

Childhood and Play

Viking children were not schooled in traditional ways, but they learned farming, crafting and trading skills when very young from their elders. These lessons provided them with invaluable skills required to live within their community.

We know that the Vikings also enjoyed their leisure time, both as children and adults as many handmade toys, dice and gaming boards have been uncovered as archaeological evidence.

Many activities involved in children's play do not leave archaeological traces, however we do know of ball games and wrestling games, which were recorded in some detail in the Viking sagas.

Written sources (such as the Orkneyinga Saga) describe how being good at table games impressed other people. Some games were scratched onto wood or stone, with broken pieces of pottery or bone used for counters.



What games would leave evidence for future archaeologists to explore today?

What games would leave no evidence?

What games do you like to play?



Childhood

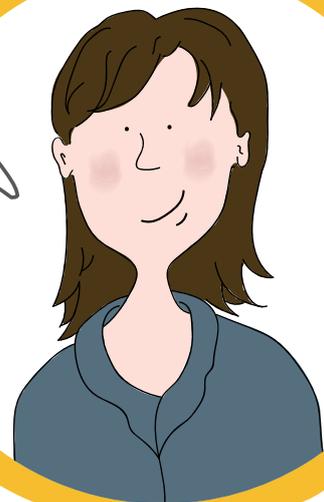
Child's Wooden Boat

Archaeologists have obtained some examples of Viking toys in the form of wooden carvings. Toy horses such as the Trondheim horse, discovered in Norway, and a wooden replica of a Viking longboat excavated in Dublin, Ireland, would have prepared Viking children for adult life.

Viking boys would learn skills and trades from their fathers and their extended families. Carving wooden boats and animals would teach Viking children the necessary skills to grow into talented Viking ship builders and carpenters.



What toys and games teach us skills today? Explore similarities and differences of toys in Viking times and toys today. Look closely at the materials used to make the toys and discuss how you think they were made.

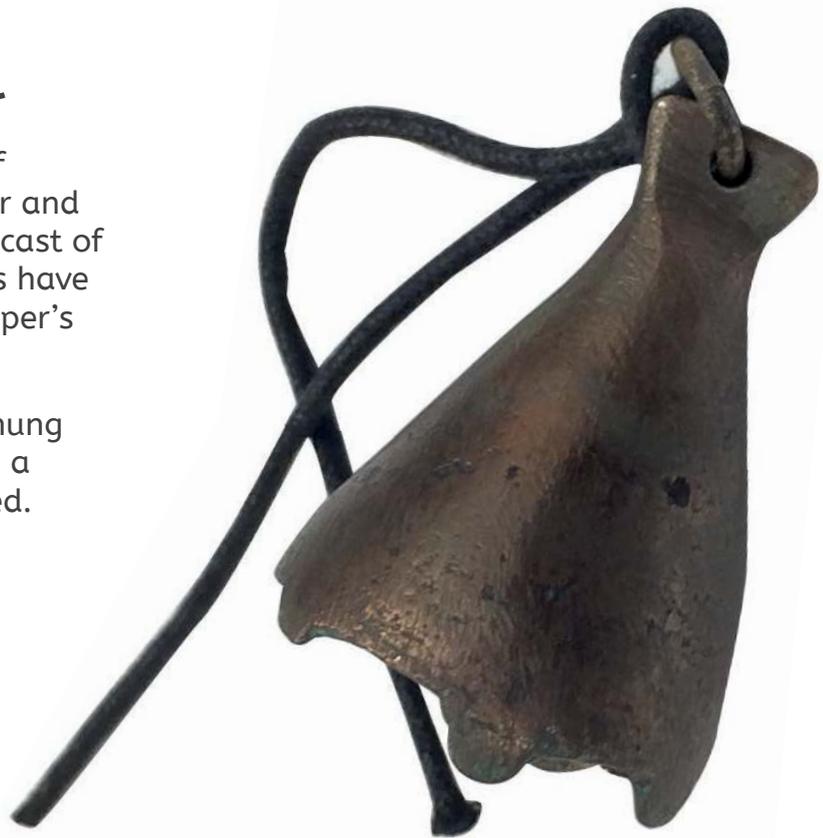


Childhood

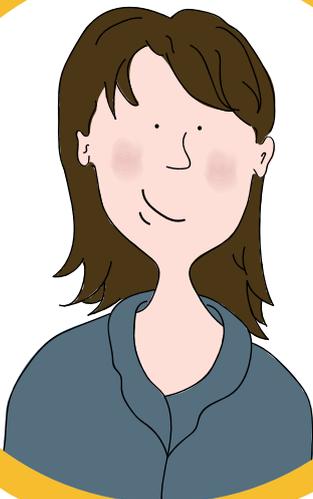
Child's Bell

This small bell is made of bronze, an alloy of copper and tin and would have been cast of molten metal. Some bells have been uncovered with clapper's still inside.

The clapper would have hung inside of the bell to make a ringing sound when moved.



This small bell was buried in a Viking child's grave on St Patrick's Isle, Peel. We know that it was common to bury children with items the child would have used or worn. Some children were also buried with beads and jewellery.



Leisure

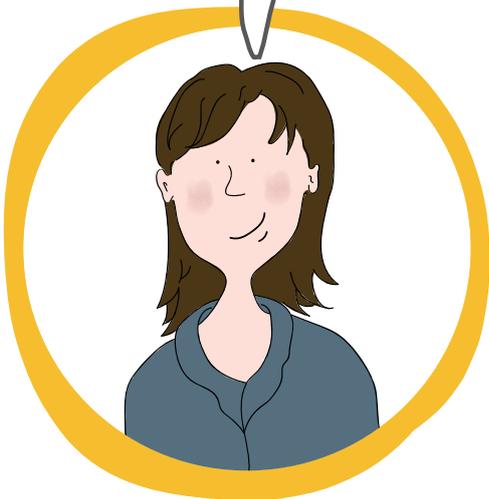
Bone Dice

This tiny dice, or die, is less than one centimetre across and is made from bone. It was found during archaeological excavations at Peel Castle and dates to the late 1200 AD.

Dice were used in many games, both with boards and without. The games could be played at home, in taverns or in the street; sometimes just for fun, sometimes with wagers involved. Because the dice were so small they were easy to carry around, but they were also easy to lose. Perhaps this is how this die came to be buried on St Patrick's Isle – or maybe a defeated construction worker threw it away during his break from building St German's Cathedral!



Can you work out what would be opposite the number 4 on the dice?
Think of other number combinations.



See 
The numbers are the same as modern dice, one through to six. This example shows the convention where the numbers on opposing sides add up to make seven – six is opposite one, five opposite two.

Leisure

Hnefatafl

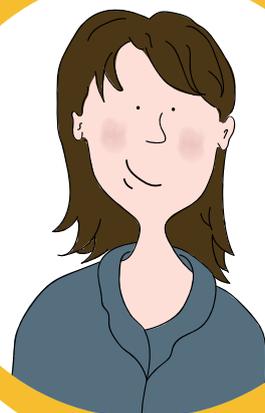
This is a replica of a Viking game called Hnefatafl, which means 'King's table'. The playing pieces may have been made from antler, bone or stone. We think that Hnefatafl is older than chess. Different versions of the game have been found across the Viking world, from Ireland to the Ukraine.

How to play Hnefatafl:

Hnefatafl is a game of attack and defence, for two people. The King piece and defenders occupy the centre of the board and a larger force of attackers is placed around the edges. The attacker wins the game if they can capture the opponent's King piece. The defender wins if their King piece can escape to one of the corners of the board.



See if you can outsmart your opponent in a game of Hnefatafl!



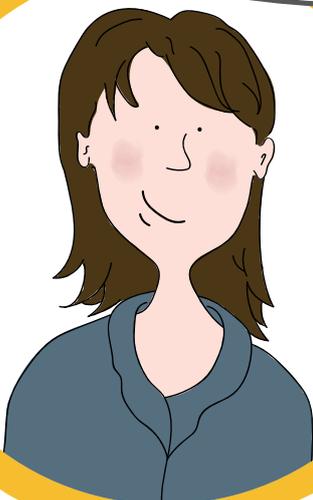
Leisure

Lewis Chess Pieces

The originals of these chess pieces, made out of walrus ivory and whale's teeth, were carved in the Viking world around 1200 AD. They were found in sand dunes on the Isle of Lewis, Scotland, in the 1800s. 93 pieces altogether were found: some were stained red, suggesting that the squares on the chess board were white and red rather than today's white and black. Chess was a popular board game amongst the wealthiest in society throughout Europe at the end of the 11th century. The chess pieces were most likely carved in Trondheim in Norway.



Did you know that the Lewis Chess pieces provide important information on how people dressed and styled their hair in the Viking Age?



Think 

We can tell which period the chess pieces were carved in, because of the detail in costume and equipment. For example, the Bishop's style of Mitre (his hat) was worn with the peak at the front after 1150 AD.