

SPINDLE WHORL

Unique ID: LIN-D92A22

Object type certainty: Certain

Workflow status: Published

An inscribed lead spindle dating to the early 11th century. The whorl is trapezoid in cross-section and roughly circular in plan. An hour-glass shaped hole has been drilled through the centre, measuring circa 8mm diameter at the opening. The whorl is inscribed on the side and base with Norse runes.

Dr. John Hines (Cardiff University) has examined the whorl. He writes:

In late summer of 2010 a lead spindle-whorl with a Norse runic inscription was found at Saltfleetby St Clement, Lincolnshire. The whorl is from a field where previously one 11th-century stirrup-strap mount had been recorded. The whorl, weighing 49.8 grams, is plano-conical in profile and thus of 'Form A1', as defined by archaeologist Penelope Rogers in her 1997 study Textile Production at 16-22 Coppergate. The Archaeology of York: The Small Finds, 17/11. This familiar form of spindle-whorl dates primarily to the 6th to 10th centuries AD, although specimens are known from 11th-century contexts. In light of the language of the inscription, it is significant that this form is typical of the area. In fact, the late Geoff Egan had noted in his The Medieval Household: Daily Living c.1150-c.1450 that medieval lead whorls are more common in northern England than in the south, while Ingvild Øye of the University of Bergen advises that both the shape and the material would make this piece unusual in a Norwegian context.

The inscription is in two rows, one around the vertical wall of the whorl and one around the ring on the flat face that would have been uppermost when the whorl was in use. The forms of the runes, including a dotted e-rune and a particular form of o-rune, suggest that the inscription was made in the earlier 11th century - a date consistent, if only just, with that for the object itself. The whorl also has a small decorative motif cut on one side of the conical area: this is damaged but resembles a stylised plant-motif.

The direction of the runes indicates that reading should start on the vertical wall. There is much to be discussed in specialised detail concerning the decipherment of the inscription: about half of it is very clear, and exciting for its contents; a quarter is tolerably clear; the remainder is very obscure. On the wall, the text reads: **.open.ok.einmtalr.ok.palfa.peir**. The points in this transliteration represent marks between strings of letters, usually single knife-pricks. This sequence can confidently be translated as: Óðinn and Heimdallr and Þjálf, they...'. Óðinn and Heimdallr are major gods of the pre-Christian Viking pantheon. The name Þjálf is also known from Old Norse sources as a servant-boy of the god Thor; this is also an obscure poetic word associated with the sea. Þjálf, however, would be some previously unrecorded feminine counterpart of that name.

Around the face, starting at the clearest point, we can read:

ielba.peruolft.ok.kiriuesf. ielba per looks very much like hjelpa pér, meaning '...help thee', which grammatically would follow on perfectly from the text on

the wall. uoflt could represent a man's name, Úlfjótr, and ok is 'and'. At present we can only make speculative guesses for the meaning of kiriuesf, which is also the most clumsily cut part of the inscription. This is a genuinely important find. It is evidence of the use of Old Norse in a North Sea coastal community in the early 11th century; a community that used local artefacts, but followed up-to-date innovations in Scandinavian runic literacy.

Church dedications to St Clement are frequently associated with Scandinavian maritime communities, as shown in Barbara Crawford's *The Churches Dedicated to St. Clement in Medieval England: A Hagio-Geography of the Seafarer's Saint in 11th century North Europe*. Above all, if the text does include the statement 'Óðinn and Heimdallr and Þjálfá, they help thee, Úlfjótr...', this is striking evidence of the persistence of non-Christian cult: not an ostentatious display of militant paganism, but apparently in a simple invocation of traditional powers for individual, personal support.

Find of note status

This is a find of note and has been designated: National importance

Subsequent actions

Subsequent action after recording: Returned to finder

Chronology

Broad period: EARLY MEDIEVAL
Subperiod from: Late
Period from: EARLY MEDIEVAL
Subperiod to: Early
Period to: MEDIEVAL
Date from: Circa AD 1000
Date to: Circa AD 1100

Dimensions and weight

Quantity: 1
Length: 26 mm
Width: 25 mm
Thickness: 12 mm
Weight: 49.72 g

Discovery dates

Date(s) of discovery: Wednesday 1st September 2010

