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Essays in Honour of Ingvild Øye on her 70th Birthday

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Fine Belt-Buckles of Walrus Ivory – also Made in Greenland

It is usually believed that finely shaped and decorated objects found in Greenland were imported from elsewhere. However, a broken and discarded rough-out of a walrus-ivory belt-buckle found in 1997-1998 at a rescue excavation in the Eastern Settlement demonstrates that such buckles, which belong to a small group of belt-buckles known from north-western Europe, were actually also carved in Greenland. This find, and a brief look at other objects found in Greenland, leads to the conclusion that many decorated objects originated there and, indeed, that the Norse society in Greenland had both the economic and the cultural capacity to produce and appreciate decorative art.

Two walrus-ivory belt-buckles from farmstead Ø34, Greenland

The excavation in question took place in the Qolortoq valley (in the Eastern Settlement, to the north of Qassiarsuq / Brattahlid), at the small farmstead Ø34, which was situated between two other farmsteads with churches, and has been dated by C14 to c. AD 1000-1300. Besides the rough-out mentioned above and much else, the finds included a decorated and presumably finished, but broken, belt-buckle of walrus ivory, as well as six small pieces of walrus ivory, 48 fragments of walrus bone (mostly from the cranium, including a few from the very solid lower jaw of this animal), several small buttons of walrus ivory and a small, delicately carved walrus-ivory figure of a bear (Nyegaard forthcoming; Nyegaard, pers. comm.; the buckles are also illustrated in Arneborg 2004, 262; Østergård 2004, Figs. 80-81).

The belt-buckle rough-out and the broken belt-buckle differ in shape and size, but are of similar construction (Fig. 1). Both are made of a single piece of walrus ivory with an indentation to accommodate the tongue; this was (or was to be) held in place by a metal pin or wire inserted from one side into a pierced transverse semi-cylindrical moulding in the middle of the buckle. The unfinished buckle (left) is broken at this point, probably while the hole was being drilled. At this stage the buckle had only been roughly shaped – the slot for the belt was just roughly marked out, and the holes for the nails which would fasten the buckle to the belt had not even been indicated. Lightly incised lines follow the edges of the roughly rectangular belt-plate. All this indicates the sequence of manufacture of such a buckle. The other buckle (right) has a zig-zag ornament on the B-shaped loop. There is a beaded border on the buckle-plate. It is broken at one of the weak points of such a buckle – around the slot where two nails would have fastened a belt to the plate. On the basis of form, decoration and find context, a late twelfth- or a thirteenth-century date may be suggested.



Figure 1. Two belt-buckles of walrus ivory from Ø34, in the Eastern Settlement, Greenland. **Left:** Broken and discarded rough-out seen from above and from the side. Length 4.4 cm, width 2.8 cm. **Right:** Ornamented buckle broken at the end of the plate where the belt would be fastened. Length 2.6 cm, width 2.6 cm. (Photos: National Museum of Denmark).

The buckles from farmstead Ø34: parallels and wider context

The vast majority of European and Scandinavian medieval belt-buckles known today are made of metal (e.g. Fingerlin 1971). But walrus-ivory and bone buckles occasionally occur, and the two examples from farmstead Ø34 belong to a small group of such belt-buckles from Northern Europe and Greenland. Exact parallels are, however, unknown and there is no evidence of the production of walrus-ivory buckles elsewhere.

The buckle shown in Figure 2 was found in the Outer Hebrides on the island of Lewis in 1831, together with the well-known ‘Lewis chessmen’ and 14 disc-shaped gaming pieces, which are now distributed between the British Museum and the National Museums of Scotland. The buckle is finely ornamented with carved foliate scrolls and is of a more elaborate construction than the Greenland examples in that it is made of two pieces: a buckle loop and a plate with a slot for the belt and four ‘hidden’ holes for attachment. The two parts and the tongue were hinged together with a transverse metal pin. The chessmen, together with the buckle, date from the middle or second half of the twelfth century, and their elaborate ornament strongly suggests that they were made in Scandinavia, probably in Western Norway and perhaps in Trondheim (Roesdahl & Wilson (Eds.) 1992, cat. nos. 614-615; Stratford 1997, 8, 15, 41-47, Plate 36; Robinson 2004, 58, Figure 19).

The buckle shown in Figure 3 is in the National Museum of Denmark (Langberg 1982, 49, 71, Figure 57; Liebgott 1985, 26-27; Roesdahl & Wilson (Eds.) 1992, cat. no. 606; Stratford 1997, 41, Plate 52). Its provenance cannot be traced further back than the early eighteenth century when it was in the Danish Royal Collections. It is a massive ‘sculpture’ carved in one piece, and the characteristic grainy central structure of a walrus tusk is seen as a darker patch on the edge of the loop and as a horizontal stripe on the plate. A pierced profiled transverse semi-cylindrical thickening holds a metal pin inserted from one side to hold the tongue in



Figure 2. Belt-buckle of walrus ivory from the Isle of Lewis, Outer Hebrides, Scotland. Length 6.1 cm. Found in 1831 as part of the 'Lewis chessmen hoard'. (Photo: The British Museum).

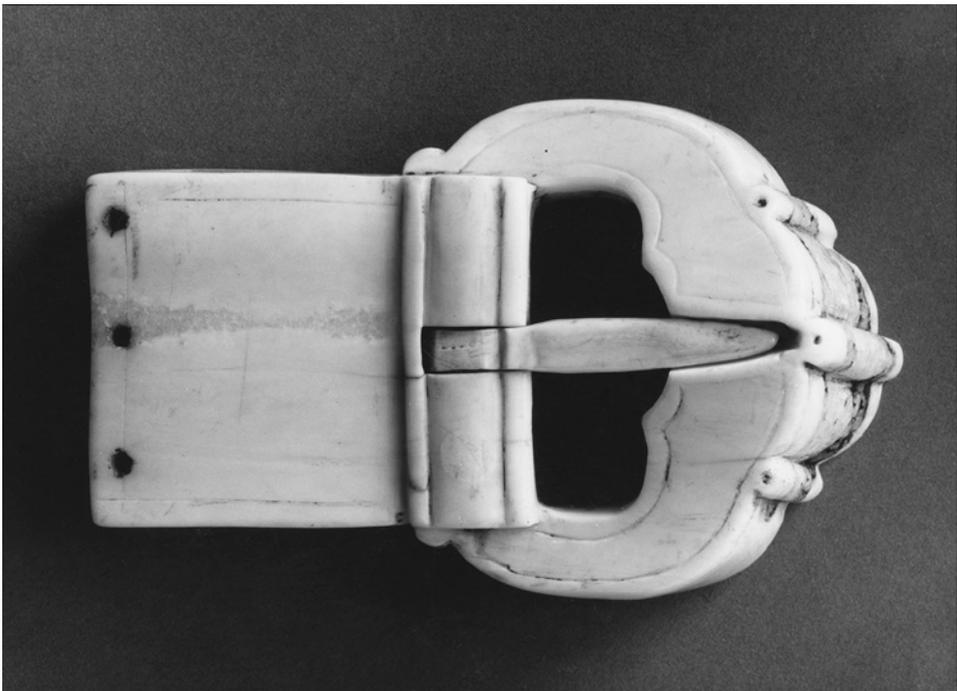


Figure 3. Belt-buckle of walrus ivory. No provenance. Now in the National Museum of Denmark. Length 9.5 cm. (Photo: National Museum of Denmark).



Figure 4. Belt-buckle of walrus ivory from Brattingsborg, Samsø, Denmark. Length 4 cm; width 2.05 cm. (Photo: Vivian Etting).

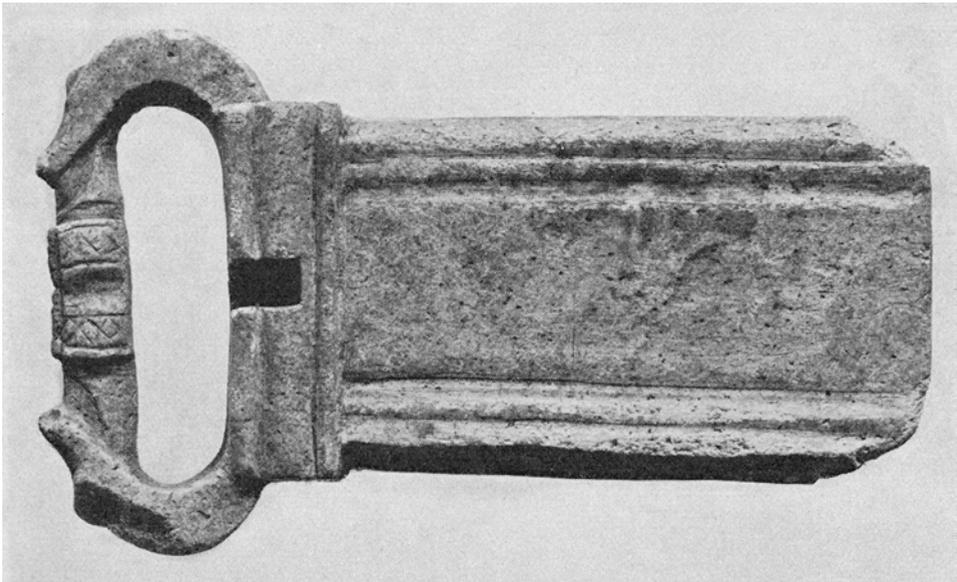


Figure 5. Belt-buckle of whalebone from Kangersuneq, in the Western Settlement, Greenland. Length 10.3 cm. (After Roussell 1941).

place. The end of the plate has a slot for the belt, which was affixed by three nails. The edge of the loop has three small decorative roll mouldings and lightly-carved contour lines. Lightly incised lines follow the edges of the rectangular plate. By comparison with the belt-buckle from Lewis, and the roll mouldings, which are paralleled in twelfth-century European art, e.g. the Danish walrus-ivory Gunhild Cross (Langberg 1982; Liebgott 1985, 23-26; Roesdahl & Wilson (Eds.) 1992, cat. no. 607), the buckle may be dated to the twelfth century. This date also seems to be supported by two cast copper-alloy belt-buckles with similar mouldings and Arab inscriptions, now in the British Museum (inv. nos. BM 817-1970; 942-175). Acquired in Sicily, they are believed to have been produced either there or in Egypt in the eleventh or twelfth century; they also demonstrate a geographically widespread taste for this ornamental element.

Other examples include a walrus-ivory belt-buckle of a different form to those mentioned above and fairly coarsely carved (Fig. 4). It is a stray find from the medieval castle site of Gammel Brattingsborg on the island of Samsø, Denmark; a late twelfth-century date has been suggested for this buckle (Engberg et al. 2009, Figure 3). A belt, complete with a bone buckle and strap-end with figural carvings, in the National Museum of Denmark, has been attributed to the late fifteenth century (Liebgott 1985, 73, Figure 68). From Greenland come, for example, a simple, 5 cm-long walrus-ivory belt-hook from Sandnes, a rather fine whalebone belt-buckle from Kangersuneq (Fig. 5) and a decorative 4.1cm-long bone buckle from Austmannadal 4, all in the Western Settlement (Roussell 1936, 118, Figure 101; 1941, 156, 264, Figs. 161:101 and 164). It should, however, be noted that there has been no systematic search for belt-buckles of walrus ivory or bone in North-West Europe.

Belt-buckles were a very visible part of the dress. Apart from their function they were objects of display. Material, shape and decoration were important. Walrus ivory is a strong material, and was also prestigious, particularly from about the year 1000 until the mid-thirteenth century. During that time, many workshops in northern and western Europe used this material, as a substitute for elephant ivory, for decorative objects (Roesdahl 2005). Buckles of ivory and bone may also have been particularly valued in cold climates, as they would not feel as cold against the body as metal buckles. Ivory and bone further allowed for the addition of colour. While traces of colour have not been found on buckles, it has been shown that sculptural ivory carvings were often painted in strong contrasting colours, or were dyed (cf. Williamson & Webster 1990), and traces of red were observed on some of the Lewis chessmen when they were found (e.g. Stratford 1997, 54-55). It is indeed very possible that belt-buckles of walrus ivory and other 'bone' materials were once very colourful. The finely incised lines on the rough-out from Greenland and the fine example from Denmark (Figs. 1 and 3) may possibly have been delimiting marks for use in the application of colour.

On the production of attractive objects in Norse Greenland

It was undoubtedly worth-while for the Norse in Greenland to carve fine belt-buckles of walrus ivory and indeed other types of objects for their own personal use as well as for export. They had the best possible access to the raw material; indeed, tusks were one of their most important exports (Roesdahl 2005). All that was required for domestic production were a number of models and good skills in carving. The belt-buckle rough-out from the Qolortoq

valley shows that buckles were indeed carved here, and the same may well be true of the other buckle from the site, which is competently decorated. Indeed, the same type of decoration is seen, for example, on the rim of soapstone vessels found in various settlements of the Greenland Norse, which were almost certainly produced in Greenland (e.g. Nørlund & Stenberger 1934, Figure 83).

Further, buttons and simple gaming pieces of walrus ivory, for example (cf. Rousell 1936, Figs. 100, 112), demonstrate that the Norse in Greenland were familiar with ivory carving; indeed, ivory waste has been found at various sites, including the farm in question, Ø34 (Nyegaard forthcoming). Miniature ivory sculptures known from sites in Greenland, including Ø34 (e.g. also Rousell 1936, Figs. 106-108) were probably carved there, while trophies in the form of the upper part of walrus skulls with tusks were probably prepared and sometimes decorated and inscribed with runes in Greenland (Stoklund & Roesdahl 2005). There are also abundant examples of carvings in bone, wood and soapstone, including many competently decorated, as well as many with graffiti (e.g. Rousell 1936, passim; Rousell 1941, 243-88; Høegsberg 2009, 189-202, Figs. 7.127-7.167).

The Norse in Greenland clearly appreciated fine artefacts, and were able to produce them. Seen in this light, there seems no reason why, for example, the thirteenth-century walrus-ivory bishop's crozier found at Gardar should not have been made in Greenland, and not in Iceland or Norway as is usually suggested (e.g. Roesdahl & Wilson (Eds.) 1992, cat. no. 344; Arneborg 2004, 249-250); the ornament is no more complex than that seen on a number of other artefacts from Norse Greenland which were probably made there. People in medieval Scandinavia seem not to have been surprised that elaborate objects were made in Greenland – the fourteenth-century Icelandic *Króka-Refs saga* tells that very fine walrus-ivory carvings were presented by a chieftain, Gunnar, from Greenland's Western Settlement to the eleventh-century Norwegian king Harald the Hard-ruler (*Króka-Refs saga*, 142; Roesdahl 1995, 16).

The production of fine artefacts in Norse Greenland would probably have been concentrated on important farms, or on farms dependent to them. But written sources give hardly any information on such matters, and artefact production has not been a particularly focused area of modern research on Norse Greenland, despite the fact that it is of major importance in understanding its economy (cf., however, Behr 1996; Østergård 2004; Høegsberg 2009; Nyegaard forthcoming). There is a good deal of varied archaeological evidence available (e.g. also Nørlund & Rousell 1929, 146-147, 161; Rousell 1936, Figure 99, 111 and passim; Rousell 1941, Figure 163:216 and passim). The interesting uses of substitute materials, like whalebone for an axe and reindeer-antler for arrow heads (Rousell 1936, 104-105; Roesdahl & Wilson (Eds.) 1992, cat. no. 340; Arneborg 2004, 270), probably contributed to the general idea that only rather basic items were produced in Greenland. As this article has hopefully shown, this was not the case. The Norse in Greenland enjoyed and made decorative artefacts, some of which were probably exported. The time has certainly come for new and less prejudiced approaches to the study of production, consumption, exchange and trade in medieval Greenland's Norse society.

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