



1. Foreign Trade

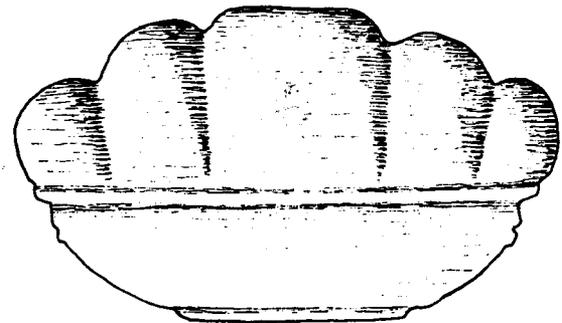
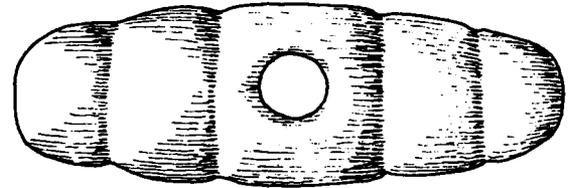
Dominic Tweddle

Many people still think of the Vikings as harsh, brutal people who added to their income from farming poor land in Scandinavia by raiding the towns, villages and monasteries of Britain and Europe, looting gold and silver, and carrying away people to use or sell as slaves.

No doubt there is some truth in this picture, but Arab merchants in Russia who dealt with the Vikings took a different view, seeing them primarily as peaceful traders: "They have no estates, villages or fields; their only business is trade in sable, squirrel and other furs."

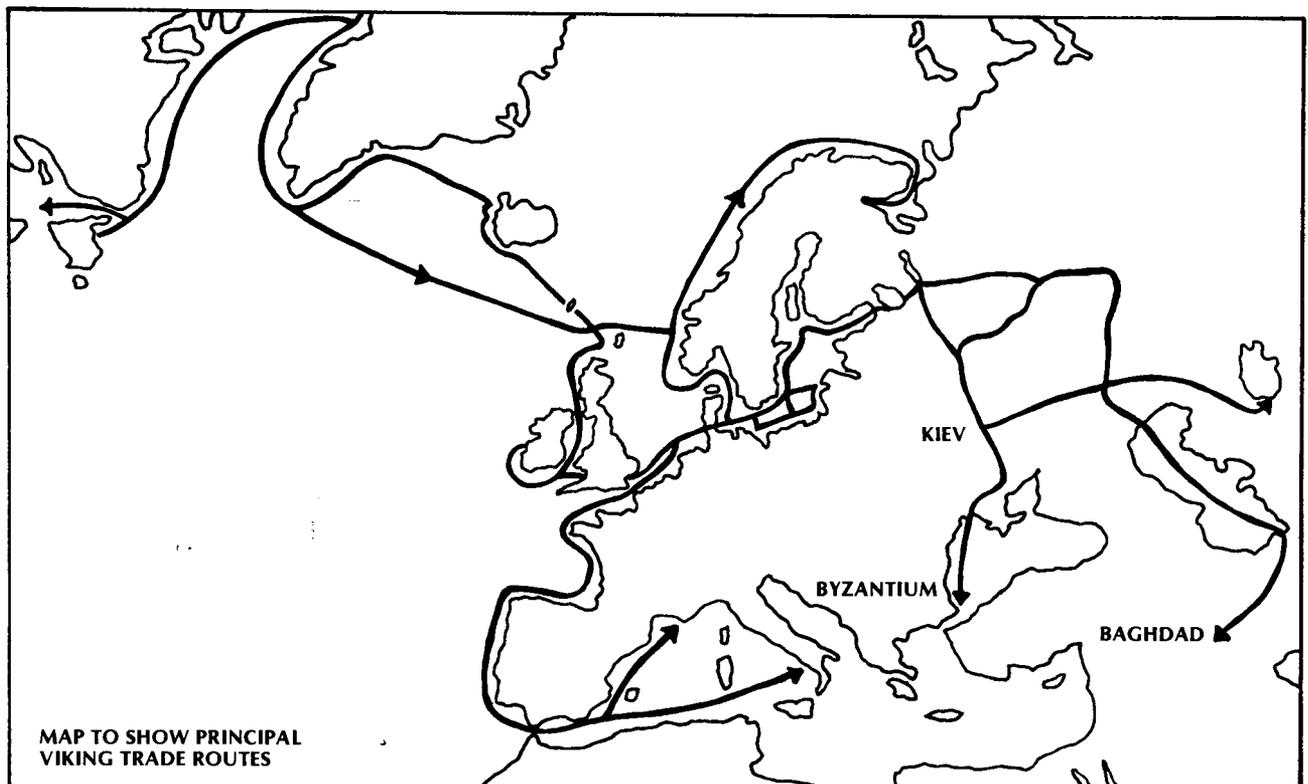
Recent archaeological excavation has confirmed this peaceful side of Viking life. At Coppergate, for example, no weapons have been discovered apart from two sword pommels which were probably made there for sale. The people of Jorvik seem to have been busy earning a living, often by making goods and trading them over long distances.

We know from early writers that Viking raiding and trading covered a huge area from the Caspian Sea and Black Sea in the east, across Russia to Scandinavia, and then west to Britain, Iceland, Greenland and Newfoundland.

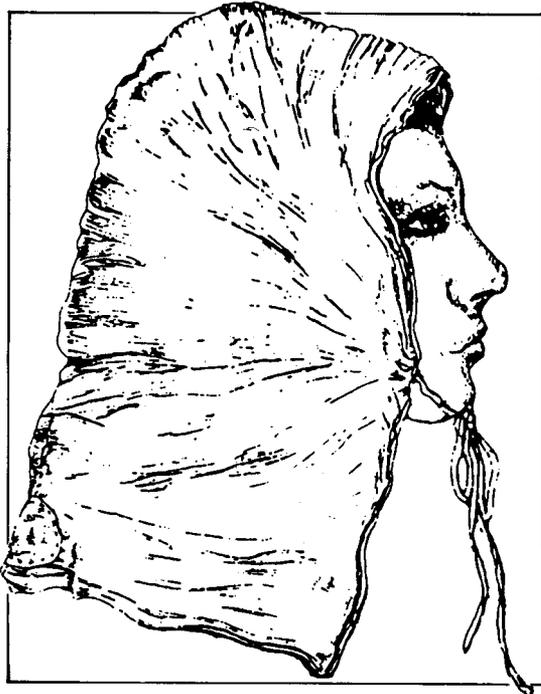


Whalebone sword pommel found at Coppergate (Length 7.2 cm).

Evidence for trade with most of these places has been found in York. Many trade goods, like foods and spices, have perished without trace, but silk has survived, and a surprising amount of it was found at Coppergate.



Making silk thread from silkworm cocoons and weaving it into cloth was a special skill known only in the empires of Byzantium and Islam, and in China beyond. All silk in western Europe came from one of these areas. The cloth for a golden yellow cap from Coppergate was probably cut from the same roll of silk cloth as the cloth for another cap found elsewhere in York and a third discovered in Lincoln. Some enterprising trader, perhaps in York itself, had imported the silk and made it up into caps for sale.



Tenth-century silk cap found at Coppergate.

Coppergate produced other objects from the east apart from silk. There is, for example, an Arab coin minted in Samarkand between AD 909 and 911. It was in fact a forgery — the silver plating covering the copper had worn off by the time it reached York, and it was probably thrown away in disgust. Another rare Eastern object was a cowrie shell found only in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden; it was probably kept as a curiosity!



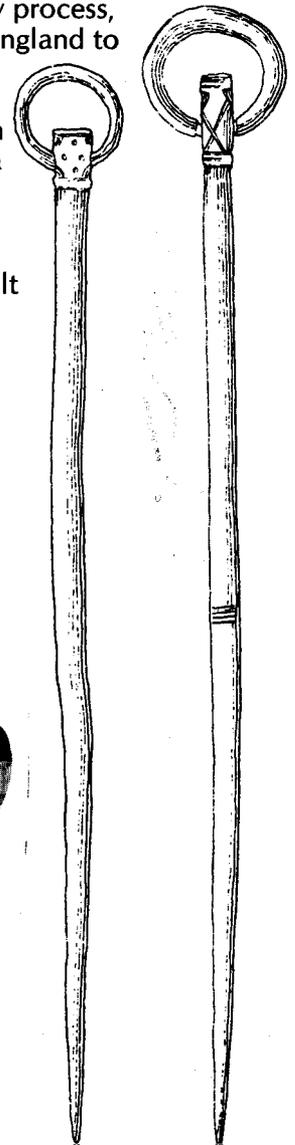
Cowrie shell from the Red sea/Gulf of Aden.

These Eastern objects probably reached York by being carried across Russia to Scandinavia and then across the North Sea to England. York has produced no objects from Russia itself (furs and slaves would leave little trace), but there are items from Scandinavia, such as a penny from Hedeby. Most of the honestones (for sharpening the edges of tools and weapons) found in Viking York came from southern Norway, no doubt along a regular trade route. Amber from the shores of the Baltic was used to make Jewellery in York, and soapstone fragments from large cooking pots found in York may have come from Norway — or from the Shetland Islands.

Goods were also brought into York from the continent of Europe, and ranged from small brooches to bulky quernstones for grinding corn. Pottery from the Rhineland was imported not for its appearance but because of what it contained — German wine, no doubt a welcome change from local beer.

There were also items from Scotland and Ireland — mostly single objects like the fragment of a Pictish brooch or the ringed pins which began in Ireland but which the Vikings liked and took almost everywhere; there is even one known from Newfoundland.

Trade is a two-way process, and goods went from England to Scandinavia as well as the other way. All the major trading centres in Viking Age Scandinavia have produced English objects, but there is always the possibility that they were the result of raiding as well as trading!



Copper alloy ringed pins from Ireland.