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## Viking Dig Reports



From the remains of five Viking ships in Denmark to the excavation of an ancient rubbish dump in Westray, uncover the finds that have revealed an enormous amount about Viking life.

### Anglesey

In 1992 Mark Redknap, from the National Museum of Wales, was sent some small artefacts from Anglesey. The haul included ninth-century coins and some small lead weights typical of those used by Viking traders. Evidence for the Vikings in Wales is sparse, but a hoard of five exquisite silver arm rings had also been found on Anglesey. The island itself has Scandinavian connections, probably deriving its name, Onguls-ey, from a Viking leader.

Based on this evidence, Mark instigated a geophysical survey of the site where these objects had been found, and discovered a hidden trench. Excavations then began which revealed a ninth-century defensive wall, partly constructed with massive stone blocks and about two metres wide at its base. The question was, what were the inhabitants of this settlement defending themselves against?



Archaeologists uncover some surprising finds ©

In the Welsh Annals Mark found records of Viking raids in the ninth and tenth centuries. Combined with the archaeological clues to a Scandinavian presence, Mark began to suspect these local people might have been under threat from Vikings.

A few seasons into the excavation Mark got a surprise. Two skeletons were found. It looked as if they had been thrown into the ditch - without the care or ceremony one would expect if they had been buried by family and friends. The following year three more skeletons turned up. The position of one, a young male, led Mark to believe his hands had been tied behind his back. It's possible these Welsh victims

of violence were killed by the Vikings.

### Repton

In the ninth century, a group of Danish Vikings set sail for England. For several years the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle describes the journey of this 'Great Army', attacking towns and villages on the way. In 873 the Great Army is said to have travelled to Repton, where it took up quarters for the winter.



The wounds on this warrior's skull suggest he died a violent death ©

Over 20 years ago, Birthe and Martin Biddle uncovered the body of a warrior in the churchyard at Repton. As well as sword, the body had been buried with a small Thor's hammer - the sign of the Viking god Thor, and a boar's tusk. Examination of the bones revealed the man to have been killed in the most brutal way. Two wounds in the skull were probably made by a spear, and marks on the spine suggest he was disembowelled after death. Finally a violent blow to the top of the thigh could easily have removed his genitals, perhaps explaining why the boar's tusk was found between the legs of the skeleton. It was an attempt to make his body complete before his trip to Valhalla, the Viking afterlife.



The warrior was buried with a small Thor's Hammer, a sign of his beliefs ©

The Biddles also excavated a nearby Anglo-Saxon body, and found the remains of at least 249 people. A report from an earlier excavation - in 1686 - claimed to have found a 'humane body nine foot long' surrounded by further skeletons. Might this have been the

body of the Viking leader legendary for his size, Ivar the boneless?

Nearby, in Ingleby, further evidence for the Great Army's presence has been found by archaeologist Julian Richards, of York University. A cluster of burial mounds was excavated in the 1950s - some of which appeared to have been the site of cremations. Goods found with the bodies also appeared to have been through the cremation fires. Sword and buckles, nails and wire embroidery all suggested these had been Viking

cremations.

Could the two groups of people have been part of the Great Army, and if so why did those at Repton bury their dead, but those in Ingleby still practice the pagan ritual of cremation? The Great Army was probably made up of various groups of Vikings - there is no reason why they would all practice the same burial rituals. These two groups of people may have had two different leaders, and joined together for a brief time at Repton.



The face of the Repton warrior, reconstructed from his battered skull ©

## Orkney

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles give the date of the first Viking raid as 793. But were the Vikings in contact with the native population of the British Isles before this date?



Was this bone comb used as an item for trading? ©

In Norway, a Viking woman's grave found at Skei contained a small wooden bucket and ladle. The decoration on the bucket suggests it was made in Northumbria sometime in the eighth century. How did these Anglo-Saxon goods end up in her grave? They might be the spoils of a raid, but it is also possible the goods were traded. Or maybe the woman was an Anglo-Saxon who had travelled to Norway, bringing her Anglo-Saxon goods with her. She may be evidence of more peaceful contact with the Vikings before the traditional beginning of the Viking Age.

More evidence for early contact between the Vikings and native Britons is found on the Northern Isles of Scotland. Combs made of antler are commonplace discoveries on the islands of Orkney. Both the native Pictish and the Vikings made these combs, each group of people apparently using a distinctive style. In their homelands the Vikings tended to use reindeer antler to make combs, while the Picts used their native red deer.



This Northumbrian bucket was found in a Viking grave in Skei ©

Antler expert Lyuba Smirnova travelled to Orkney Museum, Kirkwall, Orkney to take a look at some of the combs discovered in Birsay. Some were Pictish, others Viking. As expected, the Viking combs were made of reindeer antler and most of the Pictish combs were made of red deer. But then Lyuba made an exciting discovery. An earlier theory had suggested that some of the Pictish combs were carved from reindeer antler, and Lyuba believes this is the case. These animals are not found anywhere in the Northern Isles. So where did the Picts get

reindeer antler from? The closest place where reindeer are common is Norway.

Could the Picts who made these combs have bought reindeer antlers from the Vikings? Or did the Vikings make these combs specifically to trade with the Picts? It may be that the Vikings were making contact, trading and not raiding, well before historians had previously thought.

## Kaupang

Not far from Oslo, in Norway, archaeologist Dagfinn Skre and his team have uncovered what he thinks could be the first Viking town. The site lies in a small inlet,



A brooch mould and book clasp, probably stolen from an Anglosaxon monastic book ©

protected from the sea by two small islands. The sheltered location would have allowed sailing ships to travel in, and out, whatever the wind direction, perfect for the seafaring Vikings.

For many years the site has been recognised as a settlement, but Dagfinn has found it far bigger than originally thought. More importantly, he believes there is evidence for permanent buildings. The postholes, traces of stone foundations, and well-built hearths all hint at a town that could survive the cold Norwegian winter. The site might have expanded still further in the summer, incorporating tents erected by traders during the busy season.

Many types of goods passed through the site. The excavations have revealed glass and pottery from the Rhineland and beads from the Orient. Evidence for brooches and glass beads being made were also found, suggesting craftsmen were hard at work alongside the traders. But as well as evidence for goods being bought and sold, some of the artefacts suggested the Vikings had also been raiding.



The archaeologists have to carefully wash and sieve the soil to be sure of spotting all the artefacts ©

There are several metal objects, which Dagfinn does not think the Vikings could have bought legitimately. One appears to have been a book clasp, probably stolen from an Anglo-Saxon

monastic book. It may have been traded, but it's more likely the original owners were forced to give it up.

Along with the evidence for trading, and possibly raiding, the excavation has revealed what Dagfinn believes is a chieftain's house. It seems to have been burnt down. Perhaps this had something to do with the decline of the site, because despite a long legacy of apparently successful trading, Kaupang was eventually abandoned.

## Scar

In 1985 Orkney farmer John Deerness was walking along the beach at Scar when he found some bones sticking out of a cliff. He assumed they were those of a sailor who had died at sea. Nearby he spotted a small round lump of metal, which he took home as a souvenir. A neighbour dismissed it as part of a car battery so he thought no more about it. John died a few years later, without realising the significance of this small lead object.



A whalebone plaque from the Scar burial site ©

Six years later archaeologist Julie Gibson heard about the discovery of the bones at Scar. Thinking it might be an Iron Age burial - something she had never seen before - Julie went to have a closer look at the site. Alongside the bones she found two rusty lumps of iron, which she thought could be boat rivets. Julie paid a visit to John Deerness's widow, and was shown the strange lead object he had found. It turned out to be a Viking lead weight.



The goods found buried at Scar ©

It was late in the year, and by the time the team of rescue archaeologists, led by Magnar Dalland, could reach the site it was already November. The team had to work in drastic weather conditions, with water lapping at their feet, and the daylight fading rapidly. But their efforts were rewarded. They uncovered a Viking Age boat burial. Inside the boat were three skeletons, a male, a female and a child. These people had been buried with grave goods including a brooch, a sword and a whalebone plaque.

These artefacts suggested Scandinavian links, and there was a further clue. Grains of sand found in the caulking used to seal the boat are unlike any found on Orkney, Shetland or the Scottish mainland. Could this boat and the people buried with it have come directly from Norway?

## Roskilde ships

In the 1960s the remains of five Viking ships were found at Skuldelev in the Roskilde Fjord, Denmark. This find revealed an enormous amount about the techniques of Viking ship building. The ships dated to the 11th century and appeared to have been deliberately sunk, to make a blockade in the fjord. They ranged from a small warship to a deep-sea trading ship.



Five Viking boats were found at Roskilde in the 1960s. ©

The Skuldelev ships were clinker built - with planks which overlap one another - a characteristic of Viking shipbuilding. They all had a single mast, and double-ended hulls with curved stems. Analysis of the planks showed that the wood used ranged from Norwegian pine to oak from Ireland. The planks of wood from these ships were preserved and eventually reconstructed in the Roskilde Viking Ship Museum. To learn more about Viking ship building the museum has since built a replica of the small warship, known as Skuldelev 5, using Viking techniques. Following on from this success they are now attempting to build a replica of Skuldelev 2, a 30-metre-long warship.

In the mid-90s, an extension to the museum was built specifically to house these reconstructed Viking ships. It was during the building works for this extension that a whole new excavation began. In the autumn of 1996 the builders encountered ship parts in the soil. Further excavation revealed nine ships. Some of these ships are from the middle ages, but one is certainly a Viking warship. Known as Roskilde 6 it measured some 36m in length - the longest Viking ship ever discovered. The trees used to make the ship were dated using dendrochronology, showing the ship to have been made sometime around AD 1,025. Today the timbers are also going through a lengthy process of conservation, to ensure these



The remains of a Viking ship found at Roskilde ©

ships can join the Skuldelev ships as historical records of the Viking period.

## Tarbat

A few miles from Inverness Martin Carver and a team of archaeologists from the University of York have discovered the site of a possible Viking raid. On the site today is a church which dates from the 12th century, and Martin expected to find a settlement dating from the sixth to eighth centuries. Located on the coast, it would not have been surprising if the site had been turned into a beach market by Norse settlers in the ninth or tenth centuries, like many coastal site in Eastern England.



This smashed sculpture was the clue to a Viking raid on the ancient Tarbat monastery ©

The excavation began under the 12th-century church. Here the team found a large number of burials - not unusual in a church from this era. But strangely, more than three quarters of the skeletons belonged to men. Then, just a short distance from the church, the archaeologists discovered evidence of metalworking, a mill and farm buildings. A self-sufficient community, nearly all male, it seemed the site might have been a monastery.



Julian Richards and archaeologist Martin Carver at the Tarbat dig site ©

A further discovery added more weight to this suggestion. A thin layer of black soil was identified, with small nails, evidence for a fire that had destroyed timber buildings. Hidden within this layer, were large fragments of broken sculpture. The sculpture was covered in beautiful

designs, crosses and inscriptions as clear as if they had just been carved. A monastic community could have produced both the sculpture and the metalwork.

But why was all this exquisite sculpture in pieces? The clean breaks and sharp edges suggested it had been deliberately smashed. The burnt layer could have been the result of buildings burnt to the ground. And some of the skeletons from under the church looked as if they had been struck by swords. Could this have been a Viking attack on a monastery?

## Westray

On the island of Westray in Orkney, an ancient rubbish dump has been excavated by James Barrett of



The side of the excavation trench was littered with sea shells and fish bones - an ancient rubbish dump ©

York University. The harsh weather in Orkney often results in coastal erosion and this dump was spotted when sea shells and bone were seen eroding out of a cliff face near Nether Trenabie.

The site appeared to have been occupied for hundreds of years, from well before the Vikings arrival. The original inhabitants seemed to have been farmers, because their rubbish consisted mainly of the bones of sheep, cattle, pigs or other small mammals. But an abrupt change occurs sometime in the ninth or tenth century, which could be clearly seen in the side of the archaeological trench. The animal bones are replaced by huge quantities of sea shells.





The large number of fish skeletons showed they were an important part of the Viking diet ©

James thinks this change in diet is a clear signal that the Vikings have arrived,

bringing with them their seafaring skills and favourite food. And it seems the Vikings were not just fishing for themselves. The sheer number of fish bones, cut up in a very specific way, suggests the Vikings were drying and salting the fish to preserve it. This would have allowed them to trade it within the Orkney islands, and probably further afield, perhaps even back to their Norwegian homelands.

## Hadstock Church

On St Brice's Day (13 November) 1002 the mass killing of Danes was ordered by the English King Ethelred. It was his reaction to the news that there was a Danish conspiracy to assassinate him. But is there any other evidence that Viking settlers in Britain were subjected to harsh treatment?



A sample of skin was taken for DNA testing - could it really be human skin? ©

The village of Hadstock, Essex, has a local legend which suggests that they might have been. The wooden door of the local church is thought to date back to Saxon times, and like many church doors would have been covered in leather. In 1791 a small piece of what looked like leather was found under the iron fittings of the door. It found its way to the Saffron Walden Museum, where analysis suggested it had a more gruesome origin. A label from 1883 tells the story of the piece of skin, suggesting that it once belonged to a Dane, a sacrilegious Viking, killed for stealing from the church. He was flayed and his skin mounted on the door as a warning.



DNA testing was carried out to finally determine where the skin had come from ©

But was this local legend really true? Ancient DNA expert Alan Cooper of Oxford University decided to put it to the test. He was allowed to remove one tiny part of the ancient skin, no more than one centimetre square. He

took it back to the lab, hoping he would be able to find some surviving DNA in the tiny sample.

Alan did manage to extract identifiable DNA from the sample. But when he compared it with known DNA, the results suggested that the flayed Dane was no more than a grizzly legend after all. The skin, ancient though it was, had once belonged to a cow. It was no more than an ordinary leather covering on Hadstock church door after all.

## Find out more

### Books

*Encyclopaedia of the Viking Age* by John Haywood (Thames & Hudson, 2000)

*Cultural Atlas of the Viking Age* edited by Graham-Campbell et al (Andromeda, 1994)

*Penguin Historical Atlas of the Vikings* by John Haywood (Penguin, 1996). Detailed maps of Viking settlements in Scotland, Ireland, England, Iceland and Normandy.

### Links

**National Museums and Galleries of Wales: Digging for Vikings** - Find out about excavation work at Llanbedrgoch, with site maps and information on the team.

**The Tarbat Discovery Programme** - The programme is a collaborative project between the Tarbat Historic Trust, Highland Council and the University of York. View the discoveries so far and find out how to participate.

**Nova Online: The Vikings** - Build a Viking village, write your name in runes and discover the secret of Norse ships.

**Compass** - Take a tour of some of the British Museum's best artefacts on the web.

**The Smithsonian Institution's Vikings Exhibit** - Commemorating the 1,000-year anniversary of Leif Eriksson's arrival in North America.

### Places to visit

**The Orkney Museum: Tankerness House, Broad Street, Kirkwall, Orkney, Tel: 01856 873191** - Orkney's principal museum is housed in the 16th century merchant laird's house known as Tankerness House. Displays tell the history of the islands over the past 5,000 years with exhibits of international importance from the Stone, Bronze and Iron ages.

**The British Museum** - Important collections of Viking material, as well as displays relating to religions and beliefs from all over the world.

**Bede's World** - Provides a fascinating insight into Christian life in Anglo-Saxon England just before the Viking Age.

**Jorvik Centre** - Explores many aspects of daily life in Viking York in the tenth century.

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