

Insular feasting and dining equipment in Viking graves

This paper introduces a new project that examines the archaeological evidence for the practices of feasting and dining in early medieval Ireland through an analysis of a range of vessel types. The paper will focus on one aspect of the project, which is a discussion of the occurrence of these vessels in predominantly female Viking-age graves in both Ireland and Britain and in Scandinavia, principally Norway. The corpus being examined includes copper-alloy bowls and basins, decorative wooden pails, ladles, strainers and drinking horns. While there have been studies of individual artefacts within this group, this will be the first time that this body of material has been examined collectively. A recent survey of Viking graves and grave-goods in Ireland marked some of these vessels out as a well-known but under-studied group. A range of different vessel types is known, from large copper-alloy basins to small drinking horns. All of these may be considered to form part of a set of dining or feasting equipment, and similar material is found elsewhere in contemporary Europe. Some vessels, although likely to be secular in origin, have been found in association with liturgical objects. Large copper-alloy basins, such as that found at Derrynaflan, Co. Tipperary, are the largest type of copper-alloy vessel, while there are also smaller bowls, such as that found in a Viking grave at Ballyholme Co. Down. Another distinctive group within the series of high-status vessels are decorative wooden pails, either stave-built or carved from one piece, that are adorned with decorative copper-alloy hoops and handles. Notably, all of these vessel types have also been found as grave goods in Viking graves in Norway and also in Sweden, the Oseberg find being one such well-known example. These finds are significant, not only because of their excellent preservation, but for the dating evidence they provide, in terms of assessing Irish/Scandinavian interactions at the time, and in gaining a greater understanding of the role of women in feasting and dining activity in the Viking-age.

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