

Historic finds unearthed in Medieval cemetery

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Archaeologists thought they were going to find a layer of beer brewing stones from the Viking age, but instead they found a "Viking import" from Ireland. Credit: NTNU University Museum

What was supposed to be a simple excavation to allow for the expansion of a church cemetery turned into a treasure trove of historic artefacts, including a decorative fitting from a book "imported" by Vikings from Ireland.

Byneset Cemetery, adjacent to the medieval Steine Church in Trondheim in mid-Norway, is expanding, and Norwegian cultural heritage laws require an archaeological review of the affected area beforehand.

The expansion plans brought archaeologists from the Norwegian University of Science and Technology's (NTNU) University Museum to survey the site earlier this year.

Jo Sindre Pålsson Eidshaug and Øyunn Wathne Sæther, research assistants at the NTNU University Museum, came across a surprising find during their excavations.

"This is a decorative fitting," Eidshaug said of his discovery. "It almost looks like it's gilded here. It's a kind of decorative fitting, I would guess."

Tove Eivindsen, head of communications for the museum, just happened to be there and captured the moment when the discovery was unearthed.

The find is probably a gold-plated, silver fitting from a book. It appears to be Celtic in origin, and might have come from a religious book brought here during the Viking Age that disappeared several centuries ago, and that hasn't been seen by anyone since then – but for now everything is speculation.



A fitting, probably from a book. The style is typical of Celtic and Irish areas and dates from the 800s. Traces of gilding can be seen in the recesses. Credit: Åge Hojem, NTNU University Museum

"Someone very politely called this an Irish import, but that's just a nice way of saying that someone was in Ireland and picked up an interesting item," said museum director Reidar Andersen, who was also at the site.

Raymond Sauvage from NTNU's Department of Archaeology and Cultural History, and the project manager for these excavations, concurs.

"Yes, that's right. We know that the Vikings went out on raids. They went to Ireland and brought things back. But how peacefully it all transpired, I won't venture to say," he said.

The archaeologists call a find like this one an "imported object."



Digging in the cultural layer. Pictured are: Eivind Krag, Karen Oftedal, Raymond Sauvage, Jo Sindre Eidshaug, Øyunn Sætre and Marte Mokkelbost. Credit: Trond Sverre Skevik, NTNU University Museum

"We started the project with slightly lower hopes for what we might find than what's recently emerged," said Andersen, who calls the discovery "fantastic" and thinks this is an exciting area.

Sauvage says you don't make discoveries like this everywhere. There are only a few areas where people had the resources to go out on such voyages.

The church and the [excavation](#) site used to be connected to a large, old farm estate that probably existed here from at least the Viking age. Excavation sites like this often date back to the Nordic Iron Age and the Middle Ages and can provide valuable insight into the position and status of the Steine farm during this period, as described on the project's Norwegian website [Norark, Norsk arkeologi](#).

Archaeologists also came across a belt buckle, a key and a knife blade.



Frode Iversen digs in the cultural layer. Pictured in the background are: Karen Oftedal and Øyunn Watne Sætre. Credit: Åge Hojem, NTNU University Museum

"Steine Church was built in the 1140s," says Sauvage, explaining that the

archaeologists also found a link to Nidaros Cathedral.

Archaeologists uncovered a church mason's mark that corresponds to one found on Nidaros Cathedral. These marks were personal to every individual stonemason, which means that the same stonemason worked on both buildings.

The archaeologists were actually planning to do a sampling of layers containing brewing stones, but the area has proved to have considerably more conserved cultural layers than [archaeologists](#) were aware of before the work began, said Sauvage.

The dig was therefore expanded, and now objects dating as far back as 700 CE have been found. That means they belong to what is called the late Germanic Iron (or Merovingian) Age.

The archaeological excavations, paid for by Trondheim municipality, ran for five weeks this summer. The cemetery expansion started on 16 October.



Erecting tents at the excavation site with Steine Church behind. Credit: Raymond Sauvage, NTNU University Museum

Provided by Norwegian University of Science and Technology

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