

A VIKING-PERIOD SCANDINAVIAN STRIKE-A-LIGHT HANDLE FROM NORFOLK (Fig. 3)

In the autumn of 1999, Mr Kevin Canham, an experienced detectorist, was searching a ploughed field in Postwick parish, on the outskirts of Norwich. He found an unremarkable-looking copper-alloy object and took it to the next meeting of his metal-detector club. This club is one of those regularly attended by an archaeologist from Norfolk Museums Service, and the object was duly identified, recorded and returned at the next meeting. It has now been acquired by Norwich Castle Museum (NWHCM: 2000.75).

The object proved to be half of an openwork copper-alloy handle from a Viking-period iron strike-a-light. It was originally made in the shape of two horses and riders seen in profile, but has broken in half, perhaps in antiquity; the breaks are very old and worn. It is now 28 mm wide at most.

The base is split to hold the iron blade of the strike-a-light, and is slightly deeper at the original edge than at the broken centre; at the original edge is a circular hole or depression, which may be a casting flaw. Above the base is an openwork horse and rider, the three legs of the horse springing from the base and the nose joined by a long strut. The rider's arm runs to the neck of the horse. The head of the rider may be incomplete; what looks here like a nose is, on other examples, a curved-up beard. The top of the head expands into what now looks like a tall hat, but may be the start of the central suspension loop found on other examples.

The entire handle is smooth and worn, and there is no surviving decoration anywhere on it. Given the considerable wear on the breaks, it is hard to say whether the general wear occurred during the life of the strike-a-light or after deposition. The worn surface has corroded to a deep brown colour.

This object-type is exceptionally rare in Britain; the Postwick example seems to be the first to be recorded from this country. Strike-a-lights with bronze handles are part of the Viking tradition in north-eastern Europe, most having been found in Russia.¹ They were classified in the 1920s by Cleve, who grouped the horse-and-rider type together as his Type C. The type is a homogeneous group, occasionally bearing stamped or engraved ornament, with a distribution centred in south-western Finland.² The group was reviewed by Graham-Campbell in 1980; at that time, twelve of the 27 Type Cs known had been found in Finland. Graham-Campbell dates them to the Middle Viking Period, i.e. late 9th or 10th century.³

The site on which the handle was found, SMR number 31194, has not produced any other finds of the Viking Period. It consists mainly of a heavy concentration of post-medieval finds, and is thought to be a nightsoil spread from 16th- to early 19th-century Norwich. It is therefore just conceivable (although unlikely) that the strike-a-light handle came to Postwick from inner-city Norwich.

Norfolk has, over the last twenty years, produced a series of remarkable Viking-period finds, mostly of the cheap, mass-produced variety.⁴ In the last few years an imported Carolingian horse-harness mount from West Rudham has been acquired by Norwich Castle Museum, and the British Museum have acquired an exceptional Borre-style pendant from Little Snoring. These finds — all made by metal-detectorists — have

¹ J. Graham-Campbell, *Viking Artefacts* (London, 1980), 94.

² N. Cleve, 'Finländska fornsaker. 2: Eldstål med bronsfäste', *Finskt Museum*, 36 (1929), 51–60.

³ Graham-Campbell, *op. cit.* in note 1, 94 and 7; Graham-Campbell has now revised his dating of the Middle Viking Period to include the whole of the 10th century.

⁴ S. Margeson, *The Vikings in Norfolk* (Norwich, 1997).

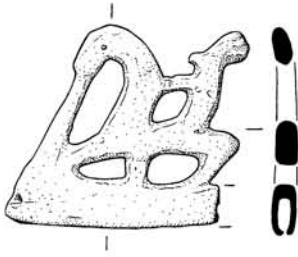


FIG. 3
Viking-period strike-a-light handle from Postwick,
Norwich, Norfolk. Scale 1:1.

radically changed earlier views of Norfolk, based on the paucity of conventional archaeological evidence, as a peripheral part of the Viking world where Scandinavian culture had little impact. In addition, the recent finding of a gold ingot and gold-working crucibles made of Thetford-type ware from the Norwich Library excavation⁵ has emphasized that Norfolk was as much a producer as an importer of high-status Viking-period objects.

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⁵ J. Bradley, M. Gaimster and C. Haith, 'Medieval Britain and Ireland in 1998', *Medieval Archaeol.*, 43 (1999), 270.