

# A Norse Viking-age grave from Cruach Mhor, Islay

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## ABSTRACT

*In 1958, a field survey at Cruach Mhor on the west coast of Islay produced a series of artefacts which suggest that there had been a rich female Viking burial on the site. Possible grave goods included two oval brooches, beads, spindle whorl, knives, sickle and the socket of a weaving batten. An ornamental buckle loop found at the site in 1978 may also belong to the grave, which appears to date to the late ninth or 10th century AD.*

## FIND CIRCUMSTANCES

In the course of field-survey on Islay in July 1958, the Islay Archaeological Survey Group collected surface finds from a sand bunker in the machair at Cruach Mhor (NGR NR 308 545), on Laggan Bay, about ¾ miles (5 km) south of Bowmore (*Discovery Excav Scot* 1958, 13; Wilson & Hurst 1959, 301). The material included portions of two bronze oval brooches, iron fragments, beads, and a soapstone spindle whorl, in addition to lumps of slag, flints and coarse pottery. As the site produced an unusual concentration of surface finds, it was systematically resurveyed in June 1959. A grid was laid out, and the artefacts within each square were collected. This second examination did not produce significant results, and the finds were of a similar nature to those recovered the previous year (Richards & Lewin, nd; *Islay Archaeol Survey Grp* 1960, *Gazetteer*, (5)8).

In 1961 the foundations of a building of possibly Norse character were excavated nearby (NR 779 570) (*Discovery Excav Scot* 1961, 13; Wilson & Hurst 1964, 312). The site was also examined in 1976 and 1977 by archaeologists from the University of Glasgow (Alcock & Alcock 1980, 66). Like the Islay Archaeological Survey Group, the team from Glasgow found a quantity of pot sherds, including late Neolithic or early Bronze-Age comb-decorated fragments and some grass-tempered ware that is believed to be of Viking-period date (*ibid*, 67). They also found the remnants of a building that was being destroyed by erosion. It may date to the Viking period, but the evidence was insufficient to date it without excavation (*ibid*).

Also recovered from the site was the loop of a small bronze buckle, found by Mr Gordon Booth of the Islay Museum in 1978 (J Close-Brooks, pers comm).

The artefacts recovered by the Islay Archaeological Survey Group and Mr Booth were sent to the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland (now the Royal Museum of Scotland) for examination and analysis (see appendix A).

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### ANALYSIS OF THE FINDS

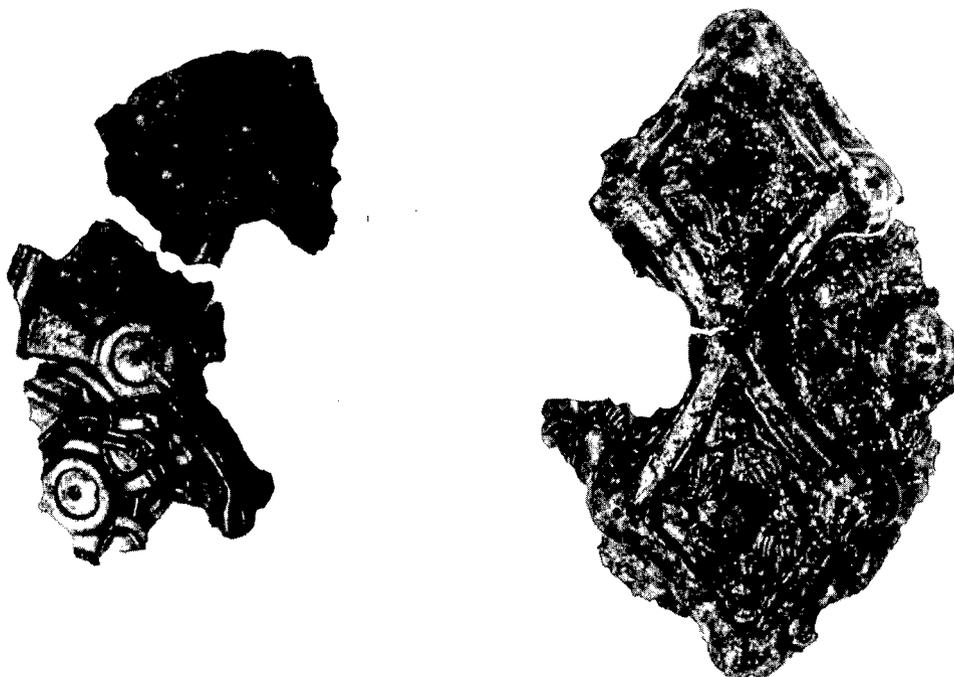
All the artefacts from this site are unstratified surface finds, so any attempt to reconstruct their original associations must be tentative. However, the presence of a pair of oval brooches suggested to investigators that there may have been a Norse woman's burial on the site (RCAMS 1984, 150). A pair of oval brooches is one of the most characteristic features of Norse women's graves during the Viking period (Petersen 1955). While a single brooch could represent either a grave or a loose find, the discovery of a matched pair strongly suggests that the brooches were deposited deliberately, as in a grave.

In addition to the brooches, the material from the site includes a number of other items which are frequently found in Viking women's burials: the bronze buckle, six beads, a spindle whorl, a small perforated whetstone, one or two small iron knives, a sickle, and an iron socket, probably the handle of a weaving batten (Petersen 1951; 1955).

Other artefacts from the site include an irregular disc of pumice, three portions of an iron blade, several links of iron chain, and 10 unrelated lengths of iron bar. While parallels can be found for most of these items within the corpus of Viking graves they are also found on settlement sites (eg Birsay: Curle 1982), so their association with the proposed grave is less certain.

The bronze stick-pin and glass fragment do not fit within the Scandinavian corpus and probably relate to pre-Viking activity on the site.

As indicated above, it was the discovery of the two oval brooches (illus 1) which alerted investigators to the possibility of a Norse burial on the site. Although the brooches from Cruach Mhor



ILLUS 1 Pair of bronze oval brooches from Cruach Mhor, Islay (scale 1:1)

are fragmentary, enough of each remains to identify them as a pair of the single-shelled type corresponding to P37 (Petersen 1928) and R647 (Rygh 1885). This is one of the most frequently occurring brooch types in Scandinavia, and it is also common in Norse women's burials in Scotland. Two were found in a grave at Valtos, Lewis (Grieg 1940, 74), and another pair came from a grave at Westness, Rousay, Orkney (Stevenson 1968, 26). Single brooches of this type have been found at Clibberswick, Unst, Shetland (Grieg 1940, 75), and at Pierowall, Westray, Orkney (*ibid*, 94). One was found in the 18th century in the island of 'Sangay' in the Sound of Harris (*Vetusta Monumenta*, ii (1978), p 2), thought possibly to be the island of Langay (RCAMS 1928, liv); this may have been one of a pair. There is also a pair of uncertain provenance in the Perth Museum (Grieg 1940, 100). The reliability of the find combinations used by Petersen (1928) to date oval brooches has been questioned by Almgren (1955, 84) and Jansson (1971, 69; 1985) but they both agree that there are probably enough examples of this particular type to date it to the ninth century.

Another artefact which is almost certainly of Scandinavian rather than insular origin is the socketed iron weaving-batten, an implement which was used to beat the weft upwards on a warp-weighted loom. To the writer's knowledge, no such weaving-battens have been found in native contexts in Scotland, while they are often found in Viking-age women's graves in Scandinavia, particularly in Norway (Petersen 1951, 285; Sjøvold 1974, 249).

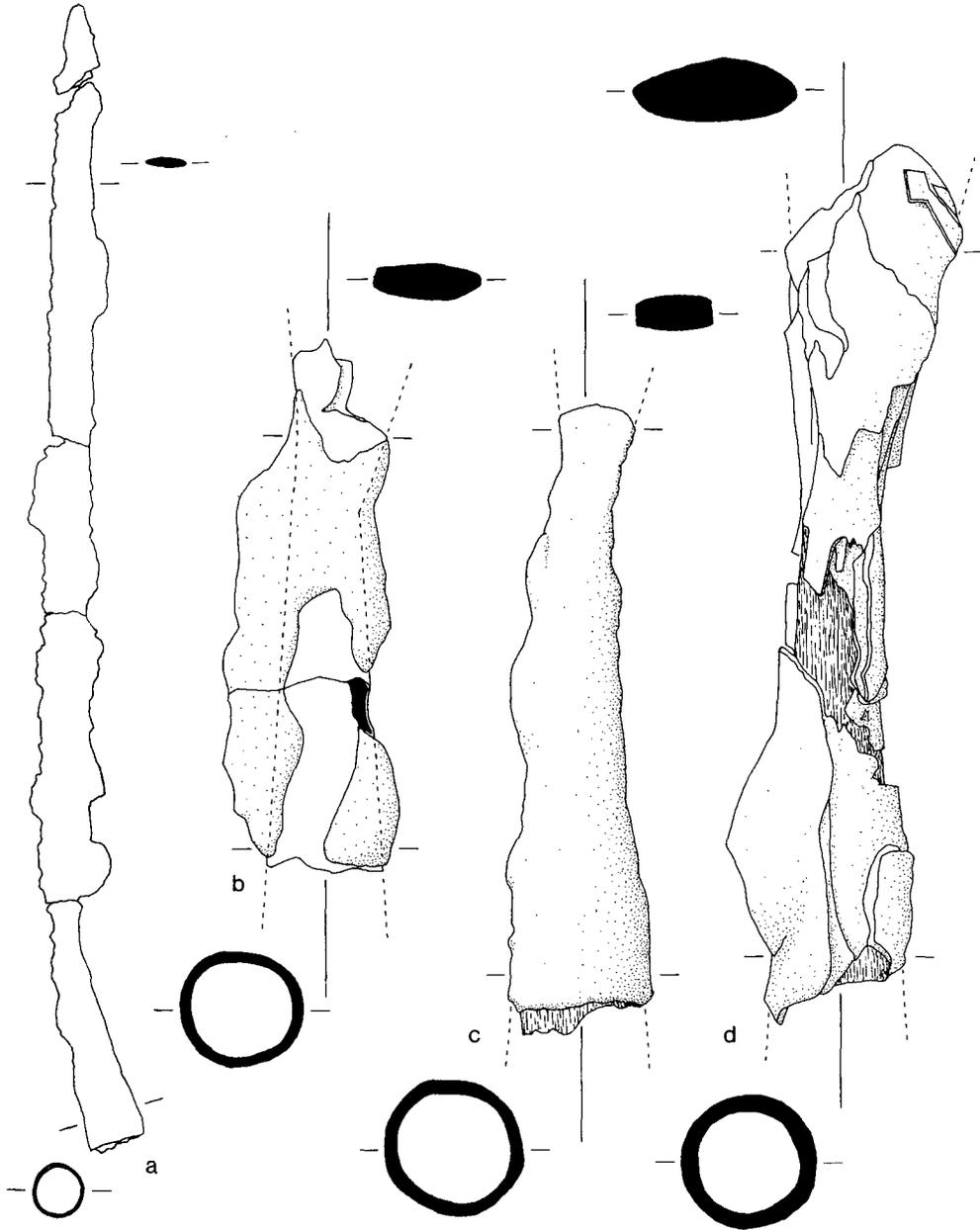
The paucity of socketed iron weaving-battens may be caused by a failure to recognize them. Of the four examples found in Viking graves in Scotland (illus 2), only the battens from Westness, Rousay, Orkney were correctly identified at the time of the excavation (Stevenson 1968, 26; Kaland 1973, 91.<sup>1</sup> Both the example from Cruach Mhor and one from a Viking woman's grave at Ardvonrig, Barra (Edge & Williams 1863, 229) were originally described as weapons.

The weaving-batten from Barra (British Museum: 95, 6–13, 11) was assumed by the excavator to be a man's sword, as the blade was 2'9" (0.84 m) long. When the finds were deposited in the British Museum, this interpretation was disputed. The reconstructed blade was dismantled, and the object was identified and catalogued as a spearhead on the basis of the socket. No attempt was made to account for the length of the blade. The socket from Cruach Mhor was also assumed to be that of a spearhead.

However, an examination of weaving-battens has shown that they display a distinctively asymmetrical profile due to the fact that the blade was offset laterally from the socket by about 10°. The offset can be seen clearly in the Norwegian weaving-battens illustrated by Rygh (1885, fig 440) and Petersen (1951, fig 155) and also in the example from Westness (illus 2a). This offset causes the blade to expand asymmetrically from the neck of the socket, so that on one side the angle between the blade and the socket is about 160°, while the other side is straight or only slightly concave in profile. There is a slight variation in the precise angles involved, but this asymmetric profile is the most easily recognizable feature of weaving-battens of this type, and clearly distinguishes them from spearheads. Both the sockets from Cruach Mhor and Barra display this characteristic asymmetric profile, although not enough of the Cruach Mhor socket survives to measure the precise degree of offset.

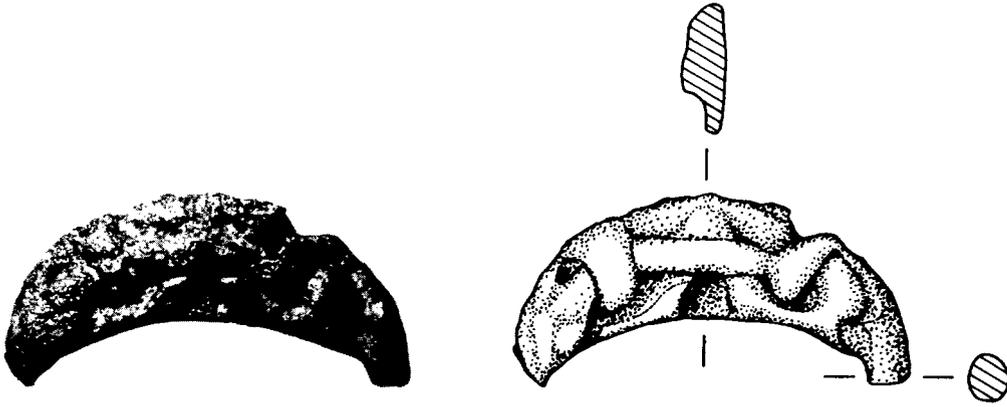
The blade fragments found at Cruach Mhor cannot definitely be associated with the weaving-batten socket, but it is likely that they are related. They exhibit the same smooth lenticular section and gently tapering profile as the blade on the batten from Westness. They cannot be interpreted as fragments of a sword or spear blade, as the former would normally have a central groove, or fuller, and the latter a keeled or lozenge-shaped cross section. In addition, there is a distinctive surface accretion on both the socket and the blade fragments which suggests that they were deposited together, as it is not found on any other iron from the site.

Although it was found several years after the initial examination of the site, the bronze buckle (illus 3) is also well paralleled in Viking-period graves in Scandinavia and Scotland. The best parallels



ILLUS 2 (a) Weaving-batten from Westness, Rousay, Orkney and weaving-batten sockets from (b) Cruach Mhor, (c) Westness (a detail of a) and (d) Ardvonrig, Barra (scale (a) 1:5; (b), (c), (d) 1:2)

for the form of the buckle are a series of buckles from 10th-century graves at Birka, Sweden, which are similarly decorated with simple Borre-style interlace (Arbman 1943, Taf 87), but examples have also been found on Norway (eg Petersen 1951, fig 273) also from 10th-century contexts. Ornamental buckles and belt fittings are well represented in the corpus of Viking graves discovered in Scotland. They have been found in men's graves at Ballinaby, Islay (Edwards 1934, 74), Kiloran Bay, Colonsay



ILLUS 3 Hoop of a bronze buckle (scale 2:1)

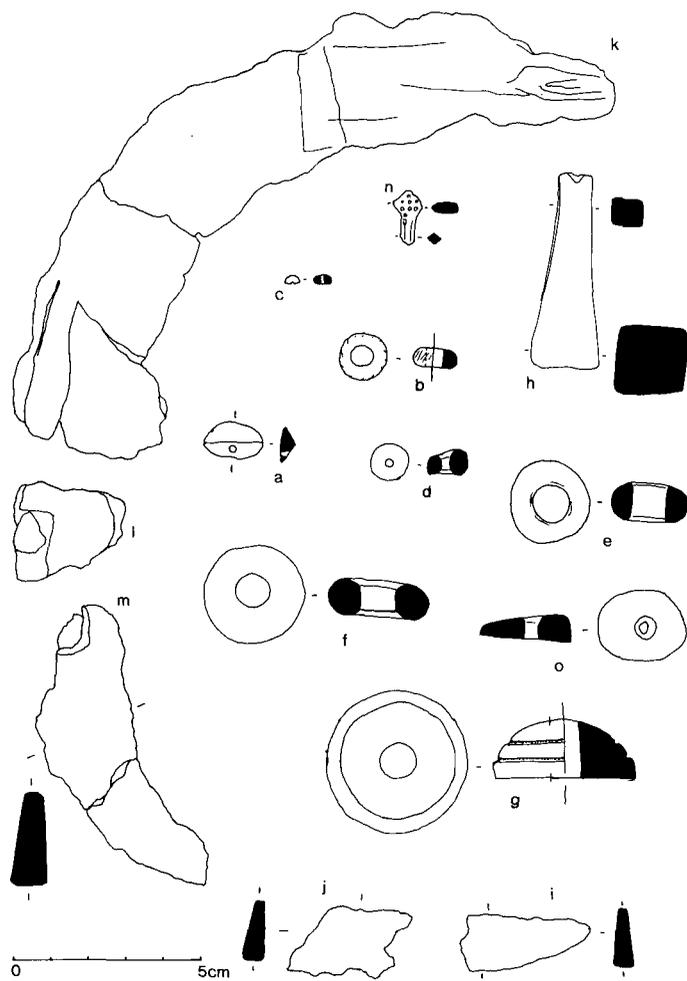
(Grieg 1940, 48), Kildonan, Eigg (*ibid*, 67) and Reay, Caithness (*ibid*, 22) and in women's graves at Kildonan, Eigg (*ibid*, 69), Valtos, Lewis (*ibid*, 75) Kneep, Lewis (Welanders *et al* 1987, 159).

The small rectangular perforated whetstone is another artefact frequently found in Viking graves. In Scandinavia they are usually found in men's graves, but they also occur in women's graves (Petersen 1951, 256). In Scotland, whetstones have been found in men's graves at Kiloran Bay, Colonsay (Grieg 1940, 54), Reay, Caithness (*ibid*, 19), on Eriskay (*ibid*, 73) and at Skail, Orkney (*ibid*, 82). One was found in the woman's grave at Ardvonrig, Barra (*ibid*, 72), and another in the woman's grave at Kneep, Lewis (Welanders *et al* 1987, 157). Ellis (1969, 133) believes these small pendant whetstones to be a Norse introduction to the British Isles, which would indicate a Viking-period date for the Cruach Mhor example. However, in addition to occurring in graves they are also found on settlement sites (eg Jarlshof: Hamilton 1956, 119) and that possibility cannot be overlooked in this instance.

There is less certainty about the specifically Scandinavian character of the beads, sickle, knife fragments and spindle whorl, although these are all objects which occur regularly in Viking burials in Scotland (eg Reay, Caithness (Grieg 1940, 20), Kildonan, Eigg (*ibid*, 68) and Westness, Rousay, Orkney (Kaland 1973, 94ff)) as well as in Scandinavia (Petersen 1928, 162; 1951, 140, 188, 302), but they can also be paralleled by material from settlement sites (eg Birsay: Curle 1982).

The bead-like disc of pumice is unparalleled in Viking burials in Scotland, but it may belong to the collection of beads. Links of iron chain are also without parallel in Scottish Viking graves. Similar links were found in grave 944 at Birka, Sweden (Arbman 1943, 370), but this comparison is somewhat forced, and the links could as easily be related to settlement activity on the site. The context of the remaining iron is equally uncertain. Unidentified pieces of iron are occasionally found in Viking-period graves in Scotland (eg Carn nan Bharraich, Oronsay; Grieg 1940, 43), but not frequently enough to suggest that the iron from Cruach Mhor belonged to the postulated grave.

While all the objects discussed above may belong to the grave, the small stick-pin head and the fragment of glass almost certainly do not. Stick-pins, as opposed to ringed pins, are not a characteristic feature of Viking graves in Scotland. Only two of them occur in this context, and both are magnificent and unique specimens. One, from a woman's grave at Ballinaby, Islay (Grieg 1940, 39) is silver with a filigree bead forming the head. The other, a bronze pin, was found on Tiree (*ibid*, 63) and has a large, open lozenge-shaped head. The best parallels from the Cruach Mhor pin, which has a small discoidal head ornamented with irregular punched dots, are a series of disc-head pins found at various sites in Scotland (Laing 1973, 70). The dating evidence for these pins is scant, but Laing



ILLUS 4 Selected artefacts from Cruach Mhor: a, Amber bead; b, Blue glass bead; c, Yellow glass bead; d-f, Jet beads; g, Steatite spindle whorl; h, Whetstone; i-j, Knife fragments; k-m, Sickle fragments; n, Bronze stick-pin; o, pumice bead (scale 1:2)

believes that they belong to the fifth to eighth centuries AD. If this is the case, then the pin from Cruach Mhor should probably be associated with pre-Viking activity on the site.

Fragments of Dark-age glass, apart from beads, have only been reported from a few sites in Scotland (eg the Mote of Mark (Harden 1956, 154), the Brough of Birsay (*ibid*) and Castle Rock, Dumbarton (Alcock 1976, 109). No glass occurs in any of the Norse graves found in Scotland. While glass fragments do occasionally appear in Viking graves in Scandinavia (Hunter 1975, 84), they do not occur frequently enough to cite as evidence for including the Cruach Mhor fragment among the proposed grave goods.

In conclusion, although it is not possible to state that any specific item necessarily represents a grave deposit, parallels can be drawn for the occurrence of most of the objects from Cruach Mhor in Viking women's graves. All of the finds, with the exception of the pair of oval brooches, are equally

consistent with finds from Viking-period settlement sites (eg Jarlshof: Hamilton 1956, 93ff and Birsay: Curle 1982), and this possibility cannot be totally ruled out, especially as there are indications of Viking-period settlement activity on the site (Alcock 1976). However, the combination of characteristically Scandinavian ornaments with agricultural and textile implements is entirely in keeping with the known pattern of women's burials of the ninth or 10th centuries in Scandinavia (cf Schetelig 1912). Similarly well-appointed Viking women's graves have been found in Scotland at Ardvonrig, Barra (Edge & Williams 1863) (although identified by the excavator as a man's grave), at Ballinaby, Islay (Grieg 1940, 39), at Valtos and Kneep, Lewis (Grieg 1940, 62; Welander *et al* 1987) and at Westness, Rousay, Orkney (Stevenson 1968). The oval brooches almost certainly came from a grave, and the discovery of the other items within such a small area adds strength to the hypothesis that at least some of them were deposited with the brooches and represent the remains of a richly furnished Viking woman's grave of the ninth or 10th century.

## APPENDIX A

### ARTEFACTS

The following artefacts may belong to the proposed Viking grave.

#### Bronze oval brooch (illus 1)

Of the single-shelled variety, ornamented as R 647 (Rygh 1885) and P37 (Petersen 1923). The edges of the brooch are missing, and only the central portion remains. The pin, which is also missing, was secured between two upright trapezoidal flanges projecting from the underside of the brooch and a third similar flange was bent over to form the catch. The underside of the brooch bears the positive impression of a plain-weave textile.

L 89 mm, W 53 mm

#### Bronze oval brooch (illus 1)

As above. Only a quarter of the brooch, including a portion of the rim, survives. There is the positive impression of a plain-weave textile on the underside.

L 65 mm, W 54 mm

Additionally, there are some fragments of bronze which may belong to either brooch. A sample of this material was analysed by the Royal Scottish Museum with the following results (Richards & Lewin):

Total weight: 0.5 g

Copper (Cu)	79.5%	(75.4%)
Tin (Sn)	0.3(5)%	(0.2%)
Lead (Pb)	0.2%	
Zinc (Zn)	5.7(7)%	
Iron (Fe)	0.1%	

Spectrographic analyses showed the following metals to be present: Sn, Cu, Ag, Zn, Pb, As, Fe<sup>2+</sup>, Hg(?).

I am grateful to the Royal Scottish Museum for allowing me to publish these results.

#### Bronze buckle (illus 3)

The loop of a small bronze buckle, with cast interlace ornament.

L 25 mm, W 1.2 mm

#### Amber bead (illus 4a)

Of irregular lentoid profile and triangular section.

L 3 mm, D 17 mm

Glass bead (illus 4b)

Blue with faint striations, annular.  
L 5 mm, D 12 mm

Glass bead (illus 4c)

Half only, opaque yellow, oblate.  
L 3 mm, D 5 mm

Three jet beads (illus 4d, 4e, 4f)

Annular, the smallest having a somewhat wedge-shaped profile.  
L 10 mm, D 26 mm; L 10 mm, D 22 mm; L 7 mm, D 10 mm

Steatite spindle whorl (illus 4g)

Circular with a plano-convex profile, ornamented with two parallel grooves encircling the convex surface.

H 16 mm, D 38 mm

Iron socket (illus 2c)

Probably from a weaving-batten similar to Petersen (1951), fig 155. The piece consists of a tapered iron socket with a transverse iron pin piercing the open end. At the other end of the piece is the base of a solid iron blade of lenticular section which expands asymmetrically from the base of the socket so that the longitudinal axis of the blade is offset from that of the socket.

L 142 mm, D 330 mm

Whetstone (illus 4h)

Rectangular with a slight taper. The narrower end is perforated, and the end is broken-off at the point of the perforation.

L 51 mm, W 19 mm, Th 9 mm

Iron blade (illus 4i)

The tip of a small knife.  
L 32 mm, H 15 mm, Th 4 mm

Iron blade (illus 4j)

Fragment of a small knife.  
L 30 mm, H 18 mm, Th 5 mm

Iron sickle blade (illus 4k, 4l, 4m)

Fragmentary, in three discontinuous sections.

L 180 mm, H 34 mm, Th 11 mm; L 25 mm, H 29 mm, Th 8 mm; L 82 mm, H 24 mm, Th 6 mm

Iron blade

Three connecting lengths of lenticular section. This may be the blade of the weaving-batten listed above, but the association is not certain.

L (total) 153 mm, W 34 mm, Th 6 mm

The following artefacts are more likely to be related to the settlement activity on the site.

Bronze stick-pin (illus 4n)

With an upright, irregular discoidal head ornamented with punched dots. The shaft is incomplete.  
L 14 mm

**Glass fragment**

Pale green with two parallel thin white trails.  
16 mm×10 mm×2 mm

**Pumice (illus 4o)**

An irregular perforated disc, possibly a bead.  
L 7 mm, D 23 mm

**Iron chain**

Two complete and two fragmentary thin oval links made of rods approximately circular in section.  
L 47 mm, W 15 mm; L 45 mm, W 16 mm; L 43 mm, W 13 mm; L 24 mm, W 15 mm

**Iron bars**

Ten unrelated lengths of rectangular section. One of them is bent in half in a manner reminiscent of a pair of shears, however as it is not flattened at the bow to form a spring this identification is unlikely.

123 mm×22 mm×6 mm; 112 mm×24 mm×5 mm; 78 mm×19 mm×5 mm; 70 mm×12 mm×11 mm;  
56 mm×9 mm×5 mm; 50 mm×20 mm×5 mm; 47 mm×15 mm×4 mm; 40 mm×17 mm×8 mm;  
35 mm×9 mm×5 mm; 34 mm×18 mm×15 mm

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I am grateful to Dr Joanna Close-Brooks, formerly of the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland (now the Royal Museum of Scotland) for the invitation to publish the Viking-age artefacts from Cruach Mhor and for her invaluable assistance with this study. In particular her reconstruction of the Westness weaving-batten was both reassuring and timely. Dr Sigrid Kaland kindly allowed me to publish this weaving-batten in advance of her own publication of the entire Westness cemetery. I am also grateful to Dr James Graham-Campbell of University College London and Mrs Leslie Webster of the British Museum for their assistance and suggestions in regard to the identification of weaving battens. Finally, thanks should go to Mr Gordon Booth of the Islay Museum and to the Islay Archaeological Survey group for their continuing field work on this site.

**NOTE**

1 The weaving-batten from the grave excavated at Westness in 1963 is in the RMS: IL 732 (Stevenson 1968, 26). The weaving-batten found in 1968 and other artefacts from graves by Sigrid Kaland are at the University of Bergen, Norway where they are still under investigation (Kaland 1973).

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