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Record: 1

Title: ICELANDIC.

Authors: Hreiðarsdóttir, Elín

Source: Ornament. 2010, Vol. 33 Issue 5, p64-67. 4p. 6 Color Photographs.

Document Type: Article

Subject Terms: *BEADS
*VIKING antiquities
*VIKING decoration & ornament
*GLASS beads

Geographic Terms: ICELAND

Abstract: The article offers information on the Viking age beads. The beads were discovered in Iceland, in Viking settlements that existed around A.D. 870 until around the half of the 11th century. Majority of the beads were recovered from burial sites with a few coming from settlements. A lot of the beads were made up of glass with the few inclusions of amber and various mineral stones. However, it notes that there was no evidence that the beads were indigenous to the Vikings, the blown and drawn beads were suspected to come from the eastern Mediterranean.

Full Text Word Count: 2538

ISSN: 0148-3897

Accession Number: 53995895

Persistent link to this record <https://proxy.lib.ohio-state.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=53995895&site=ehost-live>
(Permalink):

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Database: Academic Search Premier

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Viking Age Beads

Their Origin and Characteristics

Bead usage has often been, and is still, connected to religious or spiritual practices.

Iceland is located in the North-Atlantic, on the Mid-Atlantic ridge, lying between the northern part of Norway and Newfoundland. It was settled in the late ninth century largely by people from Norway, but also from the British Isles as well as Sweden and Denmark.

The Icelandic Viking age can be dated from the time of settlement, around A.D. 870, until the second half of the eleventh century. Archaeological excavations of about three hundred burials and over thirty settlements from this period in Iceland reveal a material culture with close similarities to contemporary settlements in Scandinavia. From these excavations beads have only recently been investigated in any detail, despite being one of the largest categories of finds.

As of 2006 a little under twelve hundred beads from the Viking age had been identified in Iceland. The majority of the beads (eighty-six percent) come from heathen burials across the country. The remainder comes from settlement sites or are stray finds. The majority (eighty-eight percent) of the Icelandic collection is glass beads but other common materials include amber and various mineral stones.

No indication has been found that glass bead production ever took place in Iceland and therefore it is most likely that most if not all of these beads were imported. The glass bead collection from Viking age Iceland consists mostly of blown, drawn and wound beads (decorated and undecorated). The most common are monochrome blown and drawn beads. Many of the blown beads are segmented and rather long while the drawn beads are usually very short and small, on average less than four millimeters in diameter. Most of these beads came from heathen burials and from their association with other types of beads it can be assumed that necklaces with a large quantity of these smaller and simple beads were commonly paired with a few larger, decorated beads from different materials. These smaller beads are commonly found in blue and green tones, but blown beads with silver and gold foil seem to have been fairly popular as well. Generally it is not considered that the blown and drawn beads were produced in Scandinavia in the Viking age so it is most likely that they were originally imported from much further away, perhaps from the eastern Mediterranean.

Simple wound beads were not uncommon in Viking age Iceland. Most of them are in blue and green colors and were probably largely made and imported from Scandinavia.

One of the more colorful group of beads found in Iceland are the wound and decorated beads. The decoration of these beads can be divided into three basic motifs: simple line décor, zig-zag line

décor and sun/eye-décor. These motifs appear on their own or together on most of the decorated, wound glass beads found in Iceland. Such beads have been found in various colors but most common are beads in a dark purple body that looks black to the naked eye. Many of the decorated beads might have been produced in Scandinavia although a fair proportion is considered to be imported (though probably through Scandinavia) from various distant locations. A fairly common bead of decorated, wound type is, for example, a black bead (or dark purple) with white zig-zag and eye décor, which is considered to have been made in western Turkistan.

A few mosaic beads from the Viking age have been found in Iceland. These beads are all large and colorful but other than that they do not have a lot in common. They are of different types and the same type has been found only twice, in two separate cases. Therefore these beads were probably made in many different trade centers although many of them might have been made in Western Europe.

Even if the majority of the Viking age beads found in Iceland are made of glass, the material of the bead collection is quite versatile, ranging from various stones, such as rock crystal, chalcedony, soapstone, and gabbro, to amber, bone and jet.

Viking age beads from stone, found in Iceland, can be divided into two categories. On the one hand there are the very well made, finely polished beads from semiprecious stones, usually rock crystal and chalcedony. These beads are usually either prismatic or globular in shape and most of them bear witness to a developed and fine craftsmanship. They are undoubtedly imported, probably from as far as India or Iran. The other major stone bead group is a small group of simple beads, most commonly made from local Icelandic stone that were probably produced domestically. The craftsmanship of these beads is usually not as developed or fine and most of them do not have any decorative carving. Most of the beads that were produced locally come from settlements as they are a rare find in burials. This is an interesting fact since imported stone beads are not uncommon in burials. This difference seems to reflect some distinction in value between the imported and domestic stone beads. It is possible that imported beads were considered a more prestigious ornament and because of that they were preferred in burial over locally made beads which may have been for more everyday use.

A fair amount of amber beads have been found in Viking age Iceland. Amber is found in various places all around the world but the most renowned is probably the so-called Baltic amber that washes up along the shores of the Baltic Sea and as far west as Norway, Holland and England. It is most likely that the majority of the amber beads found from Iceland are of Baltic amber. Amber is a soft material and easy to work with. Because of this it is likely that small-scale amber bead production took place in previous centuries wherever amber was found. It is possible that some of the Icelandic amber beads might have been of such small-scale production but it is likely that most came from the more centralized workshops in Scandinavia or central and northeastern Europe. The simplicity of the vast majority of amber beads makes it difficult to say much about them, their development or chronology. Nevertheless when taking a closer look at the assemblage and

comparing it to the amber beads from later periods found in Iceland a clear difference emerges in terms of their shape and size, as well as a minor color difference. As a generalization, the amber beads from later centuries have a more bright orange/yellow tone whereas among the Viking age beads, a darker, reddish brown tone is more dominant. There is also a detectable difference between Viking and later amber beads in their respective size (viz. diameter of bead and perforation). The beads from later times have a larger diameter while at the same time being proportionally narrower. A further difference can be seen in the perforations of the beads, which seem to get much narrower in later times.

As mentioned above, the Icelandic Viking age bead collection has a lot in common with beads from the same period found in Scandinavia. Various excavations in Scandinavian trade and market centers from the period have revealed parallels to most of the beads found in Iceland. The greatest similarities have been found with beads from Hedeby, Kaupang, Birka, and York. It is likely that most of the Icelandic collection was imported from these or other similar Viking age trade centers, although some might originally have been manufactured at more distant locations in Europe or Asia.

The Viking age beads found at settlement sites have been recovered from various types of buildings as well as rubbish dumps. Such beads are usually found complete (seventy-two percent) which probably indicates that they were not deliberately discarded but rather an accidental loss that might have happened during usage of beads or their threading. Beads are a very common find in excavations of Viking age ruins, which suggests that they might commonly have been in everyday use during this period. During this time in Iceland it is believed that gift-giving was a common form of exchange and it is not unlikely that small and valuable imports like beads might have been distributed widely within the island through such acts. But even if beads were used in more commercial transactions, they no doubt had a wide usage/purpose in Viking age Iceland. One way of trying to understand their role is to look at the beads recovered from burials.

Beads have been found in a fairly small proportion (fourteen percent) of heathen burials from the period. Osteological analysis of the skeletons in burials has shown that beads were recovered equally from male and female, young and old and rich and poor alike. However, while these factors did not seem to determine whether the buried individual wore beads or not, they do seem to contribute to the quantity of beads and to the types of beads worn. Thus while beads are just as likely to be found with men in Viking age Iceland as women, women had on average more beads than men. On the same note, older people tended to have more beads than younger ones, and richer graves on average more than poorer. There were also differences in material, type and colors of beads depending on these factors. Such findings could be interpreted as an indication that a different meaning was given to beads of different types, different colors or with different decoration. The beads from the burials seem to indicate that there was a wide group of people within the Icelandic Viking age society that might have carried beads but that they might have used differences in material, quantity, types, and color to symbolize social or spiritual status.

Bead usage has often been, and is still, connected to religious or spiritual practices. Two interesting examples of such can be found in the Icelandic sagas, written in the thirteenth century but about events that supposedly took place around the year A.D. 1000. In both cases, beads are described as old-fashioned and an eccentric decoration of old ladies who were considered to be clairvoyant and somewhat "heathen" in their ways. It is doubtful that these thirteenth century sources fully reflect the meanings and uses of beads in Iceland during the ninth to eleventh century but the insight they do give is important, particularly in light of the fact that bead usage in Iceland, as in many other north European countries, seems to fall drastically out of fashion in the first few centuries of Christianity. In Iceland, Christianity was adopted around the year A.D. 1000 but in fact there is no indication that bead usage changed immediately. It is much more likely that they continued to be popular well into the eleventh century, only becoming a rarity in the twelfth century. By the thirteenth century, judging by the examples of the Sagas, bead usage had a strong association to "heathendom" and witchcraft and seems to have been very uncommon. The insight that the Sagas give is also interesting in that when beads start to reappear in Iceland they have a strong connection to Christian practice and were often used as prayer beads or rosaries. Whether this can be interpreted as an indication of a similar religious role for beads in the Viking age is not certain but it is not unlikely that as in so many societies and different faiths, beads in Viking age Iceland were used in religious practice and meant more than simply ornament.

"Hast thou a friend whom thou trusted well, from whom thou cravest good? Share thy mind with him, gifts exchange with him, fare to find him oft."

Hávamál, composed in tenth to twelfth century, written down in the thirteenth century.

Gift-giving in medieval Iceland is usually regarded as a key form of exchange. Even if the archaeological evidence is sparse when it comes to things like this, the Sagas (written in thirteenth to fourteenth century about events that would have taken place around or before A.D. 1000) can give a glimpse into how gift-giving might have functioned. Besides regular commodity transactions (usually in barter form rather than through money), gift-giving is likely to have been a central means of distributing objects, either in payment as compensation for some prior act or as a means to create social obligations. Indeed, it is particularly the latter that has been seen as a way that individuals gained status and power, insofar as any gift demands a gift in return. The giving of gifts at feasts associated with occasions such as weddings created social ties and relations of obligation and some scholars have even seen this as having escalated to a competitive level where the aim of gift-giving was not reciprocity but the infliction of debt--to give a gift that the receiver could not possibly repay. All kinds of goods were given, from swords to food and while beads are never especially mentioned in this context in the Icelandic medieval sagas, these doubtless would have also been used in gift-exchange as well as a regular commodity transaction.

PHOTO (COLOR): ELABORATE NECKLACE of glass and amber beads from a Viking era site in Iceland. Most are monochrome glass, but there are trail- and cane-decorated glass beads, and a

cornerless-cube bicolor glass bead. Two amber beads flank the center, intricately carved carnelian (?) bead.

PHOTO (COLOR): DRAWN OR BLOWN AND SEGMENTED GLASS BEADS from various Viking age sites in Iceland, including gold foil bead at lower right, and silver-foil bead at top left. Photographs by Elín Hreiðarsdóttir.

PHOTO (COLOR): WOUND AND TRAIL-DECORATED GLASS BEADS from various Viking age sites in Iceland, including a number with canes. Note beads with wave-form trails and canes in center, Bead at top left is lobed.

PHOTO (COLOR): STONE BEADS from various Viking age sites in Iceland; upper row, imported types (rock crystal and carnelian); lower row, locally made types (sandstone and basalt with quartz inclusions). Note melon bead,

PHOTO (COLOR): BEAD NECKLACES from Viking age burials; upper of glass and amber beads from a boat burial in the western fjords; lower of glass beads with two tenth century A.D. Cufic coins, from a burial in western Iceland.

PHOTO (COLOR): GLASS MOSAIC BEADS from various Viking age sites in Iceland. A necklace of segmented glass beads from a Viking age burial in the northeast of Iceland surrounds these mosaic beads. Note numerous gold- and silver-foil beads, two lobed beads and a central melon bead.

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