

Fetlar2013

The Vikings

Tradition claims that Gruting, which lies to the north of the island, was the site of the first Viking landing in the West – and while this is impossible to verify, we do know that Vikings definitely settled on the island. Much of this evidence comes not from excavated archaeological sites, but from the names of settlements and landscape features of Fetlar.

The Shetland Isles are right in the middle of what were once the Viking seaways. As Fetlar is one of the most easterly islands, and thus one of the closest to Norway, it is possible that it was the first island that the Vikings reached while crossing the North Sea. Naturally, it made sense for some of the travellers to stay and settle on the island, establishing farms and homesteads.

With them, the Vikings brought new styles of buildings, politics, laws, and most importantly, new language. Many of the place names – and even some of the local dialect words – present in Fetlar have their roots in Norn, the language spoken by the Viking settlers who remained on the island.

Applying highly descriptive names to almost every feature of the landscape, the Vikings left a rich linguistic history behind. For example, we know that ‘wick’, ‘firth’ and ‘voe’ names describe bays of different shapes; ‘ness’ names are headlands, and narrow inlets are described as ‘geos’.

We can also tell that Vikings were once on the island by the evidence they left behind during the production of steatite bowls. Steatite, also known as soapstone, is a soft type of stone that is carved out of quarries in whole pieces. The Vikings would carve bowls and cooking pots directly from the stone face, leaving an impression behind – these can still be seen at Clemmel Geos, an ancient steatite quarry at the coast to the south west of Houbie.

Finally, there have been archaeological excavations on the island. One of these, which took place at Houbie, uncovered the remains of a Viking longhouse. Items from every day life, such as fishing or loom weights, were also revealed – along with a huge steatite bowl.

More Information

For more information about Viking settlers in Shetland, visit the [Shetland Museums and Archive website](#).

For more information about the Shetland Place Names Project, visit the [Shetland Amenity Trust website](#).

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