

Remarkable Viking Find in Remote Site

By Dr. Mark Redknapp

THE MUSEUM has recently acquired one of the most remarkable examples of late Viking art to be found in Wales. The discovery of the lower guard of a Viking sword, dated to about AD 1100, was made by a sports diver in August 1991. The findspot lies off the Small reef, making it one of the most remote archaeological sites in Wales – some 13 miles due west of Skomer island (Dyfed), the nearest landfall being the island of Grassholm, approximately 7 miles due east.

The find is cast in brass, each side being finely decorated with a pair of stylised animals in profile, interwoven with thin, snake-like beasts. On the top of the guard two animals with open jaws bite the position of the grip which once projected through the guard, but has now perished. The main fields of ornament are inlaid with silver wire, and the background was originally filled with a black inlay called niello, to form a handsome design of gold, black and silver appearance.



● Detail of beast on the top face of the Smalls guard

This decoration is in a style known as *Urnes*, which took its name from the decoration of a small wooden church built at Urnes in western Norway in about AD1060. The new find, with its elegant, refined animal profiles, reminds us that the Vikings were not only pirates and raiders, but also craftsmen and creators of art which, based on animal forms, was full of vigour and vitality. Its ornament is related to metalwork produced in Ireland from the second half of the 11th century, where it caught native imagination, as can be seen in



● Detail of an animal in profile depicted on one side of the Smalls sword guard



● Diving operations on the Smalls reef (1992)

the famous Cross of Cong (dated c.1123 and St. Manchan's Shrine (12th-century).

Following the identification of the find, the Secretary of State for Wales designated the site under the Protection of Wrecks Act 1973, which aims to prevent unauthorised interference on wreck sites considered to be of archaeological, historic or artistic importance. Such was the rarity of the discovery that the Department of Archaeology and Numismatics was granted a licence to survey the site, and two assessments were undertaken in May and June 1992, with the support of divers from Cardiff, Swansea, Hastings and the Milton Keynes Sub-Aqua Club (who discovered the sword guard).

The logistics of such an investigation were formidable, with large swells frequently rolling unhindered from the Atlantic and smashing onto the exposed rocks. Notwithstanding such difficulties, it was possible to inspect the area and complete video and photographic records of the underwater environment

of the reef, and the likely context of the find. As a result, it is now known that the site lies to the south of the present lighthouse, at the end of one of the underwater gullies of the basalt and dolerite formations that make up the reef.

The discovery of a prized possession in such a location is unlikely to represent casual single loss, but rather the capsize and loss of a vessel, probably Viking, on one of the long-distance sea-routes at some point during the period of frequent attacks by the Dublin fleet on wealthy centres such as St. David's and Bristol. The ship was a dramatic symbol of Viking culture, and to judge from other Viking finds the vessel carrying the sword may have measured between 13 and 28 metres in length – either a large, slender, fast ship for warfare, or a broader, sturdier vessel for the long-distance transport of people and cargoes.

Many ships were lost on the Smalls before the advent of navigational aids such as radar and lighthouses, and any vessel wishing to travel to Ireland from the south coast of Wales still needs to keep a course well to the south of the 'Hats and Barrels' to be sure of clearing these hazardous rocks, once the stepping-stone islands of Skockholm, Skomer and Grassholm (all Scandinavian names) have been passed, with their dangerous streams of Wildgoose Race and Jack Sound.

The Smalls sword guard is undergoing conservation prior to its future display. The rarity of the find, the quality of workmanship and the nature of the findspot are factors which shed light on the operations of Norsemen around the Welsh coast.



● The Smalls sword, c.AD1100