

VIKING AGE YORK

THE JORVIK VIKING CENTRE



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THE CITY

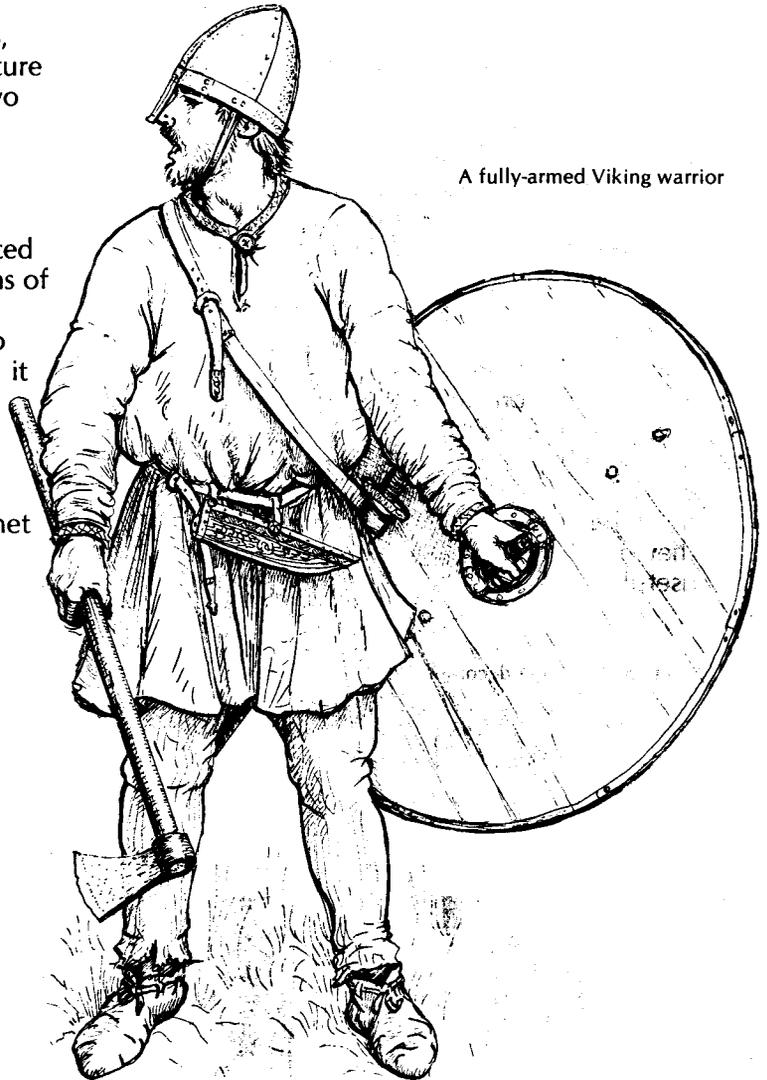
5. Weapons

Richard Hall

Weapons were very important to the Vikings, who needed them to fight the Anglians, capture York and to defend themselves. There are two ways in which we can find out what sort of weapons they used.

Firstly, sculptures of Viking warriors on stone crosses can be seen in and around Yorkshire. Sometimes the warriors are mounted on horseback, but we know from descriptions of battles that both the Vikings and the Anglo-Saxons used horses only to get themselves to the battlefield, where they fought on foot — it was the Normans who used cavalry at a later date. Some crosses show the variety of weapons which the Vikings had; the cross at Middleton in North Yorkshire shows a warrior with a sword, spear, axe, shield, helmet and knife, and the Weston cross fragment, also from North Yorkshire, shows a sword in more detail.

A fully-armed Viking warrior



The Middleton Cross



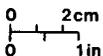
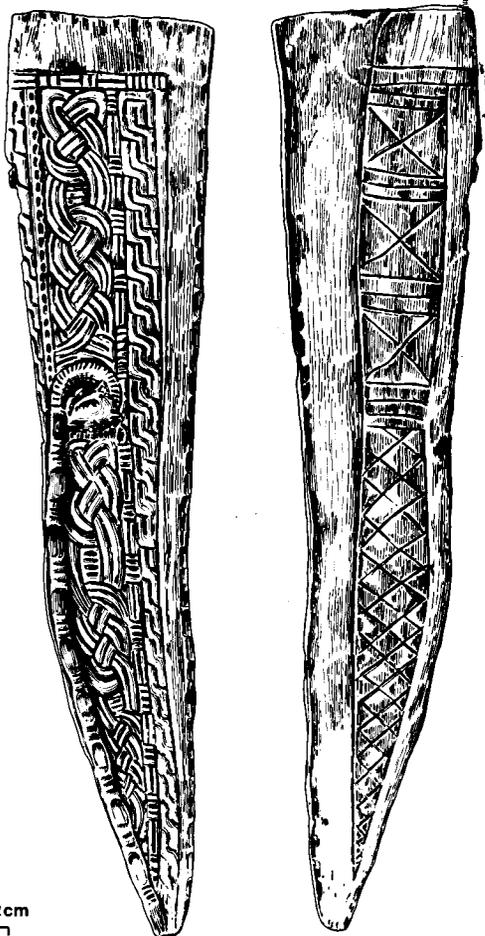
The Weston warrior

Secondly, we can learn about Viking weapons by looking at those that have been found in the ground, and this naturally gives us a much better idea as to what the weapons were really like. Some graves of Viking warriors have been found, like those at Kildale in North Yorkshire, where the dead were buried with their swords, spears, axes and other weapons. Normally only the metal parts survive in the ground, so quite a lot is known about swords, spearheads, axeheads, arrow heads, knives and shield bosses (central piece with handle on the inside); but far less is known about the parts that were made of wood, like the shafts of spears and arrows, and the rest of the shield around the boss. Nor is much known about leather items, such as scabbards, sheaths and helmets, which are very rare.

One reason why Viking weapons are not often found is that they were costly, and therefore highly valued by their owners. Weapons were taken from the dead in battle, or passed down from father to son, and even if they became damaged or broken, were still useful as scrap metal.

No Viking warrior graves have been found in York, and so the weapon finds from Coppergate were very important. These included two sword pommels, one of iron, the other of whalebone (a very rare discovery); some arrowheads (possibly for hunting rather than fighting), two decorated leather sheaths for large knives, and a leather sword scabbard. All of these were probably made in York, where there must have been workshops that specialised in making weapons, but these have not yet been found.

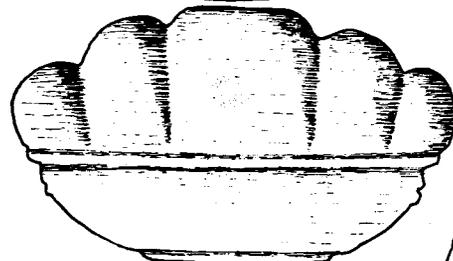
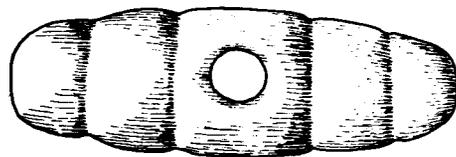
Front and back of a decorated leather knife sheath



A Viking Age knife-blade from Coppergate



An arrow-head



The whale-bone sword pommel, seen from the top and the side

The iron sword pommel

