Early medieval Scandinavian raiding, trading and settlement stretched from Russia in the east to Newfoundland in the west, from the Arctic North to the Black Sea in the south. However, this was not an empire but rather a series of settlements and colonies and it has been usefully characterized as a diaspora.
For example, it has recently been demonstrated that individuals were travelling between arctic Norway and southern Scandinavian markets as early as the first quarter of the 8th century. Raiding, it seems, grew out of long distance travel, in tandem with an emerging urban trade network. The objects exchanged via this network, and stolen from its peripheries, are among the most important artefacts of the Early Viking Age.

But what prompted these raids? Raiding itself was not unique, although the fact that the Scandinavian campaigns were directed at targets across the sea not only gives them a particular character, but also explains why their victims found it difficult to respond adequately. The motivation for these attacks was not religious, cultural or ideological, but driven by the urge to seek material gain, taken chiefly in the form of slaves and portable wealth. Nonetheless, it has been suggested that any fortune amassed through such expeditions was an order of magnitude smaller than the potential gains from tax, tribute and landholding back at home, so the risk and expense of raiding requires some other rationale. While the lure of the exotic and the quest for ‘fame’ certainly had its own social capital, a key driver may have been the particular role that objects of precious metal played in Scandinavian society.

This role requires some explanation, which takes us back to the centuries before the Viking Age. On the fringes of the Roman Empire, 5th-century Scandinavia was characterized by a patchwork of small-scale societies, finding stability through a combination of warfare and gift giving. In this context, military success was essential political capital, and artefacts clearly evidence the growing importance of a martial ethos. In the mid 6th century, probably as a result of environmental catastrophe (the atmospheric ‘dust veil’ event, possibly caused by a volcanic eruption), social complexity began to break down, thus leading to settlement abandonment and political disarticulation. Rebuilding society must have been traumatic, as various factions vied for local supremacy. Just on the horizon, Continental Europe was flourishing, towns and trading settlements began to spring up around the coasts of the North and Baltic Seas, and silver started to flood into Europe from the Arabic caliphate.

Such was the situation at the dawn of the Viking Age. In a society with a very fragile hierarchy, it is easy to imagine how a successful overseas campaign could elevate a chieftain’s standing. Moreover, exotic plunder would have held particular value as gifts, used to seal alliances and secure loyalty. In such a dynamic, unstable world, political marriages must have been important, and it is in this context that we should see the looted British and Irish metalwork in the female graves of western Scandinavia.

These initial raids did little to sate the appetite for portable wealth, and the scale of military activity only increased through the first half of the 9th century. In 865, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle recorded the presence of a micel here (Great Army) in East Anglia. After an extended military campaign in the peninsula, Alfred the Great, king of Wessex, finally brought the invaders to terms by negotiation. The north and east of what is now England were ceded to Scandinavian settlement and later became known as the Danelaw. Some members of the Great Army took up new roles as rural lords, while towns such as York became economic powerhouses and cosmopolitan melting pots. This narrative, of manorial landholding and urban entrepreneurialism, is the story of the Middle Viking Age.
In 2012, a metal detectorist discovered the first three-dimensional depiction of an armed woman dating to the Viking Age. The motif of a woman carrying a sword and shield is often associated with the Valkyries of Norse mythology. Valkyries, or ‘choosers of the slain’, were a group of maidens sent by the war-god Odin to the battlefield to guide select fallen warriors to an afterlife in Valhalla.

Another interpretation is that the figure is a representation not of the supernatural, but rather of a living female warrior. Although this interpretation has proven controversial, there is some evidence of high-status Viking women being buried with weaponry. This is a debate that will roll on and on, but it is important to remember that weapons were significant symbols of status and identity, as well as tools of war. Gender roles – whatever they looked like – would have been very different to those of the present day.

This warrior figurine would have been worn as a pendant, perhaps for luck in battle. She is depicted in a full-length patterned dress; her hair is worn in a topknot and long ponytail. The figurine was gilded, with facial features and decorative details on the shield and dress picked out in black niello.

Indeed, whatever its meaning or associations, the figure provides important information about both female dress and weaponry. The shield is clearly similar to round wooden shields with iron bosses, such as those found on the Gokstad ship (see page 70) or at Trelleborg. The sword hilt and pommel are also highly ornate. They are not simply token representations of the idea of weaponry, but renderings of real objects in miniature.
**Looted metalwork**

*Early 9th century*

*Copper alloy, gilt • Length: 8.8 cm (3 ½ in.) • From Romfjøllene, Møre og Romsdal, Norway
Museum of Cultural History, Oslo, Norway*

This object is cut from an ornate Celtic fitting of very high-quality workmanship. The decoration features interlaced animal designs, including a trio of biting, dragon-like animals, modelled in high relief, with eyes of blue glass. The mount also features a large amber setting. It is roughly cut off at one end and includes a pair of rivet holes, perhaps suggesting conversion into a brooch or similar. It is likely that the fitting was produced in an ecclesiastical workshop in Ireland or Scotland, from where it was looted and brought back to western Scandinavia, perhaps given as a gift, but certainly bearing witness to successful voyages overseas.

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**Zoomorphic brooch**

*Probably mid 9th century*

*Copper alloy • Length: 8 cm (3¼ in.) • From Kaupang, Norway
Museum of Cultural History, Oslo, Norway*

This ornate brooch is cast in what is known as the Oseberg style. The design is similar to a number of pieces of art known from the aristocratic ship burial at Oseberg, and the style probably reflects the output of local workshops that were active as the nearby town of Kaupang started to develop. The brooch features a stylized animal motif. The precise identity of the animal is unclear or ambiguous, but the design includes a sinuous body gripped by a number of claws, a bent neck, small ears and a long, protruding tongue. On the reverse, there is evidence of both a pin attachment and a repair; this was clearly a treasured possession.
Helmet
Late 6th century
Iron, foil • Internal circumference: 64 cm (21 in.), helm height: 17 cm (6 3/4 in.) • From Valsgärde, Sweden
GUSTAVIANUM, UPPSALA, SWEDEN

Our knowledge of Viking Age helmets comes largely from fragments, but complete pre-Viking examples were deposited as offerings at cemeteries such as Valsgärde in central Sweden. This helmet is perhaps the finest example, featuring panels of embossed foil, a ‘spectacle’ guard and a protective aventail of mail. It is tempting to regard such elaborate helmets as display pieces, but in this period of political transformation, power was held through a combination of military force, conspicuous consumption and chiefly largesse. It is difficult to separate the military from the aesthetic, as local leaders maintained their status through ostentatious displays of military prowess.

Ring sword and scabbard
Before c. 700
Iron, copper alloy, gilt, cloisonné inlay, wood
Length: 95 cm (37 1/2 in.) • From Valsgärde, Sweden
GUSTAVIANUM, UPPSALA, SWEDEN

This ring sword was found at the princely cemetery complex in Valsgärde, Sweden. A small ring is fixed to its hilt, believed to be an oath ring, a symbol of an unbroken pact. The practice of ‘ring giving’ to seal oaths was common throughout the Germanic world. Swords themselves were also gifted from chieftain to follower in exchange for loyalty and service. Some scholars believe that the term ‘hring-mael’ (ring ornament or ring sword) in the poem Beowulf preserves a reference to this type of sword. Ring swords are not found after the late 7th century, although ring giving continued into the Viking Age.
Of all the archaeological discoveries of the Viking Age, the Oseberg ship burial is perhaps the best known, and has heavily influenced our concept of the Viking ship burial, although in no way is it typical. Excavated in 1904, the burial contained a complete Viking longship. On the deck were a wagon and three sledges: highly ornate items, no ordinary carts. It is possible that they relate to some sort of burial procession, and a tapestry from the burial records just such an event. Also on the deck lay the remains of many animals, including fourteen horses, and a tent-shaped burial chamber containing the bodies of two mature women. The chamber was richly furnished with textiles and clothing, as well as everyday objects, agricultural and textile tools, and an ornate bucket of likely Irish origin (see page 68). The mound was broken into in the late 10th century, presumably as an act of wilful political destruction. This explains the absence of precious metal objects.

The Oseberg burial is important for two reasons. First, the ship itself provides some of Scandinavia’s earliest evidence for the use of the sail. Secondly, the burial gives us a glimpse into Norse belief systems, through the remains of what must have been an ostentatious and prolonged spectacle.
Located on Björkö, an island in Lake Mälaren, Sweden, Birka was a thriving trading centre in the Viking Age. At its height, the town was densely populated, with an estimated 1,500 to 3,000 inhabitants. This was in contrast to surrounding Viking Age settlements, which had only a handful of families. With connections to long-distance trade routes from the east, south and west, Birka was the bustling cosmopolitan hub of eastern Scandinavia during the Viking Age.

In 1887, farmer Johan Teller discovered a soapstone mould on his farm at Birka. Soapstone, or steatite, is a soft talc-based rock that was a popular medium for carving in the Viking Age. Here, it allowed for the fine carving of an exquisite dragon-head design, which would have been filled with molten metal to cast an ornate pin or decorative fitting. So intricate is the design that the dragon-head motif has since become an emblem of Viking Age Birka.

But the story does not end there. During excavation of the harbour at Birka in 2015, archaeologists made the remarkable discovery of a small bronze object in the form of a dragon-head ornament. They immediately recognized that it had been cast from the famous mould. The artefact was once a decorative dress pin, although now only the ornamental dragon head remains.

The reconstruction above shows how the finished product of this mould may have looked. The casting seems to have been intended for a dress pin or similar. Recent excavations in the harbour at Birka revealed an object identical to this, cast in copper alloy, no doubt using this very mould more than 1,000 years ago.
Wind vane

11th century
Copper/copper alloy, gilt • Length: 38 cm (15 in.)
From Söderala church, Sweden
Swedish History Museum, Stockholm, Sweden

Today, we think of weather vanes as the ornaments of church spires, but Viking Age examples were probably intended to be fixed to the prows of Viking ships. Although incredibly ornate, their purpose – to mark the strength and direction of the wind – was of huge practical importance in a maritime context. The Söderala vane is made of gilded copper or bronze, and features an openwork field of complex zoomorphic interlace, capped with an unidentifiable four-legged animal. Together with an earlier example from Heggen, Norway, this vane is one of a small number of such ornate yet functional objects.
Sorcerer’s staff

c. 9th–11th century
Iron • Length: 44 cm (17 ¾ in.) • From Gävle, Sweden
NATIONAL MUSEUM OF DENMARK, COPENHAGEN, DENMARK

This enigmatic object was found in a male grave, accompanied by a range of weaponry. It has a distinctive basket-shaped terminal and a number of cast-iron animal heads. Similar iron rods, not always featuring such elaborate ornament, have been interpreted variously as tools of ritual or magic, cooking spits and distaffs. They frequently occur in high-status graves and in association with amulets and other potential ‘magical’ items, at sites such as Birka, Sweden, and Fyrkat, Denmark. It is possible that these items played some role in seiðr, a form of shamanic magic that seems to have been undertaken in the Old Norse world.
Arm ring
11th century
Silver • Maximum diameter: 9 cm (3 ½ in.) • From Lilla Rone, Gotland, Sweden
SWEDISH HISTORY MUSEUM, STOCKHOLM, SWEDEN

This large, heavy arm ring was found on the archaeologically rich island of Gotland, Sweden. The design is complex, with finely twisted silver wire wound around braided strands of thicker silver rods. Each terminal is decorated with a stylized beast’s head, perhaps a dragon, with open jaws. Animal-headed terminals are relatively rare on Viking Age arm rings. This highly decorative ring was valuable not only for its weight in silver, but also as an item of male jewelry that would have conveyed status and wealth.

‘Blundered’ Hiberno-Norse coin
1055–1065
Silver • Diameter: 1.8 cm (¾ in.)
From Ireland
BRITISH MUSEUM, LONDON, UK

Towards the end of the Viking Age, Hiberno-Norse rulers in Dublin eventually decided to mint their own coins, thus emulating the neighbouring Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Scandinavian kingdoms. Initially, these coins were close imitations of Anglo-Saxon issues. However, the coin shown here, known as a ‘Limerick type’ penny, is an example of a novel take on standardized Anglo-Saxon motifs. The Dublin die-cutter took full creative licence, likely using an Edward the Confessor facing-head coin (c. 1062–65) as a rough template. Here, the facing bust is enlarged, the crown is replaced with a military helmet and the moustache is prominent. The legend itself is illegible or ‘blundered’. On the reverse of the coin is a recognizable double-voided long cross.