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Contents include: Miniature Quernstones and Millstones: a fragment of Shetland’s Scandinavian past;

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Shetland: A search for symbols — George Mackay Brown; Eric Linklater, a brief biography; Poetry by Rose Gray
Miniature quernstones and millstones: a fragment of Shetland’s Scandinavian past

The excavation of a Scandinavian farmstead at Setters in Unst in 1996 produced a lot of archaeological objects (*New Shetlander* no. 199, 1996). Among these was a nicely shaped circular piece of soapstone which was obviously a complete miniature of the upper stone of a millstone.

The piece has a diameter of 82mm and a maximum height of 15mm. On the upper surface there is a collar around the central hole, and on the under face a nicely carved slot for the sile (Fig. 1). Another fragment could be interpreted as a part (one third) of the nether stone. This piece has an estimated maximum diameter of 80mm and a height of 8mm. The objects can be dated to the Viking Age or early medieval period.

The authors immediately started to look for comparative finds to the miniature millstone. It turned out that four examples were presented in Hamilton’s publication of Scandinavian Jarlshof. Alan Small has published some from the Scandinavian farmstead at Underhould in Unst. Another two have been found at Gerald Bigelow’s excavation of a Scandinavian farmstead at Sandwick South, and one at Sandwick North, another farmstead, in 1995, both in Unst (*New Shetlander* no. 195, 1996).

Thus it seems that this group of finds was rather common on Scandinavian sites from the Viking Age and Medieval period in Shetland. On top of all this, an inquiry to the Shetland Museum proved fruitful as it added another four examples, in the form of stray finds, to the group. Some of the comparative finds have, besides the central hole, a small hole near the edge, indicating that they were miniature copies of quern-rather that millstones (Fig. 2).

As circular discs of soapstone, sometimes with perforations, are rather common among the finds from Scandinavian farmsteads, a clear definition of this group has to be developed. Features similar to the typical ‘normal size’ quern- and millstones must be present if a flat, circular and perforated piece of stone is indeed a miniature quern- or millstone. The following definition is established:

(a) A miniature quernstone is characterised by having a reasonably regular shape, a centrally placed perforation, and a hole along the edge for the handle. It may have a collar around the central hole and a slot for the sile on the under face of the upper stone;

(b) A miniature millstone is characterised by having a reasonably regular shape, a centrally placed perforation, a slot for the sile, but no hole for the handle along the edge. It may have a collar around the central hole.

This leaves us with a total of fourteen quern- and millstones, of which eleven were made of soapstone, two of sandstone, and one of mica schist. According to the above definition, four of these can be interpreted as quernstones (i.e., with a hole for the handle), seven as millstones, while three can not be safely identified as they are only fragmentarily preserved. Their diameter range from 41 to 110mm.

The fact that this group of objects turns out to be almost a standard thing on Scandinavian farmsteads in Shetland made us look closely for comparative...
finds in other emigrant communities of the western Viking world. However, despite intensive search, none has been recorded in Greenland, Iceland, the Faroe Islands, Orkney, the Western Isles, nor in Mainland Scotland.

How should these objects be interpreted? Clearly they never had a practical function. Their size is too small, and the fact that most of them are made of soapstone make such interpretation even more unlikely as the softness of soapstone makes it completely unsuitable for grinding anything. The finds from Jarlshof and Underholl were referred to either as ‘model’, ‘toy’ or just ‘miniature’ quern- und millstones which reflects the uncertainty connected with their interpretation.

In dealing with the finds from Underholl, Small stated that, ‘Toy millstones, similar to those found in a tenth-century context at Jarlshof, suggest the presence of children copying their adults’. The authors agree with Small in this interpretation but why are the miniature quern- and millstones only found in Shetland?

The horizontal or ‘Norse’ mill was a very prominent feature of the Shetland landscape up until this century. It was an extremely important part of daily life and, as the Norwegian archaeologist Birthe Weber states in dealing with various miniatures from medieval finds in Norway, ‘that children have always played must be regarded a fact, all the working processes in daily life of all times have been mirrored in children’s play’. She further says, ‘in ancient society it was highly important to train the various working processes at an early stage in life. The result was probably of less importance. The rehearsal of a technique, or a movement, has been an important factor in the process which children went through in order to adapt to their surroundings’.

If we accept the interpretation that these objects once were part of the children’s world in order to introduce them to an important process in daily life, they are indeed a very convincing indicator of the importance of the horizontal mill in Shetland society, going back to the Viking Age.

While it seems that Shetland was the only one of the western emigrant communities in which this type of object occurred, the question remains if they were known in the Scandinavian ‘homelands’. At first it seemed that none were known from Denmark, Sweden, and even Norway, but the picture suddenly changed. Suspicion about one possible example from the area around Trondheim in Middle Norway led to intensive inquiries and studies. This proved fruitful, as we now have eight specimens from the region around Trondheim, while notably, no certain examples, despite intensive search, have been found in other parts of Norway.

Of the eight from the Trondheim region, three can be identified as quernstones, four as millstones,
while one can not be ascribed to either group. Six
were made of soapstone, one of schist and one of
granite. Their diameter range from 36 to 126mm. In
other words, in material as well as size, they resemble
the Shetland specimens very well (Fig. 3). Thus there
seems to be no doubt that we are facing the same
phenomenon in Shetland as well as in the Trondheim
region, but how can it be explained?

Actually, the region around Trondheim is the
most prominent area for corn growing on the western
coast of Norway. This fact may already in the Viking
Age have made the grinding process and the
horizontal mill a dominant feature in the landscape –
just as in Shetland.

The horizontal mill in Shetland is often referred
to as the ‘Norse’ mill. But did it come to Shetland
with Scandinavian immigrants, or was it introduced
to Norway by Scandinavians who emigrated from
Shetland to the motherland? Possibly. Roman querns
and milling-technology survived the fall of the empire
on the British Isles and were brought into Scandinavia
in the Viking Age. If so, the Shetland horizontal mill
may not be all that ‘Norse’!

At any rate, the miniature quern and millstones
define a very specific link between Scandinavia and
the British Isles in the Viking Age and early medieval
period.

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Note. A full academic presentation and discussion, by
the authors, of this topic will appear in the journal Acta
Archaeologica (Copenhagen) later this year. The quotations
from Birthe Weber have been translated from Norwegian
by the authors.

Figure 3. Distribution map of miniature quern and millstones.

Map: the authors.