

# Hook, Line, and Sinker: Possibilities for Viking Age Fishing at Paviken 1

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When one pictures Vikings, it's not uncommon to picture a troupe of rough living ancient Scandinavians aboard a mighty sea vessel, searching the globe for new lands to plunder. The ship is as much a part of the image of a Viking as the Viking him or herself. Despite the fact that pop culture (and pop history) may imagine the ship as a tool in adventure, it served another vital, if more dull, purpose: fishing. In fact, many archaeologists and historians agree that fishing was a crucial part of Viking identity.

It was for this reason that while excavating the Viking age harbour site of Paviken 1 on Gotland this summer, we would not have been surprised to find artifacts and remains that would indicate the presence of fishing activity. However, no such artifacts were found and very few faunal remains would lead to the conclusion of the presence of fish at the site. In addition, the excavation in the 1970's yielded a very small number of fish hooks, spears, and net sinkers, but they were much fewer in number than the number of beads and other iron objects found. Thus, I would fear that spatial analysis in the context of fishing materials at the Paviken 1 site would either produce no results or results that would lead to erroneous conclusions.

So what is to be done? Given that all of the previous literature on the subject agrees on the importance of fishing during the Viking era, I believe it would be useful to examine the presence of fishing in Scandinavia's past, and to attempt to explain its absence at Paviken 1. In this case, hopefully the lack of fishing material will be able to lead us to conclusions about the site.

Fishing was a persistent yet diverse practice in the Viking age. By this, I mean that many factors affected the way the Vikings fished over the entirety of the time period. One of these factors was the geography of the waters in which the Vikings fished. McGovern et al.'s (2006, 202) discussion of the dietary habits of the Viking population of the Myvatn district in Northern

Iceland make a pointed distinction between fresh-water fish remains and marine fish remains. They state that a change in the frequency of either type of fish remains represent a change in the cultural practices and economy of the people associated with them. Firstly, it could mean that the inhabitants of the area being studied switched from inland lake and river fishing to sea fishing. Perhaps this change could be attributed to distribution of fishing in an effort for the fish population to replenish itself. Perhaps an advance in technology such as more sea-worthy ships or better catching tools would allow a shift to more plentiful waters. Of course, this is speculation, and more information would be needed to come to better conclusions. Another hypothesis, this one put forward by McGovern et al., states that the change in fish species was likely caused by a change in economy, that is, the importing and exporting of fish from neighbouring populations with different fishing habits. A level of fish trade that would be significant enough as to show clearly in the archaeological record would suggest a sizeable, organised society.

This has implications for the lack of evidence of fishing at Paviken 1. As we know from historical records, the shore line used to be much nearer to the site, and the creek was much higher. Paviken 1 was a harbour site, but perhaps the type of fish its inhabitants sought were not active in those waters for some reason. As previously mentioned, fish remains, here meaning partial vertebrae, were found in all three trenches dug this summer. Should a future archaeologist choose to analyse these remains, perhaps he or she could determine what species they belong to, and thusly determine whether they belong to fresh water or sea water, and if the species are native to Gotland or were imported from elsewhere. This would give us both cultural and economic insight into Paviken 1.

As previously mentioned, fishing technology changed and advanced in the Viking age. Shipbuilding was one of the great technological feats of the Viking civilization, used in both war and exploration. Of course, they were used in fishing too. Among the Skuldelev wrecks, a twelve metre, pine fishing boat from the eleventh century was found (Roesdahl and Wilson 1992, 44). Though the fishing boat was the smallest of the Skuldelev wrecks, it was by no means a boat for a small fishing operation. This tells us that in the eleventh century (at least in Denmark) fishing was a large scale venture, either used for feeding a massive population or for use in trade. In conjunction with the trading vessel also found at Skuldelev, the latter is likely.

The tools that are inherent in the concept of “modern fishing” were not present in Iceland at its settlement in the ninth century, and so fish were caught on shallow banks (Roesdahl and Wilson 1992, 52). In these early days of settlement, a more intensive style of fishing would have been unnecessary, but as time went on and needs increased technology would have matured. In west Norway, for example, from 800 AD to 1100 AD, the coastal fishing villages that supported the dietary habits of the inhabitants evolved to the main trading ports, supporting Norway’s economy with their resources (Graham-Campbell 46, 1980). Some examples of this technology are the fishing hooks, spears, and net sinkers that have been found in Norway in such varied places as lakes, along the coast, and in graves (Roesdahl and Wilson 248, 1992). Unfortunately, fishing tool artifacts are problematic because many of the tools, such as lines and nets, would have decayed.

No ships have been found at Paviken 1, and no fishing artifacts were found during this summer’s dig. This leaves us with the artifacts from the earlier excavations to work from. When it comes to analysis, these artifacts are a kind of double-edged sword. On one hand, they are fairly conclusive evidence that fishing was practiced with hook, spear, and net at Paviken 1. But

on the other hand, we are forced to ask why there are so few, and why no more were found this summer. In addition, we have to puzzle why they are dwarfed in numbers by artifacts such as beads. Not only do these artifacts lead to confusion about fishing at the site, they lead to confusion about the purpose of the site as a whole. With so little information, it is difficult to imagine how they fit into the larger context.

Still, they may offer some answers. Should an archaeologist with a basis in fishing artifacts choose to look at the site, some information about typology (leading to origin of manufacturing and chronological findings) may come to light. In addition, any experimental archaeology that has been done in the name of Scandinavian fishing from this time period might help come to some conclusions.

Of course, the use of these tools in Scandinavia did not only depend on the time period in history; seasonality would have had a big impact on fishing. Fishing camps by their nature were temporary, and trading posts were taken down when winter became too heavy, so the practice of fishing had ceased during this time (Carlsson and Owen 9, 1996). Still, fish played an important dietary role. Given good waters and well-constructed technology, enough marine fish such as cod and halibut could be caught and dried to sustain a population for the winter months. The fish was smoked, salted, and dried in a process that gave it an incredibly long shelf life (Graham-Campbell 47, 1980). Given that a large portion of the fish were being set aside for winter consumption, it is possible that an archaeological site would not show evidence of fishing (meaning hooks or spears or weights) but would indeed have seen processes involved in fish consumption.

The implications this kind of thinking may have for Paviken 1 are guess work at best. Still, if the site had been left in the summer, it would most likely look very different than it

would have had it been left in the winter. Say, for instance, that Paviken 1 was no more than a small village based on self-subsistence by fishing (of course this is a hypothetical situation). Should the site have been abandoned in the summer, the fishing gear may have been in use, and left at the actual fishing site, which would account for the general lack of fishing artifacts found now.

The drying of fish served not only the fishing communities; it would have made the transport of fish much more efficient for trading purposes, the importance of which has already been mentioned. This importance is emphasised in the thirteenth century through trade agreements between Scandinavia and England to support the Christian practice in England of eating fish (dried or otherwise) on fasting days (Carlsson and Owen 11, 1996, Roesdahl and Wilson 104, 1992). This time period is marked with an increase in frequency of fishing artifacts, as well as a marked decrease in frequency of domesticated livestock faunal remains (Graham-Campbell 47, 1980).

Yet again, the implications for Paviken 1 that this information provides are extremely limited. It may only be considered significant for sites occurring from the thirteenth century onwards. Still, it makes an important point about chronology. The majority of faunal remains at Paviken 1 belonged to large animals, most likely domesticated livestock (although more in-depth analysis may prove otherwise), and fish bones were few. This tells us that the people at Paviken 1 were probably not eating fish in majority. They were most likely not Christian, and most likely lived before the thirteenth century. The study of Scandinavian history used in conjunction with an absolute dating technology such as carbon dating may grant us better information about the fishing artifacts at the site, and thus about the site as a whole.

As with any archaeological site, the lack of finds at Paviken 1 (at least in terms of fishing) grants us much information. However, with only one summer of excavation yet completed, it seems futile to try to make any concrete statements about the site, literally making something out of nothing. Still, with years left to excavate, perhaps archaeologists can locate and explain patterns in the artifacts that tell us something about the fishing identity at Paviken 1.

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