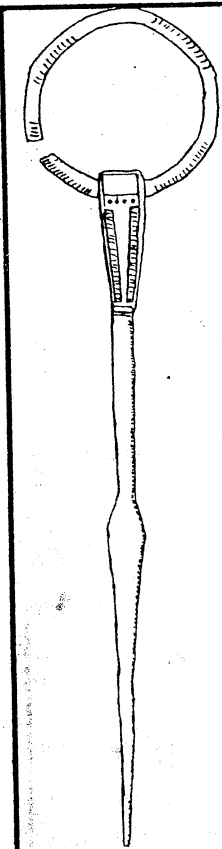


Meols' relics mirror the Viking culture

WE KNOW that there have been successive settlements at Meols from the earliest of times and that the coastline of northern Wirral once protruded substantially into Liverpool Bay.



Bronze Ring-headed pin from Meols. This pin closely resembles one found at Birka, Sweden, which is currently on display at the British Museum's Viking Exhibition.

Old maps of Cheshire provide clear evidence of the extent of this protrusion and one which has since been lost, is said to have depicted cattle grazing on what has become Burbo Bank.

The famous "stocks of Meols" were once clearly visible on the foreshore. They were the blackened trees of the submerged forest which became one of the wonders of Cheshire. Now only black mud remains, but this part of Wirral once produced a vast hoard of finds of considerable antiquity and interest.

The Rev. Canon A. Hume made a praiseworthy attempt to sketch and classify the finds in his "Ancient Meols" of 1863. The effects of erosion and inundation had caused bygone settlements to retreat westward leaving thousands of artefacts to be covered by blown sand. By Hume's time, coastal erosion was exposing evidence of these settlements at a truly remarkable rate.

DISCOVERED

Hume noted that over 3,000 objects had been uncovered within a period of 20 years and that "even during the present year, hardly a week passes without some new objects being brought to light." Hume brought together six different collections for the purpose of his study, but regretted that many more objects were likely to have been discovered and lost during earlier periods. In some cases 19th century collectors attached little importance to the finds and "the best of them were given to children as toys."

Some of the items recorded by Hume are housed in the back rooms of Chester's Grosvenor Museum, but others have joined the hoard of lost antiquities. Hume's record therefore provides a valuable insight into the changing tastes, skills and activities of settlers in northern Wirral from very early Elizabeth times.

It is possible to pick out several items which throw light on the period of Norse colonisation of Wirral and see similarities between these finds and others made either in Scandinavia itself or other parts of the "Viking World." The finds provide evidence of the skills and artistic tastes of Wirral's Vikings.

The Grosvenor Museum has rescued several bronze ring-headed pins from the Meols finds. These date from the 10th century and were used to hold clothes, particularly cloaks, together. They therefore provide a clue to the type of dress of the Norsemen. Similar pins were found in Viking excavations in High Street, Dublin, and some authorities have pointed to similarities between the Irish finds and those of Meols.

Various types of ring-headed pins have been located elsewhere and sites include graves in Orkney, Birka in Sweden, Coppergate at York and even Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland. Their existence points to the decorative side of Viking life—a side totally ignored by those who wrote solely of the rape and pillage of the Viking invasions.

Hume's book includes a sketch of a brass stud which is decorated with an interlaced animal. The stud seems to have been badly worn even by Hume's time but it is possible to hazard a guess as to its original appearance. J. D. Bullock has redrawn the animals with a degree of interpretation in an article in the Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire, vol. 112 (1960).

The design on the stud emerges as an example of the "gripping-beast" motif, considered to be one of the distinguishing marks of early Viking art. In general, the motif consists of a beast which clutches either the border around it, its own anatomy or another beast. Distorted animals formed the basis of Scan-

Wirral teacher David Healey continues his fascinating look at the Viking influence on Wirral. Mr. Healey, of Little Neston, is ancient history master at Calday Grange Grammar School.

In the second of an absorbing four-part series, he discusses the finds from Ancient Meols—evidence, he points out, of the artistic tastes of Wirral's Vikings.



dinavian art from the fifth century AD but the vigorous "gripping-beast" motif is considered to be the true starting point of Viking art.

In the Meols object an unidentifiable animal is portrayed with its legs twisted round its own body and reaching out towards the border of the stud. Hume's drawing suggests that there had once been four rivet-holes at the border and it seems likely that the stud was once attached to a belt. The "gripping-beast" motif has figured on many Scandinavian woodcarvings and brooches, but the Meols stud seems to resemble most closely a set of jet and amber pendants from Norway which date from the eighth and ninth centuries.

The "gripping-beast" was to be one of the hallmarks of Viking art for over a century. Artists experimented considerably with their animals and produced beasts with contorted and elongated bodies. Some

creatures were given bulging eyes and "Mickey Mouse" ears, some were placed in combat with other animals and some appeared in the form of snake-like animals which filled borders or became the central design.

SNAKE-LIKE

One collector on Meols foreshore evidently discovered a bronze plate which had a snake-like creature as the central feature of design. Neither the function nor the present location of this object are known, although J. D. Bullock's article of 1960 gives a full-size drawing and photograph of it.

The main part of the plate measures 4 cms. by 4 cms. but it possesses a protruding lip of head about 1.5 cms. long and of trefoil shape. Three rivet-holes show that the plate was originally attached to something else and that it partially fulfilled a decorative function. The design is of a relatively simple

"Implements of war and the chase" and placed it alongside arrow and spearheads of a different period. He seems to have thought it was a spear handle but a more recent view is that it was a bronze drinking-horn mount.

Similar finds were made in ninth century Viking graves in Scandinavia and Scotland and, although one of non-Viking origin was found in Ireland, it seems likely that we can add the Meols find to the list of Norse antiquities.

One of the most striking things about the Viking finds at Meols is the absence of weapons. The Meols foreshore has produced a wide range of arrow and spear heads but not one of them can be clearly identified as Viking. By contrast there is a selection of objects which provides evidence of the artistic tastes of the Vikings and the skills of their craftsmen.

Parallels exist in the type of art which adorns a Viking tombstone found at St. Paul's, London, and more recently, that of an unfinished grave-slab from Coppergate, York. Experts have described the style as "Ringerlike" after a Norwegian district associated with carved slaps of similar design.

The style dates from the late 10th century and was later to be refined into another style named after the Norwegian town of Urnes. Although too restrained to be classified as such, there are striking similarities between the Meols snake and those depicted on Urnes style objects. Both styles of art were developed and refined by craftsmen in Dublin and this could be the source of the Meols object.

Hume's plates include a flask-shaped object (9 cms. long) with a ball-shaped end. Hume classified it among

tions, in particular those at Coppergate in York, are leading to a fundamental reconsideration of the nature of the Viking contribution. Without doubt the antiquities of Wirral have a part to play in this reconsideration, although it is to be regretted that so many of them have now been lost.

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Bronze drinking-horn mount from Hume's book of 1863.