A Whalebone Plaque from the Collection of the British Museum

A considerable part of our knowledge about the material culture of the Viking Age originates from burials, the most peculiar of these being the boat burials. These were often ‘furnished […] with a fine array of high-status goods’¹, and give us a good picture about the objects used by the upper class of Scandinavian society. The typical artefacts in these burials range from weapons through decorative objects and jewellery to household items. Among the less common finds of the latter category are the whalebone plaques, of which about sixty have been excavated.² Despite their individual decoration, they share a common design: rectangular shape, a flat bottom part, the top open-worked or otherwise decorated, often with animal motifs. In this essay, I examine the origin, design, and function of one such plaque from the collection of the British Museum.

The plaque is a sub-rectangular board, 23 centimetres long and 20 centimetres wide, with a thickness of 0.9 centimetre. (See Appendix I.) The top is shaped into confronted animal heads, probably of horses or perhaps mythical creatures.³ It has an incised ring-and-dot decoration, ‘incised’ here referring to ‘decoration […] cut into the surface of an object, generally fairly lightly and not very deeply’.⁴ This decoration is most prominent on the animal heads; as the originally flat bottom area shows signs of damage and of extensive use, it is not clear if it was decorated, too. The plaque is carved out of whalebone, and its exact function is a matter of debate, the two main theories considering it either a smoothing board for linen or a

kitchen equipment. Most of the similar plaques date ‘from the late eighth to the second half of the ninth century’.\(^5\) Two brooches found together with the plaque date to 800-850 AD;\(^6\) these can be seen as contextual evidence, dating the plaque no earlier than 800 AD. The circumstances of its finding are poorly documented. According to Smith, it was found in a ‘barrow 107 ft. long at Lilleberre [sic], Namladen’\(^7\) in 1886.\(^8\) The name Lilleberre refers to the farm Lilleberge: ‘[g]ården Lilleberge ligger også ved Namsen, fire kilometer øst for Melhus.’ (The farm Lilleberge also lies by the river Namsen, four kilometres to the east from Melhus.)\(^9\) This is where English sport fishers and antiquities collectors excavated the aforementioned long barrow,\(^10\) their report stating the name of the farm as ‘Lilleberre’.\(^11\) The plaque came into the possession of Alfred Heneage Cocks, who sold it to the British Museum in 1891 along with several other items. There it received the museum number 1891,1021.67, where ‘1891’ is the year of acquisition, ‘1021’ stands for 21st of October and marks the collection the plaque belongs to, and ‘67’ is the final (or object) number.\(^12\) According to the British Museum website, it received two treatments after its initial conservation. In both cases, it happened in order to prepare the plaque for an exhibition. In September 2011, the treatment remained rather superficial; aside from some improvement of the old fills, no significant amendment took place. By May 2014, the condition of the plaque severely deteriorated. According to pre-treatment survey, ‘[o]bject come [sic] apart along old joins’.\(^13\) This time the old adhesive was removed

\(^5\) Owen and Dalland, p. 86.
\(^7\) Smith, p. 163.
\(^8\) Trustees of the British Museum, 'Plaque / Food-Tray / Culinary Equipment / Chopping-Board'.
\(^10\) Isaksen, pp. 62–63.
\(^11\) Isaksen, p. 62, n. 13: ‘I beretninga fra sportsfiskere blir gården kalt Lilleberre.’ (In the report from the sport fishers, the farm is called Lilleberre.) Translation by me.
\(^13\) Trustees of the British Museum, 'Plaque / Food-Tray / Culinary Equipment / Chopping-Board'.

and replaced. The report suggests that the process involved dismantling the plaque and re-joining it.\textsuperscript{14}

The material of the plaque sets it apart from the more common Viking Age artefacts. Bone carving in Northern Europe never raised to the prominence it shows in other parts of Europe.\textsuperscript{15} While objects of walrus ivory like the Lewis Chessmen are well-known, bone-based art or industry reached the level of other cultures only in the use of cetacean bone. The main source of whalebone objects appears to be Norway. Whalebone is a durable medium that decomposes slower than wood. Owen in the analysis of a similar plaque from an Orkney boat burial points out that ‘artefacts of whalebone survive particularly well in the soil conditions of Northern Norway.’\textsuperscript{16} The ‘Scar plaque’ (see Appendix II) was probably carved out of a ribbone,\textsuperscript{17} but the similar size of the British Museum plaque does not necessarily suggest the same origin, as larger species of baleen whales possess multiple bones large enough to serve as raw material for an object this size. Sjøvold calls whalebone ‘a Norwegian specialty’\textsuperscript{18}, emphasising that it is particular to North Norway, meaning the area above the 65\textsuperscript{th} parallel. He also describes the popularity of plaques second only to that of the ‘weaving swords’ among whalebone tools from Norway.\textsuperscript{19} Whalebone, obviously, was more difficult to obtain than bones of household animals or land-borne game. While there is literary evidence of whale hunting even in Anglo-Saxon England\textsuperscript{20} whose latitude whales do not frequent, the period when whaling became a regular activity is unclear. The practice of utilising stranded specimens probably originated from the Stone Age, but it could not have provided a steady enough supply to account for ‘the

\begin{itemize}
  \item[16] Owen and Dalland, p. 81.  
  \item[17] Owen and Dalland, p. 74.  
  \item[19] Sjøvold, p. 1202.  
  \item[20] MacGregor, pp. 31–32.
\end{itemize}
development of firm, standardized types of tools'. Aside from plaques, the two main types mentioned by Sjøvold are weaving swords, used in textile production, and the ‘cleavers’, whose function is even less clear than that of the plaques. Although most of the known whalebone plaques were found in Norway, occasional specimens appeared in Sweden, Britain and Ireland. MacGregor notes how the number of whalebone items in southern Britain increased after the Scandinavian settlement. While the natural scarcity of whales in the waters around Britain originally did not allow its widespread use, Viking invaders apparently introduced whalebone as a more popular raw material.

The most debated point about the plaques, of course, is their function. They occurred most often in graves of women, which suggests a function related to female activities. Although not necessarily being boat burials, these graves were ‘often richly furnished’, so their owners probably belonged to the upper classes of society. It became widely accepted by the beginning of the 20th century that these plaques were used to smooth clothes or linen. Essentially, they acted as ironing boards: glass smoothers shaped to offer a comfortable grip would have been heated and passed over the material laid on the plaque. Practices almost identical to this surviving until the 19th century in Skåne, Sweden support this argument. However, the idea was also introduced that they served as culinary or kitchen equipment. The ‘smoothening board’ theory did not explain the damage showed by some of the plaques, including the one in the British Museum. Isaksen in her thesis proposed that the cut marks found

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21 Sjøvold, p. 1204.  
22 Owen and Dalland, pp. 80–81.  
23 MacGregor, p. 31.  
24 Owen and Dalland, p. 77.  
25 Sjøvold, p. 1203.  
26 Owen and Dalland, p. 77.  
27 Owen and Dalland, p. 77.
on these could be explained by preparation or serving of food on the flat surface of the plaque.\textsuperscript{28} This would also explain a mark of usage discovered in several plaques.

‘Bruksspor i form av et glattere parti kan ha oppstått på annet vis enn ved stryking av tekstiler. Ved å plassere mat eller andre gjenstander oppå plata gjentatte ganger kan det ha oppstått glattere partier.’

(Usage marks in form of a smoother part could have arisen by another way than ironing of textiles. Repeated placement of food or other objects onto the plaque could have produced smoother parts.)\textsuperscript{29}

Archaeological evidence suggests that while certain pieces of cutlery were made of wood in this period, knives were predominantly made of iron.\textsuperscript{30} However strong a material whalebone is, repeated exposure to iron blades would have certainly produced some kind of damage or erosion. Owen offers yet another theory on the function of the plaques, approaching the subject from the direction of the specimens not showing wear or damage. She suggests that in some cases these plaques were used in religious circumstances and ‘primarily on ceremonial occasions.’\textsuperscript{31} She follows on the work of Britt-Mari Näsström, who drew a connection between a name of the goddess Freyja, ‘Hǫrn’ and the Old Norse word for flax, ‘hǫrr’, which was ‘surrounded by many magical perceptions’ and ‘connected with women; it was even called “seed of the woman”.’\textsuperscript{32} The supposition Owen states is that ‘the finest carved whalebone plaques were used for pressing precious linens for ceremonial occasions’.\textsuperscript{33} This argument

\textsuperscript{28} Isaksen, p. 103.
\textsuperscript{29} Isaksen, p. 103 Translation by me.
\textsuperscript{31} Owen and Dalland, p. 79.
\textsuperscript{33} Owen and Dalland, p. 79.
works well with the ‘Scar plaque’ she analysed, as it is indeed one of the specimens in the best
collection and shows little sign of any use from before its burial.

In conclusion, it is clear that the whalebone plaque of the British Museum is a rare
source of information about the material culture of the Viking era. While it has not been
preserved in a spotless condition, it offers insight to the everyday life of Scandinavian society.
It had evidently been an object for frequent use, which is not in accordance with the theory
proposed by Owen. Although the general opinion on the function of the whalebone plaques is
still in favour of the smoothing board hypothesis, in the case of this particular specimen the
alternative theory seems to be more plausible. The repeated motions of the suggested process
of smoothing would probably cause signs of use more in accordance with the description of
Isaksen: ‘glattere partiet sentrert i midten’ (smoother part centred in the middle).\textsuperscript{34} The marks
on the plaque, which more closely resemble cutting marks, support the idea of using it in a
kitchen or other food-related environment. This, of course, does not rule out the possibility of
a transition in function. Its shape being ideal for both purposes, it is conceivable that the plaque
changed its function from the originally intended during its time of use.

\textsuperscript{34} Isaksen, p. 101 Translation by me.
Appendix I

The whalebone plaque (1891,1021.67) Picture © Trustees of the British Museum.
Appendix II

The ‘Scar plaque’. Picture © Orkney Islands Council.
Bibliography


Näsström, Britt-Mari, Freyja - The Great Goddess of the North (Lund: University of Lund, 1995)


