

II.

A GOLD ARMLET OF THE VIKING TIME DISCOVERED IN
SHETLAND. By GILBERT GOUDIE, F.S.A. Scot.

It may perhaps be said with truth that no single district of equal area within the bounds of Scotland has surpassed, or even equalled, the Shetland Islands in the extent and variety of its contributions of objects of antiquity found within its limits to the National Museum under the charge of the Society. The prehistoric ages are represented by very numerous collections of implements, weapons, vessels, etc., some of these unique in character; and by characteristic relics from brochs and other inhabited sites. The early Christian period is well attested by sculptured stones and Ogham-inscribed monuments; the Viking time and the subsequent settlement of the Norsemen have left a legacy of Runic inscriptions, personal ornaments, and other objects, including legal and other documents in the Norse language; while the husbandry and the neo-archaic or primitive forms of life prevailing in the islands up to quite recent times have been illustrated by examples of domestic and agricultural articles described in our *Proceedings* from time to time. The object of the present paper is the description of a further relic from Shetland, equal in interest to any that have ever come before the Society—the gold armlet some time ago discovered, and now acquired for the Museum.

This massive and beautiful example of early art workmanship (fig. 1) was discovered some years ago in the small isle of Oxna (*i.e.* *Yxney*, isle of Oxen), adjacent to the Burra Isles, on the west side of the southern promontory of the Shetland mainland. The finder is a young man, Mr James Fullerton (a name locally pronounced "Fullinter"), now at Hamnavoe in Burra, who came upon it accidentally when playing about as a boy on his native island. The

extent of the island is only about one and a half miles each way, and it is in the occupation of two or three families only. The place where the bracelet was found is a bare spot, the surface of which had been scalped over and over again to provide extra soil for the adjacent arable land worn out by prolonged cultivation. It is thought that 18 or 20 inches of the original soil had been removed by this



Fig. 1. Gold Armlet found in the Isle of Oxna, Shetland.

scalping process, so that the bracelet lay, in all probability, at a little more than that depth beneath the former surface. It is now, of course, impossible to say whether it had been intentionally deposited at that depth, or whether, if accidentally lost, it had worked its way downward by its own weight during many centuries past. But, whatever the circumstances may have been, a portion of its outer diameter was exposed at the time of its discovery, its glitter in

the sunlight attracting the notice of the finder. He had some difficulty in pulling it out from the strong attachment of fibrous roots in which it was embedded.

The armlet (or bracelet) is of solid gold, $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches in width in its interior, and $2\frac{7}{8}$ inches in its exterior diameter, at the widest part, and its weight is 964 grains troy. It is composed of four strands of the metal, finely polished, and interpleated into a continuous circular chain, broadest at the back opposite where the ends meet, and gradually diminishing in girth towards the points, which are joined together by a flattened and elongated lozenge-shaped formation which welds them together and makes the circle complete. I am inclined to think that the ends were not originally united in this way, but that their welding together has been a later operation, possibly with a view to render the armlet a medium of exchange like the ring-money of the Norsemen common in the Viking age, its intrinsic value at the time having been probably at least six times more than at the present day, as was the computation of Worsæ, the great Danish authority, in dealing with the golden horns of Gallehus in Denmark, in his *Pre-history of the North*, translated by Dr Morland Simpson, one of our Fellows.

This rare example of early goldsmith's art is kindred in style of workmanship to some armlets and necklets which formed part of a hoard of objects found in 1858 at Skail in the parish of Sandwick, in Orkney, and described by Dr Joseph Anderson in the *Proceedings*, vol. x. p. 575 and vol. xv. p. 286. But in that case the articles were of silver, while the present find is unique in this, that it is the only object of gold of this intertisted pattern that has as yet been found in this country. In point of fact, ornaments of wire, or strands, intertisted in this way are of rare occurrence anywhere, and as a rule are of silver. Examples in gold are not, however, wholly wanting, as a very limited number are preserved in the archæological collections of Sweden, Norway, and Denmark. This well-known scarcity there-

fore renders the present example all the more interesting as it has been found within the Scottish area, though the district in which it has so long lain undisturbed was really an outlying dependency of the Crown of Norway at the time when, in all probability, it fell aside or was deposited in mother earth. For the sake of comparison, a



Fig. 2. Neck Ring from the Skaill hoard, Orkney.

figure of a neck-ring (fig. 2), part of the Skaill hoard, may be introduced here, the point of distinction being that in the case of Skaill, as already stated, the objects are of silver.

There is little that can be advanced by way of illustration or explanation of this valuable bracelet now last discovered, though its original use, for a lady of high rank, being obviously too small to pass over the hand of a man, is apparent. While it may be accepted

as a production of the late iron age (700 to 1000 A.D.), and in personal use in Viking times, we are yet unable to speak with certainty of its place of manufacture. The elaborate intertwisting of the strands is highly suggestive of the Celtic interlaced ornamental work on stone, in metal, and in manuscript, with which, in this country, and especially in Ireland, we are familiar, but we cannot on that account claim it as a product of Celtic art on this side of the North Sea. In his *Pre-history of the North*, Worsæ admits that many such ornaments were imitations of Western forms, and in his *Account of the Danes and Norwegians in England, Scotland, and Ireland*, he regards them as the work of the Northmen themselves, and as indications of the existence in the North of a high degree of wealth and luxury during the Viking period, and even at an earlier date. There was, in his view, reason to believe that such ornaments had in some cases been buried as offerings to the gods, in the hope that the treasures would come back to the owner in the other world.¹ The later school of Norwegian archæologists, headed by Professor Bugge of Christiania, recognise more fully the influence of Western civilisation in shaping the art, the customs, and even the mythology of the Norsemen in the literary form in which it has come down to us, and might not improbably regard our armlet as a product of the West, at all events as produced under strong Western influences, in the *Wanderjahre* and the Viking age. These views are specially set forth in Bugge's *Vikingerne*, 1904, and in his *Vesterlandenes Indflydelse paa Nordboernes og særlig Nordmændenes ydre Kultur, Levesæt og Samfunds-forhold i Vikingetiden*,

¹ As N. M. Petersen puts it in *Danmark's Historie i Hedenold*, Kjobenhavn, 1837: "Much of the riches gained in Viking expeditions was not used in this life, but buried in the earth, to be used yonder. The hero hid his treasure in a hole, or sunk it in a spring, in some place where neither he nor anyone else should come at it. The thralls who assisted in this were killed, either because dead men tell no tales, or more probably that the treasure might be watched by their souls. Such store gained by 'Viking' was not therefore to be reckoned as inheritance, nor could sons receive it after their fathers. They were bound to deposit it with them in the howe."

Christiania, 1905. Upon the whole, our armlet may be regarded as probably the product of the mixed art of the mixed population of Celts and Norsemen in the colonial dependencies of Norway in the time of the predatory expeditions and settlements in the countries of the West.

At this time Orkney and Shetland are understood to have been in quite an advanced state. According to the latest Norwegian authority, Professor Bugge, the civilisation of the West made the deepest impression upon the Norse people in those islands; so much so that the islands might be regarded as then occupying, in reference to Norwegian culture, much the same position as did Cyprus and Crete to the culture of ancient Greece—in each case the centre of civilisation and art in the outlying regions of the respective home lands.¹ So late as the fourteenth, and early fifteenth, century, in the days of Earl Henry II., the little Court of Orkney was “the most elegant and refined in Europe, with the official services of many proud Scottish nobles,” if we may accept as an approximation to truth the perhaps somewhat pardonable exaggeration of the late David Balfour of Trinaby in his *Oppressions of the Sixteenth Century in Orkney and Shetland* (Maitland Club, 1859). But it is a fact that art workmanship, especially in silver, is successfully cultivated in the Faroe Isles and Iceland—which were populated by the same people—up to the present day, though it is no less true that this art has long since died out both in Orkney and Shetland.

For the possession of this precious relic the Society is indebted to Miss Elizabeth Stout, teacher in Burra Isle, for whose admirable essay on the Brochs and Standing Stones of Shetland the Chalmers-Jervise prize was awarded by the Council last year. When Miss Stout became aware of the existence of the bracelet she lost no time

¹ *Dybest ned gik vel den vesterlandske paavirkning paa Orknoerne og Shetlands-
oerne, som kunde kaldes vor Kulturs Cypem og Kreta. (Vesterlandenes Indflydelse
paa Nordb. i Vikingetiden, Christiania, p. 401.)*

in communicating with me ; and at my instance succeeded in procuring it for the purpose of inspection here, with the result of its being acquired permanently, by purchase, for the Museum. With such a keen eye and a comprehension so intelligent, there is every reason to hope that further important service in the interests of archæological research in Shetland may be looked for from this talented young lady, who has shown herself so deeply interested in the history and antiquities of her native country, and is now a Corresponding Member of the Society.