

# WIRRALH SKIP FELAGR



*Viking & Anglo Saxon Living History*

## The Archaeology of Meols.

Meols and the adjacent natural harbour once known as Hoyle lake are located at the end of the Wirral peninsula, places which by modern standards are of no great importance. However, around the end of the 18th century large-scale dredging of the approaches to the growing port of Liverpool combined with bad weather caused a sudden acceleration in coastal erosion in this area. It was this shifting of the sands to which we owe many of the amazing archaeological discoveries made around Meols during the nineteenth century when it became fashionable for antiquarians to compete as to who could find the best artefacts.

The archaeological remains uncovered around Meols may be some of the most important evidence in Britain for prehistoric, Roman and medieval coastal settlement and trade. Indeed the extent and range of medieval finds from this site make it second only to London in terms of its significance. The name Meols derives from a Viking term for sandbank further emphasising its importance in the early medieval period as it was the Vikings who gave Meols a fresh lease of life as a beach front trading centre after the Wirral was densely settled by Scandinavians in the 10th century AD.

People have written books about the archaeology of Meols so all we can do here is mention a few highlights, but finds from the early Saxon period around the 6th century which show its global connections as a trade centre include a pottery flask for containing holy water from the shrine of St Menas in Egypt and Byzantine coins from Turkey. Later Viking Age finds include numerous Hiberno-Norse ringed pins, a small bronze bell, strap ends, clothes hooks a mount from a drinking horn and part of a set of traders scales. Coins including over 20 Anglo-Saxon silver pennies are evidence that the site continued as a trading centre with connections to Dublin, York and Scandinavia during the early medieval period. A recently re-identified group of iron weapons listed in the antiquarian collections, such as a sword, a deliberately-bent spear head, an axe and a shield boss, hint at the possibility of at least one pagan Viking grave at Meols.

Sadly the vast majority of these finds were recovered long before archaeology became the more exacting science it is today, so little information about context was recorded and it's probable that any organic remains would have been overlooked in favour of extracting the metal objects that could be displayed in collectors cabinets. There are, however, some clues in the recorded observations. Maps from the time many of the finds were recovered indicate how the position of the coastline has changed over the last century or two. This in turn hints that the houses and graves mentioned cannot have been too far beyond the present shore. It also points to the exciting but slim possibility that in the sand behind the present sea wall, more of the ancient settlement may be preserved.

Establishing any detail about how Meols functioned as an early medieval port isn't easy as the first written mention is not until it is listed in the Domesday Book. It was however most likely a mix of small villages, maybe even a small town, a regular beach market and maybe a location for seasonal fairs. Undoubtedly though the tenth century was just one important chapter from the much longer and equally exciting story of Meols.

[www.wirralvikings.org.uk](http://www.wirralvikings.org.uk)

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