic way what the ship looked like in its days of

prosperity. The colours of the upper plankings are based on the yellow and blue colour fragments that were found during the investigation in combination with what else is known about the colouring of ships from this period. The sail has stripes in the same colour.

The museum has also been involved in another entirely different boat project in which we have helped seek information in connection with a local carpenter who was building a so-called *esping*. A carpenter named Arne Jensen is interested in old craft traditions and he wanted to try to build an *esping*. He asked the Ladby Ship Museum to help him to find literature and contact people with knowledge of this boat type. No sooner said than done; in early summer Arne Jensen hollowed out and stretched out his boat, with good help from a team of volunteers. The builder says that the result is somewhere between his wildest expectations and worst forebodings. The hollowing and stretching went very well and now we consider this a great pioneer work that has yielded a lot of useful experience and generated several specific questions. When these have been answered we will start work with *esping* no. 2 (and no. 3?) under the museum's auspices. Arne Jensen will lead the work together with a team of enthusiastic volunteers.

## The protection of the grave – a successful project

The problems with damp that threatened to destroy the ship grave have now been eliminated thanks to the radical rescue work that we were about to begin when I wrote my last article. The work was carried out almost without problems. When I write almost it is because there was one period when we really had challenges of a special calibre. The first time was when the drill ran into a very large stone (a purely geological phenomenon that was also noticed in other places in the area). The steerable drill was to be led underneath the stones and further on underneath the imprint of the ship. We were successful!

The next time was when the ground under the ship proved to consist of silt. Due to that the personnel could dig further in underneath the grave in fairly



*The model has arrived at the Ladby Ship Museum and the boat-builder Vibeke Bischoff (to the right) is telling about the huge reconstruction task. Photo Eigil Nikolajsen, Ladby Ship Museum.*

short stages. Even this was a success. Now we have a low inspection cellar beneath the whole ship-museum and a ship grave without moisture problems. Here I must mention that we found nothing interesting, from an archaeological point of view, neither when we excavated in the test area next to the mound nor underneath the ship.

**Ways of spreading information**

We have many different ways of spreading information at the museum. Some of them are directed towards school children while others are aimed at the general public. One of the new features was a Viking market, that took place on August 11–12, 2001, where the actors were “Odins Vi” – a Viking group. As the name implies they have their homes in Odense, but are connected with the Ladby Ship museum.

With the Viking market an old dream came true, in that we have felt a need to show more aspects of the Viking Age than the ship grave and the museum. This had to be done in a way that could be understood by everyone, no matter age or nationality.

Odins Vi has a wide range of craftsmen at its disposal: mail-makers, blacksmiths, silversmiths, fur traders, basket-makers and others, and with their enthusiasm and serious approach to the period, we felt that the task was in good hands. This proved to be true: There was good trading at the marketplace and the guests stayed for a long time. The public was very inquisitive; many wanted to know more about the



*The thrilling process, where the esping is stretched out over the glowing charcoal, is in full process. Arne Jensen has his back towards the camera. Photo Bodil Holm Sørensen, Ladby Ship Museum.*

tents and the beautiful clothes. The typical visitor looked at the marketplace, perhaps bought something, went to the ship grave after that, and then returned to the marketplace to sample some food and drink.

In the near future we hope to be able to complete the plans for the reconstruction of a Viking house on “Bytoften” in Langeskov Kommune (about 15 kilometres south of Ladby) and to find the proper financing to realise the plans. During archaeological investigations a

couple of years ago, building remains were found that, including periods with no finds, extended over a period from the Bronze Age to the Middle Ages. The museum already uses the area for information purposes but we need a house. Partly we have a practical need for accommodation and partly we would really like to be able to give people the special experience it is to see pre-historical buildings arise in three dimensions.

**The future**

Ladby Ship Museum is the youngest department of the Museums of Kerteminde and Environs and to a large extent we are always at beginners’ level. Soon we hope to be able to start preparations for building a new exhibition hall and in this way also solve some of the most urgent locality problems for the archaeological work.



*The drilling has started in the area at the entrance of the ship grave. There a temporary footbridge is placed so that the public has access to the ancient monument during the process. Photo Eigil Nikolajsen, Ladby Ship Museum.*

**About the author**

Bodil Holm Sørensen, Ph.D. in Aarhus, Denmark, 1990 (thesis: *Bride Silver Depots from the Viking Age in Denmark*). Since 1996 she is employed by the Museums of Kerteminde and Environs as director of the Ladby Ship Museum. Her work also includes archaeological commissions for the surrounding districts.

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While the historical veracity of the Icelandic sagas is still subject to intense scholarly debate, recent studies, along with emerging archaeological evidence, cast new light on these millennium-old documents. Increasingly celebrated as world class literature, the works of the saga writers open a window on Viking Age society – not only on its vibrant myths and raging feuds, but on the equally intriguing dimension of pioneer survival. The sagas reveal much about the politics, local customs, and cultural and legal codes, which shaped this Viking Age North Atlantic settlement and steered its development as an essentially peaceful and sometimes egalitarian republic.

Iceland was an island society of Norse settlers with no kings or warlords, no towns or villages. Its rugged volcanos, glaciers and lava deserts loom amid its fertile valleys, and this country is unique in being the only European society whose historical origins are widely known. Our knowledge today of this society comes thanks to the works written down between 1100 and 1300 in Iceland, sources that include histories, laws and sagas, and which together chronicle the medieval state's formation during the Viking period.

“From social-historical and anthropological viewpoints, early Iceland is a fascinating social laboratory,” says Jesse Byock, an archaeologist and professor of Old Norse and Viking history and literature at the University of California at Los Angeles. Byock draws from extensive research into the sagas, as well as state-of-the-art archaeological finds, in his most recent book, *Viking Age Iceland*, (Penguin, 2001). This cutting-edge socio-historical study explores the first centuries of the Old Icelandic Free State in the period from the 10<sup>th</sup> to the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century.

The emphasis in *Viking Age Iceland* is not the sagas' colorful pagan pantheon—the mythical Nordic deities and the accounts of their supernatural intercessions in the lives of kings and commoners. Byock's main interest is the practical everyday existence of Norse and Celtic immigrants eking out a living 1,000 years ago on this remote subarctic island.

This well-written book takes up a wide variety of subjects, including the social fabric, domestic realities, cultural codes, politics and the legal infrastructure, and the mechanisms that defused conflicts among the fiercely independent early Icelanders. What emerges is a picture of a people who had an extraordinary opportunity to shape their own destiny. Essentially, theirs was a successful experiment in proto-democracy with strong egalitarian processes.

Of importance for comparative studies of the Viking Age, Byock's study of this Viking society sheds light on life throughout the medieval north, and he notes that there are significant differences between the island society and the rest of Scandinavia. Here the analysis is skillful, logical and sophisticated, with Byock stressing that Iceland was a decentralized community, a land of farmers and small scale chieftains. While the Icelanders were obsessed with the operation of law, the country was run without a formal law enforcement or an army.

Plumbing the sagas, and weighing the anthropological, literary and legal evidence he supports his conclusion with research in archaeology, law and other disciplines. In *Viking Age Iceland*, Byock has recreated a multifaceted scenario of Viking Age life from the

New  
book!

## Life in the Viking North Research Opens Window on “Otherwise Lost”

BY JUDITH GABRIEL VINJE

settlers' survival strategies to the roles of women, from farming techniques in this harsh environment, to the influence of the conversion and the development of the church. As such, the book is a vivid companion to reading the sagas, shedding light on many of the elements in the literature, particularly the legal and political aspects of early Icelandic society.

Byock first focused on the topic of feuds in an earlier book, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga*, (University of California Press, 1982) He also wrote *Medieval Iceland: Sagas, Society and Power*, (University of California Press, 1988). Both books are widely used as standard texts in universities throughout the world, from Japan to Russia. But

*Viking Age Iceland* goes further than the previous works, exploring not just how the society came into being but how the people actually lived.

The result is a book brimming with details about everyday life on the isolated island, that not only looks at the social order but also considers the challenges presented by the unusual ecology. We learn what the Icelanders ate, how they built their homes and fashioned their latrines. With a shortage of good building wood for ships or houses in a land rapidly shorn of its native supply, the new immigrants turned to driftwood, and primarily to the soil itself, constructing sod and turf dwellings. Drawings and discussions of turf construction are included

in *Viking Age Iceland*, along with maps illustrating sailing routes and landing sites. There are also extremely helpful illustrations of environmental elements such as patterns of fallout from volcanic eruptions to the range of drift ice, and factors which give a geographic focus to early Icelandic settlement and early social development.

Byock brings several disciplines to his work, crossing the boundaries between history, literature, law, and archaeology. A member of the UCLA's Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, his earlier work on bone diseases in the Viking period led him to a study of the

### VIKING AGE ICELAND

by Jesse L. Byock

London and New York:  
Penguin Books. 2001,  
448 pp.

The author Jesse L. Byock, here in Iceland.

# North Atlantic Window to the World



warrior bard Egil, the son of Bald Grim. (“Egil’s Bones,” *Scientific American*, Jan. 1995). The work has developed into an on-going dig in Iceland’s Mosfell Valley, where Byock has found evidence of an entire Viking Age valley system, a series of early habitations that were engulfed beneath landslides and wind/water-borne soils around the year 1000. Byock and his team return to the site each summer.

And while archaeology is, of course, a major source of data about Viking Age life, it cannot tell narrative stories. “It only records what archaeologists find preserved and can interpret. The history of the Viking Age and later medieval north is fortunate to have the sagas to flesh out the rich archaeological finds,” Byock said. Without believing that the sagas provide strict historical fact, he finds that the sagas offer “a wonderfully useful window into a functioning yet otherwise lost world.” They offer valuable clues about the underlying structures and cultural codes of the Icelanders, and this careful usage of the sources is what has allowed Byock to explore how Iceland’s Viking Age social order came into being and how it functioned.

Staking out a position that the sagas are neither historical fact nor complete fiction, Byock writes: “The family sagas are a register of the basic values of medieval Iceland’s conservative rural society, yet since the mid twentieth century historians and social scientists have shied away from using them as sources.” In *Viking Age Iceland*, he often turns to anthropology, weighing in an even-handed manner the “series of theoretical obstacles against historical analysis” raised in saga studies debates, and which still inhibit “innovative kinds of socio-literary and socio-historical analysis which could deepen the study of both saga and history.” He adds, “Scholars have had difficulty in utilizing these narratives for social and historical

analysis. Not factual history, the sagas are stories by a medieval people about themselves. In many ways, they are rich ethnographic documentation....The sagas are one of the world’s great literatures and a knowledge of their social context increases our appreciation of their achievement.”

To achieve that, Byock offers much fresh material, drawing on episodes that earlier scholars eschewed, such as *Vápnfirþinga saga* (*The Saga of the People of Weapon’s Fjord*) and *Eyrbyggja saga*. Byock explains that insights he has drawn from these little used sources

have changed the way he looks at the better known sagas. He also uses the so-called family sagas, which cover everyday issues confronting Icelandic farmers and their chieftains, from land ownership to stolen hay.

Byock brings to his analysis of society and saga a deep knowledge of Old Norse. He has translated several sagas, *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, the mythic-legendary epic about ancient heroes and warrior queens of Denmark and Sweden. This new translation with Penguin (1998) makes this important Norse version of *Beowulf* readily accessible in the English-speaking world. He has also translated *The Saga of the Volsungs: The Norse Epic of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer*, one of the great works of world literature that is highly instructive as to ancient Scandinavian custom and moral codes.

From the saga accounts to the fallout of volcanic eruptions, *Viking Age Iceland* contains vivid accounts of Viking life. Written in a manner that is both approachable and fascinating, it will surely become essential reading for those interested in the Viking period.

For the larger study of western Europe and early societies in general, this new book will open up the sagas and other Norse sources about life in the Viking north Atlantic to the broader appreciation they have long deserved.





*ET CEDIDERUNT QUI ERANT CUM HAROLDO And those who were with Harold fell*

# The Bayeux Tapestry

BY FLORIAN W. HUBER

**More than 900 years have passed since the Bayeux Tapestry was made - this unique cultural and historical monument featuring the series of events in England and Normandy which led up to the invasion by William the Conqueror in 1066 and culminating with the description of the famous Battle of Hastings. The Bayeux Tapestry gives us detailed impressions and information about human life in the late Viking Age.**

## The material

The Bayeux Tapestry, a pictorial hanging of linen, is a little over 230 feet (70 m) long and about 20 inches (50 cm) wide. It is obvious that it once was even longer, because the border running above and below it is intact at the left end, but missing on the right where the material has been torn. The long strip of linen is made up of

eight bands sewn together.

The embroidery is sewn with two-ply wool yarn; the main stitches used are stem stitch and laid-and-couched work. All the outlines and the beautiful inch-high letters (Latin) of the inscriptions are sewn in stem stitch. Perhaps the use of these humble materials has enabled this work of art to survive while so much other contemporary handicraft, adorned with pearls and precious stones and worked in gold thread, has perished through warfare and looting.

## The colours

Today we can distinguish eight colours or shades in the wool used. The five main colours are terracotta, blue-green, light-green, yellow-brown and greyish-blue. Yellow, dark green and very dark blue, which can almost appear black, are also used. Where there should be skin colour, the linen is left bare. How much the original colours have faded, or otherwise changed, is not possible to ascertain. Despite the rough treatment and the unsatisfactory storage of the tapestry through the centuries and not least thanks to the excellent restoration work and display, the colours remain surprisingly bright and clear today.

## Who made the tapestry and where?

In its entire style and technique, the Bayeux Tapestry closely resembles other pictorial

productions from the later half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. But who was responsible for producing it and where was it made? It is quite certain that the tapestry was made by women, and the names of several women of that time who were renowned for their handicraft are known, for instance, Edith, the wife of Edwarth the Confessor. But in any case, this question is still not to be answered.

Where was the Bayeux Tapestry produced? Today, most researchers say in England, and they base their assumption on several facts. At that time there was a renowned school for decorative embroidery in Canterbury, the county town of Kent. The style and the technique of the hanging also points in the direction of that school. Secondly, it has been established that the details of a number of scenes are clearly inspired by illustrations in Anglo-Saxon illuminated manuscripts from the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries and that the vivid and stirring character of the many scenes, as a whole, bears the stamp of Anglo-Saxon tradition more than any other.

While it is likely that the embroidery was made by women, there is no doubt that the design was made by a man. The detailed representations of military equipment, fiery war-horses and extremely realistic battle scenes dispel any doubt. Presumably the entire hanging was designed by one man, for in spite of the wealth of variety in

content, there is a striking homogeneity in the entire pattern of the tapestry.

### Comparative Objects

Woven or embroidered figured hangings narrating heroic deeds in the sagas, or reproducing well-known religious subjects, were quite common even in pre-Viking times. Festive halls were decked with hangings, as was already related in the 8th century saga about Beowulf.

At Oseberg in Norway a ship burial find from Viking times, about 850 AD, indicates that the woman's burial chamber had been decorated with figured hangings of which some fragments still remained.

German and French narrative hangings from the 11th and 12th centuries are known, but on the whole very few, mostly fragments, have survived.

### The content of the tapestry

The series of incidents depicted in the Bayeux Tapestry, and recounted in Latin in summary texts on it, took place in England and in the French Duchy of Normandy. They occurred in the years 1064-1066, when Svend Estridsen reigned in Denmark and Harald Hardrada in Norway.

The main persons are the English Earl and later King, Harald Godwinson and the Norman duke William, called "the Bastard" on account of his illegitimate birth, and later "the Conqueror" after his conquest of England. Its main theme is William's



*HIC NAVIS ANGLICA VENIT IN TERRAM WILLEMI DUCIS*  
Here an English ship came to Duke William's country

invasion of England in 1066 with its culmination in the depiction of the Battle of Hastings on October 14 the same year. A third person who appears several times is William's half-brother, Bishop Odo of Bayeux. Modern researchers are of the opinion that it was Bishop Odo who had the tapestry made to adorn his new cathedral, consecrated in 1077.

Figured hangings like the Bayeux Tapestry would have been accessible to ordinary people, at any rate on certain occasions; thus being used in much the same way as medieval frescoes, not only to decorate a church interior, but also to tell an edifying story to the many illiterate people of those times.

The reason the Bayeux Tapestry occupies a quite unique position among pictorial hangings of the period is partly that it is so large and so well-preserved, and partly that it depicts a series of historical events well-known from literature, which is possible to confirm, and indeed, in some cases, to supplement. The invaluable significance of the tapestry for cultural history lies, among other things, in its vivid and detailed representation – though often stylised and sometimes almost naive – of a number of features of both daily life and warfare.

Today, the tapestry can be admired in the Museum of Bayeux, France.

This article is just a very short introduction to the extensive subject of the tapestry, for more information take a look at the following books:

*David C. Douglas:* William the Conqueror. London 1964

*Wolfgang Grape:* The Bayeux Tapestry. Munich 1994

*Sten Körner:* The Battle of Hastings, England and Europe, 1035-1066. Lund 1964

*Mogens Rud:* Der Teppich von Bayeux. Kopenhagen 1996 (also available in English, Danish, Swedish and French)

*Frank Stenton (editor):* The Bayeux Tapestry. London 1965

*David M. Wilson:* The Bayeux Tapestry. London 1985

## Li grave-field at Fjärås Bräcka, Sweden

Li grave-field, dating from the Iron Age to the Viking Age, is one of the finest of its kind on the West Coast of Sweden, see photo on the front page of this issue.

Here the visitors are able to see 127 bauta stones (uncut memorial stones without inscriptions), 4 burial mounds, 26 round stone circles and 13 ship barrows. The biggest stone, called *The Frode stone* is 4,75 m high. Originally it was more than 7 m, but in the 18<sup>th</sup> century it fell down and was broken. The Frode stone has, according to a legend, got its name from a Danish Saga-King, Frode Fredegode, who is supposed to be buried here.

The grave-field is situated on the edge of a majestic moraine ridge, Fjärås Bräcka, one of Halland's most unusual natural formations. In ancient times, the ridge was an important route and link between the lake Lygnern and the sea.

In the northern part of Fjärås Bräcka's west slope the remains of a Viking-Age settlement have been found. The Bräcka ridge was probably stripped of its forests as early as the Iron Age. Until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the countryside was predominantly open heather moors, fields and meadowlands.

The Fjärås Bräcka outdoor museum is located on the Bräcka ridge. Information boards and a nature trail provide visitors with an in-depth picture of the wildlife and culture of the area.

### About the author:

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# DESTINATION VIKING

BY GEIR SØR-REIME

Details of the new initiative called Destination Viking have already been published in the Viking Heritage Magazine twice (Nos. 3/00 and 2/01). We are now actively seeking partners across the North European area to join in the new project. The new initiative incorporates a number of sub-projects and sub-themes. Even different funding sources are involved.

A separate project, although linked to the main project through co-operation agreements will be a Socrates-funded (EU's funding for school activities) project focusing on the use of Viking villages in an educational setting – "teaching Vikings the Viking way".

The main project is meant to be co-funded by the Interreg IIIB programmes in the Baltic Sea, the North Sea, Northwest Europe and the Northern Periphery.

There will be a number of distinct, area-specific issues covered by each of these sub-projects. In addition, there will be a large number of joint activities. The running of the whole Destination Viking project will be co-ordinated by a joint board, although each of the Interreg IIIB projects will be autonomous.

The joint activities will include:

- continued development of a Viking-related web-site
- continued publication of the Viking Heritage Magazine
- a new, enlarged guide-book to Viking attractions, "Follow the Vikings"
- a complete marketing "pack" for marketing Destination Viking
- joint courses and conferences to improve quality and further networking.

These joint activities will, of course, make up a considerable part of the project, but the larger part of the funding will be used towards destination

development and destination improvements. This is very similar to what was done in the now-completed North Sea Viking Legacy and BALDER/Via Viking projects, funded by the Interreg IIC programmes (in the North Sea and the Baltic Sea, respectively).

In Destination Viking we will focus mainly on the maritime aspects of the Viking legacy in our site development and



**DESTINATION  
VIKING  
NORTH SEA**

**DESTINATION  
VIKING  
BALTIC SEA**

improvement programme. The Vikings as seafarers, ship builders, port builders and traders will be particularly emphasized.

Within each geographical region, the emphasis could vary a bit. For instance, the Northern Periphery and North Sea sub-projects could co-operate on activities linked to the famous Voyage of Ottar, from Northern Russia to Haithabu and then over to England. Similarly, the adventures of king Olav Tryggvason could be the theme of a joint Baltic and North Sea co-operation, and of course St. Olof (Olav Haraldsson) would be a suitable theme for a similar project.

The Viking raids, settlements and take-over (permanently or temporarily) of areas along the southern shores of the North Sea and the Channel, along with

the Danish rule in larger parts of England could be another theme, as could the Norse activities into the Irish Sea through the Orkneys and Shetlands, in Ireland, the Isle of Man and the Western Isles.

The Destination Viking project will be open for all actors on the Viking scene:

- museums
- visitor centres
- authorities and others managing and doing presentation work at Viking sites
- Viking villages
- Viking re-enactment groups
- fighting groups

The funding of the Interreg IIIB projects will require 50% partner funding and 50% EU-funding. Probably, around 25% of the total budget will go towards joint activities like publishing the magazine, maintaining the web-site, organising conferences etc. (In the current North Sea Viking Legacy project, 16.7% of the total budget went towards such costs, which proved too low).

Partner meetings on national or regional level will now be arranged throughout the eligible area. At these meetings, partner contributions and details of

the project programme will be discussed and settled. Applications for Interreg IIIB funding are expected early next year.

Anyone interested in participating in any of the planned activities should contact the project co-ordinator, Mr. Geir Sør-Reime at Rogaland County Council immediately.

E-mail address is [gsr@rfk.rogaland-f.kommune.no](mailto:gsr@rfk.rogaland-f.kommune.no) and phone is +47 51 51 68 55 (or mobile +47 918 84 190) and fax +47 51 51 66 74.

# Protecting the Viking Heritage!

BY CHRISTIAN RUNEBY

The sensational find of an enormous silver hoard at the location of a Viking-Age farm at Spillings on Gotland has once again put the focus on the fact that there are exceptional archaeological artefacts still hidden in the cultivated fields on Gotland. In the fields beside these Viking-Age treasures, ploughed-over Bronze-Age cairns, astonishingly well-preserved bone material from Stone-Age settlements and much more are also found.

The Viking hoards form an important scientific source for understanding daily life on a Viking farm and the society in general. Internationally they are also an important material for numismatic research since the majority of all English and German Viking-Age coins found until today are from Gotlandic Viking-Age treasures. The hoards can clarify the picture of the international monetary system at the time.

How we can best work in and preserve these archaeological sites is not completely obvious since threats remain despite the many good possibilities and methods.

Protection of the Swedish cultural heritage has a long history. As early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century the first act for the protection of ancient monuments and sites was declared. At that time the monuments were considered royal property. Today the protection has developed into a law, which ensures public access to the cultural heritage of Sweden; history is a part of every citizen's common right. The Cultural Heritage Act very clearly states that it is a joint responsibility for authorities, enterprises and individuals alike to protect our ancient monuments and sites. Damaging these environments is forbidden and only in exceptional cases can permission be given for archaeological excavations due to land exploitation or for scientific purposes. The goal is a protected and accessible historic landscape. However this is not uncomplicated. Protection must be co-



*The excavation of the Spillings' silver hoard, Gotland, in 1999. Photo Dan Carlsson.*

ordinated with other interests of society and the right of common access also means that everybody who visits the monuments and sites must respect their protection.

The Gotlandic Viking Age has left an enormous, rich material. A small amount has been excavated but our knowledge of Viking-Age society on Gotland is still very incomplete. One reason for this is that the Viking-Age settlements are very often hidden under present-day habitation or in the agricultural landscape of today. Many of the Viking farms, of which there were an estimated 1500 on Gotland, are situated in the cultivated fields of the present day farms. It is inevitable that the ongoing farming activity in one way or another damages the underlying archaeological remains.

Therefore identifying and defining the

borders of these Viking settlements is an important archaeological task on Gotland, in order to better protect them. Many different methods and sources are used in this work: historical maps, archaeological and landscape inventories, geological and chemical analyses and, of course, the use of metal detectors. The metal detector is an important archaeological tool but has also proven to be a curse and threat to our Viking fortunes as it has been used for illegal treasure hunting. Problems with treasure hunters have been so great, especially on Gotland with its well-known Viking sites, that it has been necessary to prohibit all private use of metal detectors in Sweden.

In the future the Gotlandic Viking-Age farms will be able to tell us much more about the way of life of the Vikings and their society. Therefore it is very important that we protect these archaeological remains against the threats of plundering and destruction in every way we can.

## About the author

Christian Runeby is an archaeologist working at the County Administration of Gotland, Sweden, as a Deputy Director of Monuments and Sites. The County Administration is responsible for the monitoring and maintenance of the archaeological sites on the island.  
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*Some pieces of the Spillings' silver hoard are found. Photo Dan Carlsson.*

New  
book!

# The Nine Worlds: A Dictionary of Norse Mythology

BY DOUGLAS "DAG" ROSSMAN

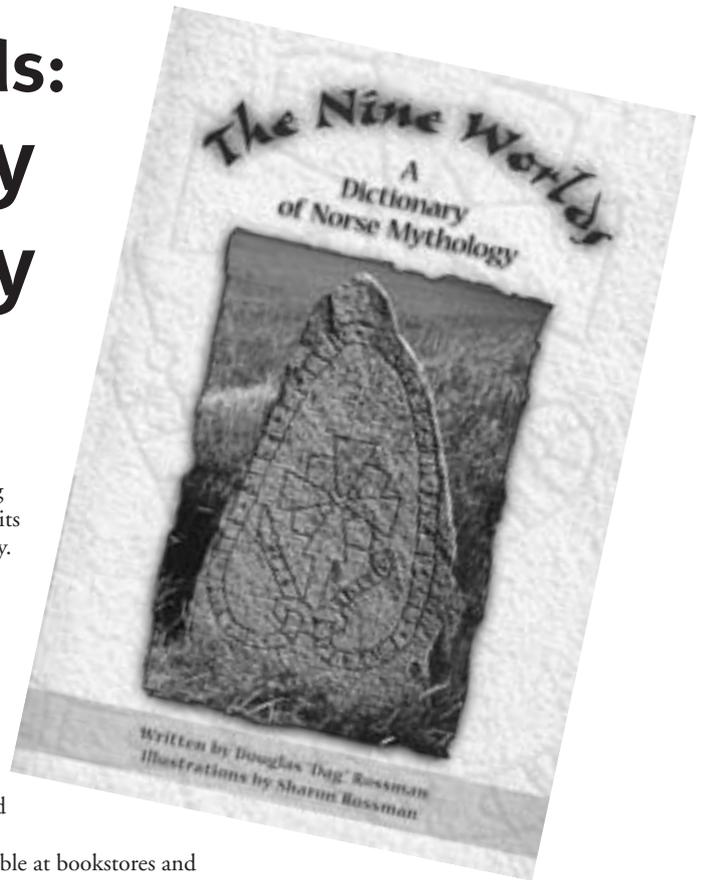
In *The Nine Worlds: A Dictionary of Norse Mythology*, author Douglas "Dag" Rossman provides readers with an annotated list of the principal mythological beings, places, and magical implements mentioned in the Eddas - tales of Viking Age Scandinavia. But *The Nine Worlds* is more than a handy reference book, for its thoughtful preface places Norse mythology in a context we can understand today. In it, Rossman explains, in fascinating detail, the Viking-age belief system.

"By exploring these myths," Rossman asserts, "we will come to better understand our ancestors and, hopefully, ourselves." Rossman's perspective on the Norse myths is "not that of a scholar of mythology, but rather that of a storyteller who has been attracted to power, the tragedy, and, yes, the humour of the Norse myths"

Known for his passionate retellings of Norse myths and Viking tales, "Dag" Rossman is a gifted storyteller who shares a passion for Norse mythology with his wife Sharon, an artist. A dozen of Sharon Rossman's detailed pen-and-ink illustrations illuminate the text of *The Nine Worlds*.

*The Nine Worlds: A Dictionary of Norse Mythology* (\$8.95, paperback) is available at bookstores and Scandinavian gift stores in the United States, or directly from Skandisk, Inc., 6667 West Old Shakopee Road, Suite 109, Bloomington, Minnesota, 55438.

Telephone: (952) 829-8998 or (800) 468-2424; Fax: (952) 829-8992.



## Viking Discovery. *L'Anse aux Meadows*

Written by Joan Horwood

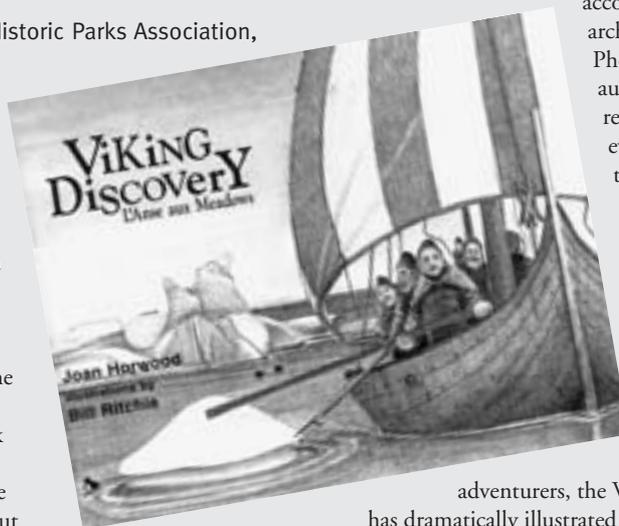
Illustrated by Bill Ritchie

ISBN 0-920502-50-4

Published by Newfoundland Historic Parks Association,  
St. John's, Newfoundland.

The book *Viking Discovery* summarises the mystery and drama surrounding the founding and rediscovery of the legendary Vinland so extensively referred to as "the new colony" in the Viking Sagas.

In the first part of the book Joan Horwood describes the discovery of North America by the Vikings, based upon the Viking Sagas and the sea voyages of Eirik the Red and Bjarni Herjolfsson. From the Sagas, dated back to the twelfth century, we can learn about how Bjarni Herjolfsson first came to accidentally see the new land on his way to Greenland. This discovery led to a number of expeditions, led by the sons of Eirik the Red, to the new world Vinland, named for the grapes they found on their trips.



After having enlightened the reader on the background to the extraordinary discovery in L'Anse aux Meadows, the author accounts for the historians' and archaeologists' search for Vinland.

Photographs of the Viking site at L'Anse aux Meadows enhance the text, which reviews the historical and contemporary events leading up to the discovery on the northern tip of Newfoundland.

Joan Horwood was a Newfoundland historian, author and playwright. With her book, *Viking Discovery*, she wanted to help Canadians, Americans and students of history around the world celebrate the major archaeological discovery of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, North America's first known

settlement by the European

adventurers, the Vikings. Labrador artist, Bill Ritchie, has dramatically illustrated the book, giving it an impact that will attract readers of all ages. His drawings of knarrs and longboats are outstanding. Horwood's account is interesting and concise; an excellent source of information relating to this find.

New  
book!

# Ask Us



Viking Heritage answers your questions.  
Editor: Olle Hoffman  
Send your questions to [viking@hgo.se](mailto:viking@hgo.se)

*Hello,  
I am interested in getting a Viking wedding band that is essentially interlaced serpents or snakes, but the craftsman was unable to tell me what their significance was in Norse folklore. Could you tell me or suggest a website to research this?*

Hello,  
Thanks for your e-mail. Art for its own sake and in our present meaning hardly existed during the Viking Age. On the contrary, a longing for beauty has been expressed in the line-patterns and the ornamentation of utility objects. The pictures and the patterns probably had a magical meaning, but many pictures have been identified as illustrations to myths and sagas that apparently were known to the public of that time, for instance the sagas about Hild, Völund and Sigurd Fafnesbane (the Dragonslayer).

Perhaps you can find some information at the Viking Answer Lady homepage:  
<http://www.vikinganswerlady.org/>

• • •

*Hello,  
I have a question concerning Vikings. I read on a web site about a week ago that the sons of Vikings used to torture their mothers if they tried to lead them away from Vikings. I can't find the site to show you the exact words, but my teacher wants proof that I didn't write that stuff in a report I did and give her that as an excuse. I would really*

*appreciate any help that you can give me. Thank you very much.*

Hello,  
Thanks for your e-mail. I've never heard about such a scenario that you presented. First we need to remember that there were very, very few men who went away on Viking raids, probably only a few percent of the population. Most of the people in Scandinavia had never even heard about other countries, treasures and new discoveries. The second thing is that the women in Scandinavia during the Viking Age were very much respected and they had a lot of responsibility concerning the family and the house and home. To me it sounds very strange that a son would dare to torture his mother if she tried to lead him away from Vikings. Society would surely not have accepted that.

Do you think that the website with this information was serious? There's a lot of strange information to be found on the Internet.

• • •

*Is there any information available about a Viking called Ragner. Any Viking information will be welcome.*

Hello,  
The Viking I think you're after is **Ragnar Lodbrok**. He was a Danish Viking and a hero in sagas in the Nordic countries. The historical "model" was a jarl at the court of the

Danish king **Hårek** and participated in the Viking plunderings of Paris. He was offered 7000 pounds of silver by Charles, the Bald to leave Paris, and he died soon after his return to Denmark. The connection with the famous Lodbrok brothers that fought against king Ella is barely confirmed historically. An Icelandic saga tells us how Ragnar kills a serpent, protected by his hairy trousers. Many of the sagas and myths from the Volsunga- and the Nibelung circles can be connected to Ragnar.

• • •

*I read somewhere that the Vikings can be traced as far back as the Stone Age. Is that accurate? I would greatly appreciate an answer.*

*Thank you.*

Hello,  
I would not say that the Vikings can be traced back to the Stone Age. Viking is only a name for the extremely few Scandinavians who sailed away from their homelands to other places in Europe, Russia, the Middle East and also North America during a limited period of time (most often we talk about the time between 800-1050 AD).

Scandinavians can of course be traced back to the Stone Age, but Vikings are, as mentioned, only a limited number of Scandinavians at a certain period of time. They were not a separate tribe or people.

**W**olin is a small island situated in the north-western part of Poland where a Viking market was held in July this year. The idea to go there came from one of our friends who is a great Viking enthusiast. He is also a member of a music group called Gny, that plays medieval music. The organisers of the Viking market had invited the band to entertain on Wolin, and the group provided most of the musical entertainment during the market.

We arrived in Wolin early on the opening day when the market was about to start. The Viking tents and market stalls were being raised and modern clothes exchanged for beautiful Viking costumes.

We began by seeking out our friend who had also just arrived, and we found him busy raising Gny's Viking tent together with his friends. We were happy to find that there was room for us in it too because otherwise we would have had to go to a camping place outside the marketplace area.

When the tent was put up the others changed to Viking clothes. We felt a little out of place because we were dressed in our dull, modern clothes. But once again we were lucky and could borrow some spare Viking clothes! This warm welcome



*The two sisters, Liana and Laidi Kirsta, dressed like Vikings. They grew up on Gotland but are now studying in Copenhagen and Stockholm. Drawing by Liana Kirsta.*

their achievements.

In the evening a Viking feast was held with campfires, lots of mead and beer, music, dancing and crazy antics. We sat and talked to some of the Jomsvikings when one of them asked us what we would give him if he performed an "authentic"

Viking strip. First we offered him our friend who we proposed could become his thrall. But the final agreement was that if he performed the strip show one of us two sisters would become his thrall for a week.

In the presence of around 200 Vikings the strip was performed with bravura. To the music, in the firelight and in the centre of the ring of Vikings, the clothes were taken off one by one. At last, a completely naked little Viking was running around in circles to the obvious delight of the audience. For this he got a thrall for one week! Later on that evening one of the other Vikings thought that both of us should become thralls. The payment this time was in form of gifts because nobody dared perform another strip show.

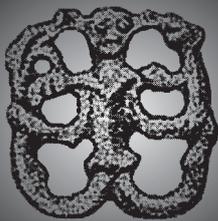
Our first tasks were to give massage to the group and their friends, as well as rolling cigarettes for them. Sometimes we also had to bring them food and beer, but we can hardly say it was a heavy load on our shoulders. Viking life was mostly having a good time in the company of good friends.

In Poland we lived as Vikings, dressed like Vikings, ate Viking food, drank mead

made us feel a part of the Viking group already during the inauguration of the market in the middle of the same day.

According to the Saga of the Jomsvikings, Wolin was the place where the tough Jomsvikings had their quarters called Jomsborg. Nowadays there is a re-enactment Viking group who also calls themselves Jomsvikings, and we started to talk to them the very first day in Poland. The Jomsvikings we met travel around to Viking markets in many different countries and they live like Vikings several months every summer. Their foremost purpose at the markets is to set up different forms of showfights, for example single combats, duels and competition fights. Besides these combats some of them sell weapons, jewellery and other Viking equipment.

A good guess is that the behaviour of these re-enactors is not very different from the original Jomsvikings, since they spend their days eating and drinking mead and beer, trading, and fighting and boasting of



### The "Dragon man"

from Fröjel. This Viking Age brooch was found during the excavations in Fröjel, Gotland, 1999, depicting a human figure fighting two dragons. Drawing: Mikke Brännström

# When the summer sun is shining the love of adventure is great

*Two sisters Liana and Laidi Kirsta have visited two Viking Markets this summer*

and besides that, also had the fascinating experience of sailing in a Viking ship! The speedy Viking ships were a very central part of the Viking culture, and being able to go sailing in one of the proud dragon ships was, of course, one of the highlights of this market.

A big surprise for us was that the market attracted quite a few people who wore Thor's hammers, had shaved heads as well as being dressed in black clothes and boots. These people seemed to be impressed by the re-enactors but, at the same time, were looking for trouble. A

couple of years ago some re-enactors (Vikings) were attacked and even stabbed with knives in Wolin. Therefore the market was very well-guarded this year, both by guards at the entrances and by helicopters watching the area from above in the evenings. The fact that neo-nazis are using Vikings as models says something about their ignorance and how misinformed they are about the Viking culture and way of life.

## **Normandy**

In the 10th century Vikings took control

over a small area in Normandy in the north-western part of France. Using this area as a base, other neighbouring areas were conquered. Thus Normandy became a relatively rich and important centre. Normandy was the Jomvikings' next destination and since the thrall contract was valid for seven days, and we were happy being Vikings, we joined the group.

The Viking market in Normandy was very different from the one in Poland. This was the first year this market had been held and it was not so well organised. There were only a few Vikings and not so many visitors. The market was situated close to the sea, far away from everything, and we felt rather isolated from the rest of the world. This was not so good for the market's participants who depend on their sales, but still this was not a completely negative experience since the Viking mood became more intense and alive.

Our tasks expanded to some cooking and a couple of times we were allowed to take part (passively) in their shows. The organisers in Normandy had not hired any music groups, but instead we could admire reckless performances of two clever fire-eaters.

This tour to the Viking markets increased our knowledge about the Vikings a lot, as most of the re-enactors we talked to knew a lot about the Viking Age, the old sagas and the finds from that time. We got the impression that most people in the markets tried to imitate Vikings as authentically as possible, both in appearance and behaviour. Participating in Viking markets is therefore not only great fun but also an informative experience.

## **Viking blood in the Orkney Islands**

In an earlier issue of Viking Heritage Magazine (1/01) you could read an article by Michael Cunningham, concerning genetic research for Vikings in Britain. The subsequent text relates to this article and accounts for the first results of the study made by geneticists at the University College, London.

After having studied the genetic roots of the population of Orkney, the main author of the study, David Goldstein, found a strong Scandinavian genetic influence among the 71 islanders that were examined. The purpose of the study was to chart the extent to which the Norsemen interbred with the islands' indigenous population after the ninth century Viking invasion of the Celtic Orkney. To uncover Y chromosome heritage, examinations were made on samples from male islanders along with samples from control groups in Ireland, Wales, Norway and the Netherlands.

The study also revealed a significant similarity in the gene patterns passed down the male line as the scientists examined the Celtic credentials of Orkney's males against the Welsh and Irish control groups. It seems as though the populations on the so-called "Celtic fringe" of the British Isles shared Y chromosome characteristics that pre-dated the fifth century Saxon invasion of the Islands. The fact that the geneticists, when comparing the Irish and Welsh samples with those of Basques, discovered that the Basque, Irish and Welsh make up "a Y chromosome community with members more closely related than they are to the European populations", verifies the preceding theory.

When it comes to the women, the X chromosome, the study shows that there is genetic similarity between the British Isles and the rest of Northern Europe. Women enhanced the genetic diversity of the Isles, starting approximately 8,000 years ago.

The genetic research for Vikings in Britain will continue to focus on areas that can be linked historically to specific population groups, among them Jorvik (York).  
From abcNews.com June 2001

# “European Vikings” Avaldsnes Viking Farm, Karmøy,

The people involved with the running and use of the Viking Farm at Avaldsnes are keen to develop wider co-operation and links between themselves and other such sites in Europe. The EU operates several funding schemes that can be used to enable such links and we would like to propose two programmes that we wish to develop.

## Viking History – teaching it the “Viking” way

This proposal would be operated as an EU Socrates Comenius 2.1 project, which encourages the development of teacher training programmes. We suggest that the project run from September 2002 to August 2004, over two academic years. Four partner groups are needed, each from a different European country and with experience in working in an educational centre that teaches or interprets Viking history to schools and to the public.

The first year would involve a series of planning



*Children at Avaldsnes.*



*Children learning how to construct the fencing round the Viking farm at Avaldsnes. This fencing is done in an old traditional way from this part of Norway. Photo: Marit Synnøve Veia*

meetings between the partner groups in order to develop a course that would then be offered to people throughout Europe during the second year. The partner groups in the first planning year would look at their key principles, concepts, methods they use, their experiences, aims and the achievements that have been developed in order to create a course based on their best practices. The course run in the second year would be offered to teachers, museum education officers, personnel working at historic sites etc. The aims would be encourage the teaching of Viking history in a practical and innovative way and to show how to interpret historical sites or collections or re-constructions or history visitor centres



## Norway

in the best way for children and the public in general.

### Viking Youth Programme

This would be organised by the Karmøy Vikingclub and would apply for funding from the EU Youth Programme. Many Viking clubs and re-enactment groups have members within the 15 to 25-year age groups and we would like to create a week long programme bringing together youth groups from different countries with a common interest in Viking history. We suggest that we offer a week in early July 2002 to meet together here in Karmøy.

Anyone interested in either of these programmes or wishing further details should contact:

Paul Mercer  
Pedagogisk senter  
Rådhuset  
4250 Kopervik  
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*Viking girl at Avaldsnes*



## Genetic search for the origin of the Icelanders

Recent studies of mitochondrial DNA suggest that as much as 60% of Iceland's original female population had a British origin. Research based on Y chromosome implies that 80% of the early male settlers were of Scandinavian origin.

Also old traditions, such as the medieval Icelandic codex – The book of Settlement, tells that many of Iceland's first female settlers came from the British Isles. Presumably many of the Scandinavian men first settled in Northern Britain and Ireland where they found Gaelic and British partners. When they moved on to Iceland the whole family migrated. But some of the North Atlantic islands also had small indigenous Gaelic populations when the Scandinavians arrived.

Through similar genetic studies it can also be determined that Scandinavian women were ancestors of some modern British Islanders, e.g. the Orkney Islands 35%, the Western Isles 12%, and on the Isle of Skye 12% of the population had Scandinavian genetic origin.

Mitochondrial DNA is only inherited through the egg and gives us the maternal lineage enabling us to trace the origin of our female ancestors.

From Daily inSight, 2001-03-16  
[www.academicpress.com/insight](http://www.academicpress.com/insight)

## Reconstruction of a Viking-age Landscape in South Sweden

One of Scandinavia's largest reconstructions of a Viking-age landscape is about to take place in Löddeköpinge, in southern Sweden. In charge of this interesting project called *The Viking Times*, is the Viking Foundation association, a non-profit, non-political and non-religious organisation. The main purpose of the project is to spread empirical knowledge of how Scandinavians lived 1000 years ago.

The vision is to construct a main building in modern architecture that will function as a sluice between the present and the Viking Age. In the main building the visitor will be able to follow the production of Viking-age handicraft in a large glassed-in area. Furthermore the building will contain a large exhibition

hall, shops, restaurant and a café.

After having passed through the modern building, a 30-hectare Viking-age landscape will be revealed to the visitor. In an environment of meadows, watercourses, crops and cattle the Viking-age people's living, agriculture, handicraft, religion and pleasures will be exposed.

Löddeköpinge's first Christian church was situated close to the area where the landscape will be reconstructed. Archaeological excavations have shown that the church was a stave church, about 25 metres long. The aim is to start reconstructing the church in the spring of next year.

From Arkeologiska nyheter & fakta – Internet Malmö 2001



## Children's drawings and Viking Plym in museum

When the new magnificent exhibition was opened at the Museum of National Antiquities in Stockholm on June 16, 2001 some colourful drawings and photos were to be found in a nearby room (together with the Birka model). The drawings were ships or rune stones and a result of a drawing competition in all the schools in Täby, a town close to Stockholm. The winners came onboard and sailed with us in sunshine and strong winds.

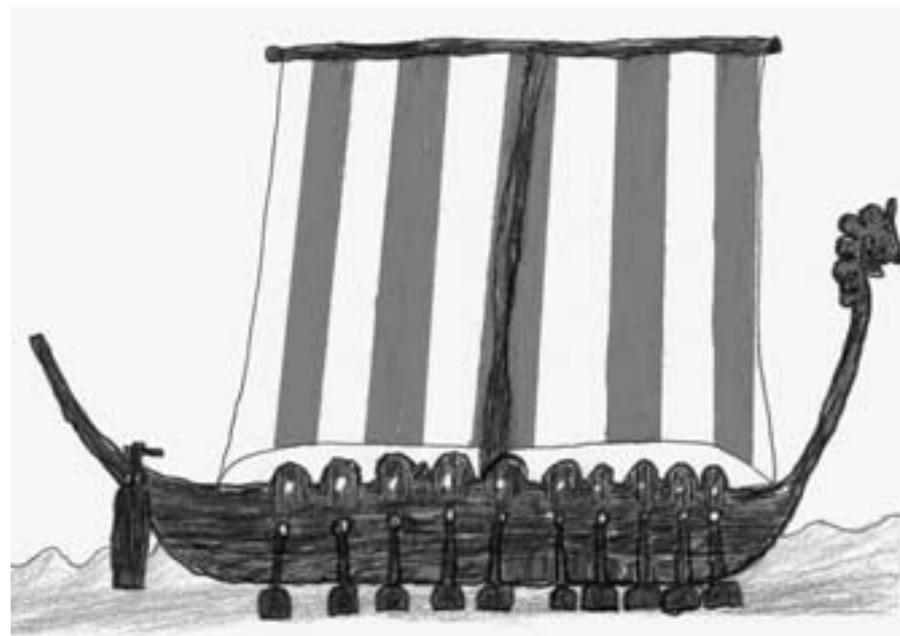
(We hid ourselves so that only the children are seen onboard).

Since this museum has no ship on display we think this was a good chance to show the most important Viking symbol in this form. We are proud that our ship can be seen at this main museum for Viking history and the children helped us to get there.



*The ship Viking Plym in good wind.*

Carl Bråvalla (Norberg)  
Chief Täby Vikinga Skeppslag



*The winning ship drawing.*

## Untouched 8<sup>th</sup> century Viking grave found in Egersund, Norway

What started as a quick clearance for a property development turned out to be a major Viking find in Årstad, south Egersund. What appeared to be a small heap of stones was in fact an untouched 8<sup>th</sup> century Viking grave.

The grave is just over two meters (6.5 feet) long and shows no sign of a funeral pyre. It includes an intact collection of weapons and burial objects such as a sickle, two scythes, a glass pearl and iron nails and rivets. A bronze buckle and several types of textiles complete the impressive discovery. Experts believe that there is a man buried in the grave but they are waiting for the DNA analysis of bone fragments to reveal more about the discovery.

From Aftenposten Interactive, 2001-08-01

## ***New Gotland now in New Zealand***

A group of re-enactors in New Zealand has created a new history group called New Gotland. They want to place themselves in the years between 850–1050 AD and maybe refine that time period within a 50–100 year period.

The main aims of the group are to create a village for educational purposes and "educate the masses that the Norse weren't like the Hollywood creations and did not wear horns on the helmets". They want to break the trend of combat groups in New Zealand and develop a new group of 40% combat and 60% living history. The future village is also to be used for national gatherings of re-enactors.



## Was the Norse God Odin a Russian Cossack?

*Thor Heyerdahl searches the origin of the Æsir gods and the Vikings*

Is it possible that a historical truth exists behind one of the Icelandic Snorre Sturlason's sagas from the 13<sup>th</sup> century? In one of his texts Sturlason states that Odin (God of war and wisdom) and other Norse gods known as the Æsir were originally defied humans that came from the East (Asia).

This summer the world-famous Norwegian explorer and scholar, Thor Heyerdahl, has been leading an archaeological excavation and a research project in southern Russia trying to locate the origins of the Vikings. Heyerdahl is mostly known for his boat and raft reconstructions and ocean expeditions with the vessels Kon-Tiki, Ra, Ra II and Tigris.

The excavation was conducted at the ancient city of Tanais, where the river Don meets the Sea of Azov, northeast of the Crimean peninsula. In ancient times the name Tanais was also used for the river Don. Heyerdahl says that the river in the Icelandic sagas was called the Tana River and maybe that is proof that the name has Germanic rather than Greek roots.

Specialists from Norway, Sweden and Russia have teamed up to excavate a pre-Viking fort at the site. Russian archaeologists have previously found remains of Greek origin at Tanais but they have also reported finds from a culture predating the Greek settlement. These early peoples are believed to have given the Sea of Azov its name. Perhaps there is a connection between the words Azov and Æsir, the latter being the name of one of the two divine families of

Norse gods.

The purpose of Heyerdahl's new excavations is to establish the validity of his theory that the Vikings originally came from this area in southern Russia. He has suggested that the people populating the area



*Odin, God of war. This figurine represents a follower of Odin crowned with animal horns, holding a sword and two spears. Found in Ekhammar in Uppland, Sweden.*

around the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD were the ancestors of the Vikings and perhaps also of the Cossacks, fighting as mercenaries in

the earliest Russian principalities. He further suggests that this people migrated to Scandinavia because the Romans hounded them from southern Russia. There is evidence that the Romans sacked the city of Tanais around 40 BC. The Icelandic saga should then be interpreted as a recollection of these actual historical events.

The model for the God Odin could have been a chieftain who led his people to the Nordic countries in the early centuries AD. It is a well-known fact that the cult of Odin and Æsir gained importance in Scandinavia first during the Viking Age or at least not before the Migration period (5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD). It was the higher social strata of society in particular that venerated the warlike Æsir gods during the Viking Age. The fertility gods, Njord (Nerthus), Frey and Freya probably predated the Æsir gods and were more important among farmers.

Thor Heyerdahl's present ideas will most certainly provoke academic discussions as they usually do. Whether plausible or not, it is important to raise the question of how much archaeology can rely on written sources.

Read more about these thrilling excavations in the next issue of the Viking Heritage Magazine.

By Alexander Andreeff/Viking Heritage

### Sources:

The Times – Giles Whittell & Michael Binyon/BBC – Caroline Wyatt/News24

## The well-known Viking exhibition “Vikings, the North Atlantic Saga”

on display in North America, is presently in the Houston Museum of Natural Science, Houston, Texas until October 14, 2001. The next stop will be at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, California from November 23, 2001 to March 16 2002.

## Viking Viewpoints



## Heritage News



# The New Viking exhibition in Stockholm

## Focusing on the artefact

A new exhibition has opened at the historical museum in Stockholm. The exhibition is called "Vikingar". The subject is, as you can see from the name, the Viking Age. It is the biggest exhibition about Vikings ever set up at the museum. It contains about 4000 Viking-Age artefacts in an area of 900 sq.m. The museum houses one of the largest and most unique collections of Viking-Age artefacts in the world. Only the originals are shown in the exhibition.

The exhibition is set up so that it is more abstract and aesthetic than earlier exhibitions. The museum wants it to be the artefacts, and not just assumptions from archaeologists, that tell you the story. For example there are no reconstructions of houses and graves, but there are finds from them in the displays. The thought and future goal with an abstract exhibition like this is to build "the museum without walls", says the exhibition manager. It is meant to give the visitor more opportunity for his/her own ideas and interpretations. In addition, it has an interactive programme that offers both audio and visual display modules. It is the first museum that can offer this interactive programme for visitors. In the future it will offer multilingual texts in English, German and French.

The Viking Age is a period that can be described as one of transition. The exhibition has been set up so that it provides the visitor with a story about these changes. The story centres around three themes: "Power and Supremacy", "The Farm and the City" and "Pagan and Christianity". Under these three categories there are more general topics such as runic stones, picture stones, silver hoards and artefacts illustrating aspects of everyday life, death and inheritance.

The showroom is divided into three quadrants; one large and two small. The exhibition is of modern design. The displays are encased in glass and steel that



*Viking Age sword. Photo: The Museum of National Antiquities. Sweden.*

provide the visitor with a full range of view. Unfortunately, the lighting is somewhat soft and may cause some viewing difficulty. The tasteful, very modern style of setting up an exhibition is attractive but can sometimes take the artefacts a long way from the observer.

Sometimes the focus on the artefacts makes it difficult to get a clear understanding about the ordinary human aspects of Viking-Age society. Some discussion may still be necessary as to where the first area of a unified Sweden originates. Some researchers suggest that it might be in a different part of Sweden. It would be interesting if the exhibition pointed out this possibility. This would truly allow the visitor more freedom of interpretation. Otherwise, I found the exhibition to be both informative and of interest and recommend it to both young and old.

**Tove Eriksson**  
Archaeologist  
Fröjel Discovery Programme//Gotland University

Back in the old days when we had to read all those scientific reports, archaeological papers and other initiated essays on the Viking era, it could be quite hard, in spite of all this reading, to try to get a glimpse of what the daily life of that time was like.

With no doubt, intricate population curves, proper artefact analyses etc. gave us a lot of help when we were trying to imagine the ancient weekday, but still, important parts of daily life were difficult to grasp!

But times are a-changing, as we all know.

## Viking Age sword found in an attic

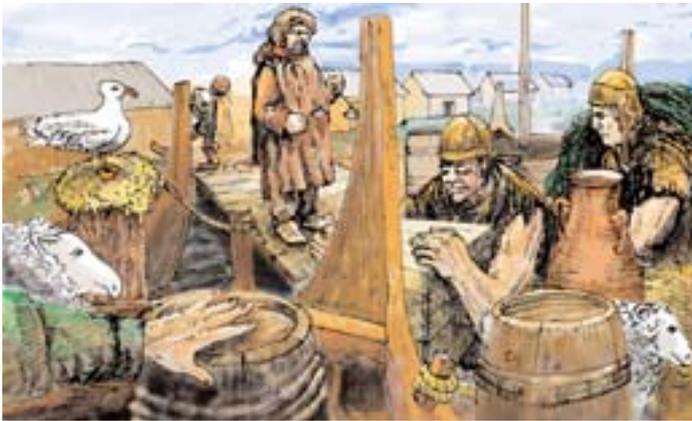
When Eva Eriksson was cleaning the attic in her family home, a farmstead close to the city of Östersund, Sweden, she found an old sword among all rubbish. She took the sword to the County Museum in Östersund, where the antiquaries were overwhelmed at the sight. "It was a great day", says Ove Hemmendorff at the museum.

The sword was made in the Viking Age, making it about one thousand years old. Most likely it was buried in the grave of a wealthy farmer who lived on the farm during the Viking Age. Time marched on and in the 1950s Eva's father, a new young farmer, found the sword when picking stones from a mound in a field. At that time he didn't want anybody to know about his sword finding as he didn't want an archaeological excavation where he was going to start farming. So he put the sword on the attic and it was forgotten until Eva found it.

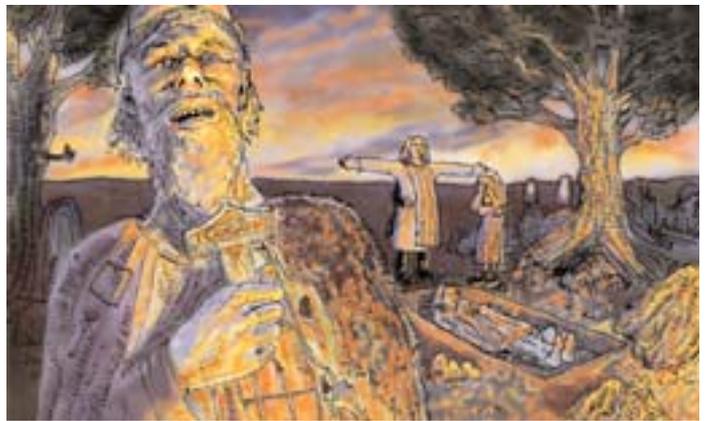
Now the sword will be sent to the Archaeological Research Laboratory of Stockholm University, where it will be preserved.

From Länstidningen Östersund 2001-09-08

# Experience a day with the Vikings in Fröjel – Now on the Internet!



*The port of trade.*



*From the burial scene. Drawings by Sverker Holmqvist*

Therefore the Viking Age can now come down to you via the Web, nice and handy, with hand-drawn colour scenes, tons of text information and Viking music in full stereo! The Viking Age has never been as obvious as it is right now and it is just one click away!

In *Experience a day with the Vikings in Fröjel*, you can follow the young Viking Anund as he strolls around in Fröjel,

looking for a ship to join....

– This time, says Sverker Holmqvist (the creator), we've striven for a more historically correct and education-packed product and therefore we worked as a team with Mia Göransson and Olle Hoffman at Viking Heritage, under the supervision of Dan Carlsson.

*Experience a day with the Vikings in Fröjel* is the most recent release from

Holmqvist Media, the software developing company partly responsible for the last summer's Vikings-meet-the-Web-Craze, *Meadshock*.

Have a look at the web sites:

<http://viking.hgo.se/Frojel/scenes/index.html>

or

<http://frojel.hgo.se/scenes/index.html>

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*Viking Heritage Staff*

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The objectives of the network are:

- To develop and maintain the European Institute of Cultural Routes project.

- To co-operate with schools, universities etc. in the field of education and training in the study of the Vikings.

- To collect information of present Viking history activities, and to distribute information about Vikings and their history.

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