

Norse Children

As with most projects, this one started simply enough – I thought it would be lovely to make a special gift for a friend’s impending youngster and make it something well-documented. I figured I’d simply collect a few items related to Norse children and make a “Viking layette set.”

However, once I began investigating the topic, I found that there was precious little on medieval Norse children. Rather than give up, the project’s focus shifted from producing a Viking baby kit to compiling the evidence available on medieval Norse infants and children, supplemented by information about Anglo-Saxon, Irish, and Pictish children from similar time periods and geographic locations. This research includes a wide geographic area (Scandinavia, the British Isles, the Faroe Islands, Iceland and Greenland) as well as a very long period (roughly 8th-12th centuries) and includes evidence related to both babies and children... and still this research yields a very limited amount of information.

While I have collected a fair amount of information thus far, I am not yet content and hope to compile more before considering it complete. I envision this paper as being first a research A&S entry and then eventually a webpage to make this research available to the general public.

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Key to abbreviations:

ASTI – Anglo-Saxon Textual Illumination

OxGer – Eric Graf Oxenstierna – Die Wikinger (in German)

OxEng - Eric Graf Oxenstierna – The Norsemen (in English)

V2C – From Viking to Crusader

VA - Viking Artefacts

VNAS – Vikings: The North Atlantic Saga

WITE – Woven Into the Earth

York-BAIH – The Archaeology of York – The Small Finds – 17/12 – Craft, Industry, and Everyday Life: Bone, Antler, Ivory and Horn from Anglo-Scandinavian and Medieval York

York-Finds - The Archaeology of York – The Small Finds – 17/14 – Craft, Industry, and Everyday Life: Finds from Anglo-Scandinavian

York-L&L - The Archaeology of York – The Small Finds – 17/16 – Craft, Industry, and Everyday Life: Leather and Leatherworking

York-Wood - The Archaeology of York – The Small Finds – 17/13 – Craft, Industry, and Everyday Life: Wood and Woodworking from Anglo-Scandinavian and Medieval York

Reasons for Research Difficulty

While I regularly profess research and documentation to be a joyful and enlightening experience, there are several reasons why research about Norse babies and children is a particularly difficult topic.

First, there are very few archeological remains that can positively be identified as belonging to children. While we know infant and child mortality was quite high during the Middle Ages, children are underrepresented amongst archeologically investigated burials. In part this is because children, particularly infants, were not always interred in graveyards like the adults. Also, children's remains are particularly fragile and susceptible to decay rather than preservation. Further, even when a child's grave is preserved and identified, they seem less likely to be buried with grave goods than adults. Even though there are some well-equipped children's graves (Crawford, 178) there are no extremely rich finds like the Oseberg or Sutton Hoo burials. This means the archaeological evidence is limited to the rare child's burial with grave goods and chance finds that can be associated with children with some degree of certainty.

Documentary evidence is similarly lacking. Throughout much of the Norse/Viking period, relatively few written documents were kept. Later in the period, the sagas were written down but, as they largely deal with adult adventures, their insights about children are limited. There are a few useful passages that give us interesting snapshots of children's play and clothing, but these are few and far between and one is lucky to find a single example in an entire saga. There are some laws that touch on family life, but they are generally concerned with matter of inheritance, as opposed to the usual life and upbringing of a child.

Lastly, even examination of modern secondary sources is hampered by accessibility and language barriers. Reasonably enough, much of the research on medieval Norse culture is published in Scandinavian languages. Unfortunately, I do not speak any of the Scandinavian languages and so am dependent on translations and secondary sources available in English. While I am blessed that UW-Madison has a strong Scandinavian Studies department and so carries many otherwise difficult to obtain books and journals, there still are many, many more that would be enlightening but that are only available via interlibrary loan and then only provided there is a library willing to lend them.

Non-Physical Evidence

While the appearance of children in medieval Norse documents is limited, it does provide valuable insights into children's lives. Many of the passages deal with clothing, toys, or games, and those passages will be addressed in conjunction with the physical evidence for those topics. However, the documentary sources also provide us with information about children's place in medieval Norse culture, something that leaves no physical evidence and so would be invisible outside these texts. The primary texts of interest in Norse studies are the law texts (particularly from Iceland), the sagas, and the Kalevala from Finland. Unfortunately, all these sources were written down well after the action they describe has taken place, but they remain some of our best documentary sources.

Regarding the Newborn

When a child was born into a Norse family, there was a formal process for recognizing the child as a person and a member of the family. Three things needed to be done – the child had to be named, sprinkled with water, and suckled. Until those three things occurred, the baby could be rejected and exposed without it being considered murder. This “pagan baptism” seems to be a genuinely pagan Norse ceremony, not a practice adopted because of conversion to Christianity or inserted into older texts by later Christian scribes.

Egil's Saga

Skalla-Grímr og þau Bera áttu börn mjög mörg, og var það fyrst, að öll önduðust; þá gátu þau son, og var vatni ausinn og hét Þórólfr.

Skallagrím and Bera had many children but all the older ones died in infancy. Then they had a son. They sprinkled him with water and called him Þórólfr. (Chapter 31)

Þóra ól barn um sumarið, og var það mæ; var hún vatni ausin og nafn gefið og hét Ásgerðr.

In the summer Þóra gave birth to a girl, who was sprinkled with water and given the name Ásgerðr. (Chapter 35)

Eyrbyggja saga

Þórsteinn þorskabítur átti son er kallaður var Börkr digri. En sumar það er Þórsteinn var hálfþrítugur fæddi Þóra sveinbarn og var Grímur nefndur er vatni var ausinn. Þann svein gaf Þórsteinn Þór og kvað vera skyldu hofgoða og kallar hann Þórgrím.

Þórsteinn Cod-Biter had a son called Börkr the Stout. Then in the summer when Þórsteinn was twenty-five years old, Þóra gave birth to another son, who was sprinkled with water and given the name Grímr. Þórsteinn dedicated this boy to Þórr, calling him Þórgrím, and said he should become a temple priest. (*Eyrbyggja saga*, chapter 11)

Birth of the first European in the New World – Snorri Thorfinnson

“Snorri, Karlsefni's son, was born the first autumn, and he was three winters old when they began their journey home.” (Erik the Red's Saga, page 32)

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/17946/17946-h/17946-h.htm>

“At this time Gudrid, Karlsefne's wife, brought forth a male child, and the boy was called Snorre.” (Greenlander's Saga, Chapter 6) <http://www.northvegr.org/lore/flaty/001.php>

Snorri, son of Gudrun and Thirfinn, called Karlsefni, was the first European born in the new world. He was born in 1007 (Erik the Red's Saga) or 2008 (Saga of the Greenlanders).

Christian Baptism

The Icelandic book of law, the Gragas, made it a legal requirement for a woman to baptize her newborn if no man or boy over the age of twelve was present. (Jacobson, 47)

Rigsthula

<http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/poe/poe14.htm>

7. A son bore Edda, | with water they sprinkled him,
With a cloth his hair | so black they covered;
Thræll they named him, |

21. A son bore Amma, | with water they sprinkled him,
Karl they named him; | in a cloth she wrapped him,
He was ruddy of face, | and flashing his eyes.

34. A son had Mothir, | in silk they wrapped him,
With water they sprinkled him, | Jarl he was;
Blond was his hair, | and bright his cheeks,
Grim as a snake's | were his glowing eyes.

See also the supporting documents for information from the Hurstwic website about infants. It is interesting, but no citations were provided.

Children's Play

Many of the activities involved in children's play do not leave archeological traces. Sports and games that do not involved equipment are invisible outside of documentary sources. From the sagas, we know that children played a ball game called *sveinaleikur*, that they wrestled in a style called *glíma*, and that they played make-believe, particularly that they would reenact lawsuits from the Thing and that they would go outside to play "house."

Sveinaleikur

Sveinaleikur appears to be some sort of ball game played with a bat or a stick, and enjoyed by both adults and children. In chapter 40 of *Egil's saga*, the boys were playing a game of *sveinaleikur* when Egil used an axe to kill the boy who had been rough earlier in the game. <http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/egil/egil41.htm>

Sveinaleikur is also mentioned in chapter 10 of *Flóamanna saga*, where it explicitly mentions marking off a playing field before the game was played. Þorgils, who was five years old, wanted to play with the older boys but they said he could not play unless he had killed some living creature.

http://www.hurstwic.org/history/articles/daily_living/text/games_and_sports.htm

Glíma

Glíma, a type of wrestling, is at its core a contest of strength. A win was recorded if the opponent was thrown off his feet, or lifted clear and then dropped onto any body part except the feet. There are many mentions of wrestling by men, boys, and even sometimes women in the sagas. Egil's Saga mentions his skill at the sport even as a child.

Make Believe

In section 8 of Njal's Saga, several children on the playing on the floor re-enact a divorce lawsuit from the Thing. In doing so, they make accurate, if embarrassing, comments about the proceedings, a situation very recognizable to modern parents.

<http://tinyurl.com/cybp9k> and <http://omacl.org/Njal/>

Playing House

Óláfr, sonr hans, var þá sjau vetra eða átta. Hann fór af bænum með leik sínum ok gerði sér hús, sem börnum er títt. (Trans: "Óláfr, his son, was then seven or eight winters old. He went from the farm to play and build himself a house, as it is customary for children to do." Bolla þátrr Bollasonar. Íslendinga Sögur. Ed. Guðni Jónsson: 244)

Children are great mimics of adult behaviors and playing "house" seems to be a normal childhood activity for Norse youngsters. See also the small dishes, querns, shoe lasts, swords, and other miniature "household items" in the Toys section.

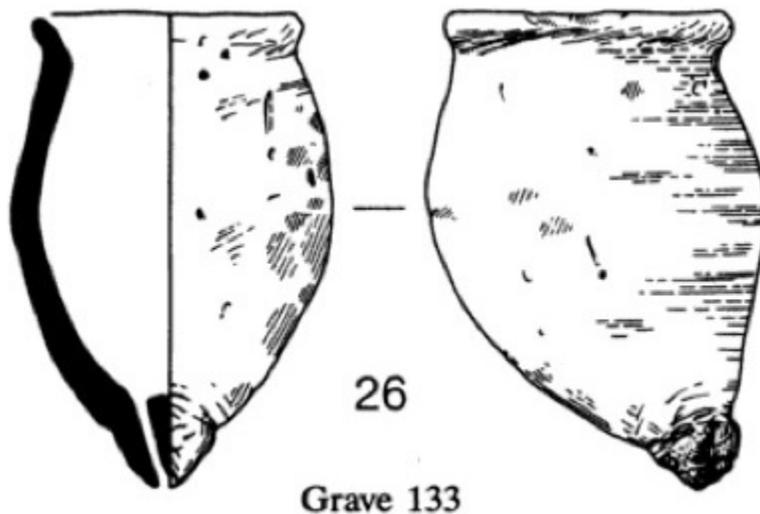
Diet

You may see a baby on the floor even your sister-in-law's baby;
Lift the baby onto a wall bench, wash its face, smooth its head,
Give it a piece of bread in its hand, spread butter on the bread.
If there is no bread in the house, put a chip of wood in its hand.

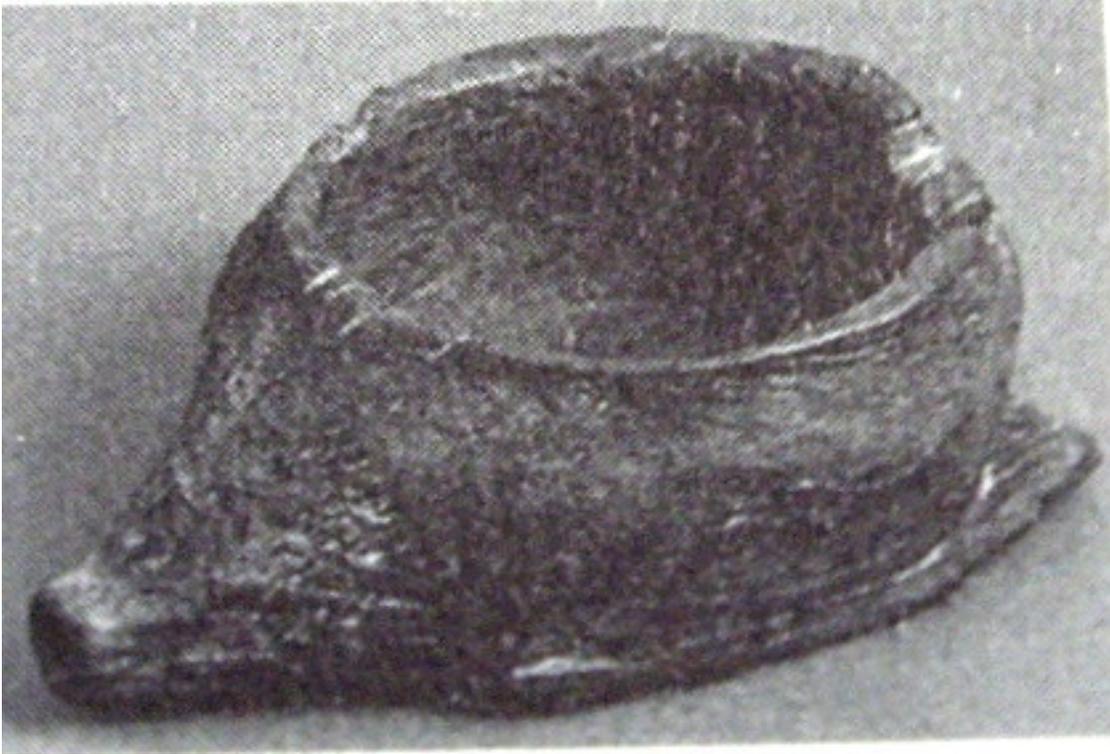
Kalevala 23:199-202

Little to nothing is said about what young children ate during the Viking period, but it can be expected that weaned children ate much the same foods as their parents. The age of weaning was probably somewhere around eighteen months to two years old, based on the average time between births and analysis of skeletal remains. While this is difficult to prove, at least one analysis of the skeletal remains of children in a Pictish and Norse community in Orkney confirms that children were at least partially breastfed well into their second year of life. (Richards 2006) The analysis of the remains on one youngster from the Isle of Lewis, Scotland, showed that the “degree of attrition of the deciduous teeth and absence of caries suggests the diet was of an abrasive nature, with few carbohydrates. The 'good-quality' bone and well-formed tooth enamel suggest that the youngster was well nourished, enjoyed a relatively healthy childhood.” (Dunwell, 1995)

An unweaned child who lost its mother or whose mother was unable to breastfeed it would require a wet nurse in order to survive. One (obviously unsuccessful) attempt to “bottle feed” a baby is attested to by the discovery of a mammiform pot complete with a teat at the bottom from an infant's grave in the cemetery at Barton-on Humber (Crawford, Nenck, Drinkall). The wear on the teat implies that the pot was indeed used for some time before the death of the child. The bottle is approximately 111mm high is made of an unspecified ceramic and is believed to be the earliest feeding bottle found in Britain (Drinkall, et al).



Above: from The archaeology of identity by Margarita Díaz-Andreu García and Sam Lucy, page 46.



Above: a dikopp or “sippy cup” from Wahloo, pg 39.

Clothing

Due to the perishable nature of clothing, very little clothing of any sort from the Viking era has survived. Clothing for the very young represents additional challenges because even the loss of a relatively small quantity of cloth could represent a large percentage of the total garment. Very small children may not have had tailored clothing at all and simply been swaddled in shapeless pieces of cloth or too-large garments fastened with swaddling bands. One has to imagine that then, as now, small mobile children were hard on their clothing and likely it was handed down from one child to the next until it was beyond further use other than as rags. However, some clues as to children's clothing do remain.

I have subdivided the evidence for children's garments into Swaddling Cloths and Diapers, Body Garments, Hats and Hoods, and Shoes, with jewelry and other items of personal adornment to be handled as a separate topic altogether.

Swaddling Cloths and Diapers

Swaddling cloths are squares or strips of cloth wrapped tightly around the baby, sometimes being secured by a separate swaddling band criss-crossed and secured over the top. While this restricts the baby's movements, many babies (especially the very young) find swaddling to be calming. This treatment would also prevent a small child from pulling itself out of a shallow cradle or rolling off a wall-bench.

There are a number of babies in swaddling clothes in Anglo-Saxon illuminations and in a 12th century fresco at Kirkerup Church. In these images, the babies seem to be swaddled in single large pieces of cloth rather than thin strips of cloth wound around them repeatedly. The swaddling cloth is often arranged in such a way that the child's head (except for the face) is covered as well as the body.

Although diapers would have clearly been a necessity, the only mention of a potentially Norse diaper is in the Kalevala (see below) and thus far I have not discovered any images of an infant only wearing a diaper, so it is difficult to say much about them.

Rigsthula

This poem has two references to "wrapping" a baby, as opposed to clothing it or putting a shirt on it. (See the non-physical evidence for the full text.)

21. ...in a cloth she wrapped him...

34. ...in silk they wrapped him...

Kalevala

There is a story in the Kalevala that tells of Kullervo, a fierce little boy who, as a three day old infant:

"... tore off his swaddling band, got rid of his covers
Smashed the lindenwood cradle, tore his whole diaper to ribbons" (31:72-73)

And later, another unnatural child is born to a woman and
"She washed her little son, wrapped him in his swaddling clothes" (50:340)

Post-Norse Swaddling Clothes

Maistresse Mathilde Bourette has produced some very nice documents on 15th c gowns and swaddles that are available online. While this is well past the Norse period, the technology and techniques are unlikely to have been significantly different.

Handout on how to swaddle a baby and simple children's gowns:

<http://www.mathildegirlgenius.com/Documentation/KASF2006/InfantOutfit.pdf>



Above Left: detail from *Physiologus* c1200CE. Arni Magnusson Institute, Reykjavik, AM 673 a I 4to. in Kristjansson, Jonas. *Icelandic Manuscripts – Sagas, History, and Art.* Icelandic Literary Society, 1993, page 40. 9979-804-34-3

Above Right: from a 14th Century edition of the *Flateyjarbok* in Kristjansson, Jonas. *Íslandske Sagaer og Handskrifter.* Saga Publishing, Reykjavik, 1970? Page 42.

Below Left:

Below Right:



Above Left: 16.26 Oxford, Bodleian Library, Junius 11, p 51, in ASTI pg 551.

Above Right: 16.24 Oxford, Bodleian Library, Junius 11, p 47, in ASTI pg 549.

Additional images can be seen in the Furniture section where Anglo-Saxon babies are depicted in cradles.

Body garments

The clothing of children is rarely commented upon in the sagas, even on the relatively rare instances where they appear, so we may be able to conclude that their clothing was the same as or sufficiently similar to the adults' so as not to elicit comment. The one comment about children's clothing I did find seems to support this since *Fljótsdæla saga* (chapter 11) describes the clothing of two ten to twelve year old boys named Helgi and Grímr as including tunics of striped rough homespun wool, trousers, and cloaks.

Anglo-Saxon illuminations show children in very simple gowns, much like those worn by the adults. Smaller children seem to wear long gowns, regardless of sex, whereas male youths may wear shorter tunics like the men. In the Anglo-Saxon illuminations examined, men sometimes wear leg wrappings or trousers, but the youths seem to be routinely depicted as barelegged.



These images are from a 14th c Icelandic manuscript and so are somewhat late for our purposes, but are the first images of non-infant Icelandic children I could find. In both cases, the youth wears a mid-thigh length tunic, very similar to that of the adult male.



Left: From a 14th c from the Stjorn compilation, AM 227 fol.

In Kristjansson, Jonas. Icelandic Manuscripts – Sagas, History, and Art. Icelandic Literary Society, 1993, page 43. 9979-804-34-3

Right: In Kristjansson, Jonas. Islandske Sagaer og Handskrifter. Saga Publishing, Reykjavik, 1970?. Page 89.

The Greenland Materials

While I am not aware of any extant Norse children's clothing, we do have a wealth of clothing from the end of the Norse period of occupation of Greenland. While this is past the period of direct interest, they are the first examples of reasonably complete children's garments from that part of the world.

Thanks to the properties of the ground and climate, many pieces of clothing were recovered from graveyards, some of which are children's gowns. Analysis of the color of the clothing seems to indicate that children's clothing was preferentially made from white or pale grey fabrics, as opposed to dark brown from adult men and patterned grays for women (WITE).

Woven into the Earth is the best source for a catalog of the finds from Norse Greenland, but several of the garments can be seen online as well, sometimes alongside some very nice reproductions. See also the supporting documents for additional images and resource.



Above: Both images from

<http://www.forest.gen.nz/Medieval/articles/garments/H44/H44.html> Accessed 3/10/2010

Hats and Hoods

There are a surprising number of hats and hoods in children's sizes that have survived, but they occur at the very extreme ends of the Viking period. Most of the examples come from the very late finds in Greenland, but there is one excellent very early Pictish example as well.

The Greenland finds include both hoods and hats. The hoods are clearly of a very late date as they usually include a liripipe or are fragmentary and may have included a liripipe that is now lost. The hats are of a very simple "pill-box" style. The hats are notable in that one was made from goat-hair fabric and the second was wool dyed red using korkje, a lichen. Please see the supporting documentation for images and descriptions of these hoods and hats.

The very early St Andrews hood has been extensively evaluated and reconstructed by Jacqui Wood. It is dated to about 600CE, so slightly predates the period of interest but hoods of this style are known from throughout the Pictish period from the Pictish symbol stones. The body of the hood is made from a 2/2 twill and it is trimmed with two types of trim, one of which is a little bit too short for the circumference. By analyzing the construction, she has determined that the hood is a recycled textile, that is, it is a garment made from pieces of other garments that have been cut down and repurposed as a hood. (Woods)

While child-sized, the hood is similar in form to the hoods seen on Pictish crossbowmen on picture stones. This alone may provide an interesting insight – ONLY crossbowmen are depicted as wearing hoods, other Picts go bareheaded unless they are veiled nuns. Therefore, there is a chance, however unable to be proven, that this hood represents "dress up clothes" for a child to make-believe that they are a fierce hunter with crossbow in hand, the extravagant trims the equivalent of sequins and ruffles on modern little girl's dress-up gowns.



St Andrew's Hood
Orkney, Scotland, c600CE
National Museums of Scotland
Personal photo

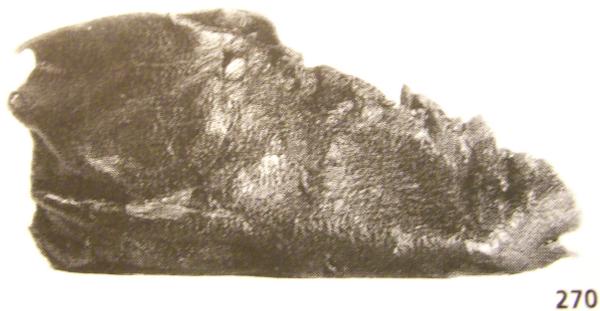
Shoes

Many children's shoes have been found in Viking contexts. They come in sizes as small as a modern child's size three (York-L&L 3338), implying that children were shod as soon as they could walk, a sensible policy in Viking cities and farms where the chance for injury from sharp items on the ground must have been significant. The shoe styles seem to have been the same or similar to adult shoe styles (York-L&L 3339) and included boots (V2C 299&329) as well as shoes (V2C 240). There is even an extant shoe last from Germany in a child's size. Shoes seem to be uniformly made of leather. See also the supporting documentation for additional citations and examples.

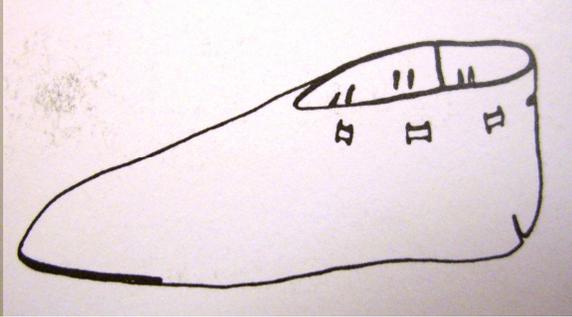


Left: Child's Boot with separately sewn on sole. 13th century Dublin. In Viking and Medieval Dublin – Catalogue of Exhibition. Ard-Mhusaem na H-Eireann, 1982, catalogue number 193.

Right: Child's Boot with separately sewn on sole. 13th century Dublin. In V2C page 329



Above: Child's shoe made from a single piece of leather and fastened with laces at the front and the heel. St Petersburg, 8th Century. In V2C pg 299.



Left: child's shoe, unreconstructed.

Right: drawing of shoe reconstructed.

Child's shoe from Haithabu, 9-10th century. In V2C page 240.



Above: A child's Boot from Wahloo, page 76.

Jewelry

Gudrun was the name of their daughter. She was the goodliest of women who grew up in Iceland, both as to looks and wits. Gudrun was such a woman of state that at that time whatever other women wore in the way of finery of dress was looked upon as children's gewgaws beside hers.

Laxdaela Saga

http://www.sagadb.org/laxdaela_saga.en

The Norse adored items of personal adornment and while the evidence for children's jewelry is somewhat limited, there are some excellent examples. But what identifies a piece of jewelry as belonging to a child? Size is one determinant but, as the quote above implies, there is, at least in some cases, a difference in quality or other properties between the jewelry of adults and that of children. Sometimes, the size of the jewelry is the best indicator that it belonged to a child, as "scaled-down" versions of iron brooches are known from children's graves (Crawford p. 176, V2C p. 281). For the purposes of this investigation, I am including jewelry either found in direct association with a child's grave, sized appropriately for a child, or both. Many more examples of children's jewelry can be found in the supporting documents.

Arm Rings

Arm rings are the items for which I have the clearest evidence of their being made of lesser materials than that used for adults. There are three examples from York of children's arm rings made from lead alloy or tin, but in a style similar to that used for adults (York-Finds 2583-4). Other arm rings of a spiral design were found in a young girls' grave in 10th century Finland.



Above: Jewelry from a girl's grave, 10th century Finnish. Finds include 65 glass beads, a circular brooch, finger and toe rings and bells. Metal items are bronze. V2C page 281.

Brooches

Children's brooches are very similar to adult brooches except that some have been scaled appropriately. (See above for round brooch from a Finnish Girl's grave.)



Above: Finds from a boy's grave, 10th century Finnish. Finds include an axe head, spear head, cross pendant on a chain, penannular brooch, and possibly a mail fragment. From V2C page 281.

According to the museum at Gotland, “the animal-head shaped brooches correspond to the tortoise shell brooches on the Swedish mainland. These brooches have had the practical function of holding together the garments, e.g. the shoulder straps. They have even been worn by small girls. Miniature animal-shaped brooches have been uncovered in infant graves.”

(http://www.gotmus.i.se/1engelska/skatter/engelska/jewellery_as_form_of_personal_expression.htm accessed 3/20/09, no citations)

Pins

Pins also seem to be similar to adults' except for being somewhat smaller, as appropriate. An example of a bone pin is reported in the article that follows and a lead alloy pin that may, like the lead alloy arm rings, have belonged to a child, is reported on York-Finds page 2583. See also Dunwell 1995 in the supporting documents for images of bone pins found in association with children's' graves.

Beads and Pendants

The beads and carved pendants worn by children in the Viking Norse period appear to be the same as adults' and include glass, jet, stone, lead, and amber. (See above for glass beads from a Finnish Girl's grave.)

Bells

Bells are known from several graves, many of them children's graves. There is an excellent example from Freswick Links that is very similar to the one found at St. Patrick's Isle, Peel, but not illustrated.

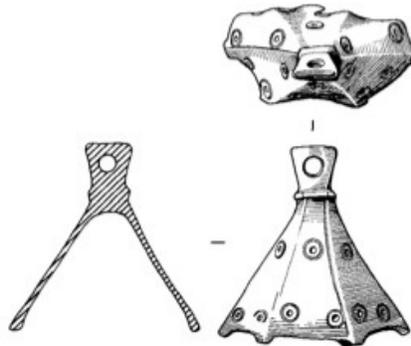


FIG. 3
Copper-alloy bell from Freswick Links, Caithness. Scale 1:1

Above: Frewick Links bell, Scotland.

Other bells are known from children's graves in Sweden and Finland, including some excellent bronze "jingle bells" illustrated above.

Other Jewelry

Other types of jewelry are known from children's graves and they seem to follow the same form and type as seen in adults' graves, with some being made on a smaller scale or of less precious metals. See V2C page 286 for an example of a tinned bronze cross.