The Finds Research Group AD700-1700

DATASHEET 34

Steatite Vessels in the Norse North Atlantic 800-1400

by

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Steatite objects, in particular cooking vessels, are recovered in high numbers across the North Atlantic region from the mid 9th century AD, and are regarded as a signature of Viking and Norse settlement (Hunter 1990, 190). Archaeological evidence suggests that Norwegian settlers were established in Shetland, Orkney, the Western Isles and Faeroe by the mid 9th century and that settlers had reached Iceland by the close of the same century. In addition, Scandinavian settlers had arrived in York by AD 900 (Richards 2000, 63) and Dublin by the mid 9th century (Clarke 1998, 334). The presence of steatite artefacts on sites dating to the Viking and Norse periods is often cited as evidence for trade involving both Shetland and Norway (Mainman and Rogers 2000, 2544; Wallace 1985, 135).

The research on which this *Datasheet* is based concerns the possible trade of steatite goods within the North Atlantic region during this era, from AD 800 to 1400 (see Forster 2004). Due to problems encountered in the scientific provenance of North Atlantic steatite (see Bray 1994), the research has concentrated on artefact morphology as a means of distinguishing different source regions. In using this method, it has been possible to address questions of distribution and trade of Norwegian and Shetland steatite throughout the North Atlantic region. The *Datasheet* will concentrate on the typology of the artefacts studied.

Background: material, cultural specificity and displacement

Steatite (or soapstone) is a general term used to describe metamorphic rocks composed primarily of talc. Such stone can be easily worked using metal or stone tools and, having a low coefficient of thermal expansion, can be subjected to heat without a high risk of fracturing (Bray 1994, 4). The stone is therefore suitable for the manufacture of objects exposed to heat (such as cooking vessels, moulds, crucibles), and its aesthetic qualities make it attractive for decorative and finely detailed artefacts (beads, whorls).

Within the North Atlantic, steatite outcrops can be found in Scandinavia, Britain and Greenland. Figure 1 depicts the location of the main steatite producing areas within the North Atlantic region (see Bray 1994 and Boggild 1953 for geological descriptions of sources).

In Merovingian and Viking Age Norway, steatite was employed for the manufacture of large vessels as well as for smaller objects such as weights and spindle whorls.

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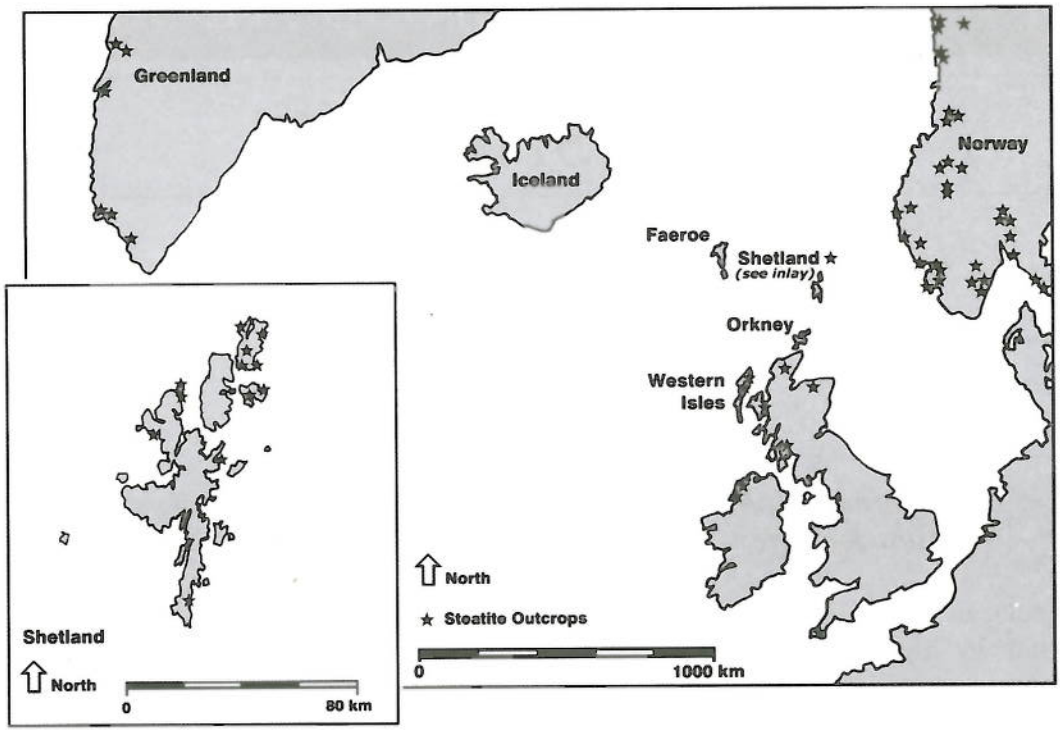

Figure 1: Steatite sources in the North Atlantic region (after Resi 1979; Ritchie 1984, Buttler 1984)

The Norwegian preference for steatite (over ceramics) is reflected in western Viking settlements of the North Atlantic region, and is not recorded outwith areas of Norwegian settlement (to the author's knowledge). The presence of steatite at settlement sites such as York during the early Viking period has been taken as an indication of Norwegian influence and seen as indicative of an ethnic Norwegian presence (Richards 2000, 123; Hunter 1990, 190).

Assessment of the steatite from sites across the North Atlantic region has suggested that the prime mover behind steatite goods distribution was *not* trade but movement of personal possessions (see Forster 2004). Thus, during the earlier Viking period (up to mid 10th century), the majority of steatite finds across the region are likely to be of Norwegian origin. Even in Shetland, Norwegian steatite vessels dominate assemblages until the use of Shetland steatite begins to replace them. It is probably not until the mid 10th century that Shetland's steatite industry really takes off. Even then, trade of Shetland goods appears to be limited to Orkney and the Western Isles, with only a few examples appearing further afield (for example, in Faeroe). Thus, the steatite artefacts recovered from sites such as York and Dublin are probably Norwegian and brought to the settlement as personal possessions (see Forster 2004). This observation makes the typology of Norwegian vessel types as relevant to British sites as a Shetland typology.

Steatite and vessel morphology

The two main sources of the steatite artefacts recovered in the North Atlantic are Norway and Shetland. Although sources on Greenland were exploited extensively by Norse settlers after AD 1000, products do not appear to have been distributed outwith the island (see Forster 2004). The following section will therefore concentrate on the vessel types produced in Norwegian and Shetland quarries between AD 800 and 1400.

Norway

Steatite is a well-known commodity in Norway, and was used increasingly during the Merovingian period for the production of vessels and replaced ceramics by the onset of the Viking Age (Blindheim 1982, 11). The recovery of substantial numbers of steatite goods from Kaupang (southern Norway) and Hedeby (northern Germany)

(Blindheim 1999, 195), suggests that they were incorporated into redistributive networks throughout Scandinavia. During the Viking Age, the production of steatite vessels is seen as one of Norway's major industries (Roesdahl 1998, 115). Artefact groups from the Viking Age such as whorls, moulds, tuyères and weights are only rarely of primary manufacture, more often being fashioned from broken vessel sherds on-site, and are not included in the following discussion (see Resi 1979).

The majority of Norwegian steatite vessels from the Viking Age to the end of the 14th century are circular with a hemispherical profile. Variations of this vessel type are common and, due to the nature of the material, a strict typological series cannot be easily formulated. Additional attributes such as tooling and accoutrement offer some chronological and regional refinement. For example, the use of iron handles on steatite vessels is common throughout Scandinavia, whereas decorative tooling is prevalent only in the Oslo fjord area (examples of vessels can be seen in Figure 2). The introduction of flat-based circular vessels in the Medieval period offers a basic typological difference to Viking period vessels (see Figure 3).

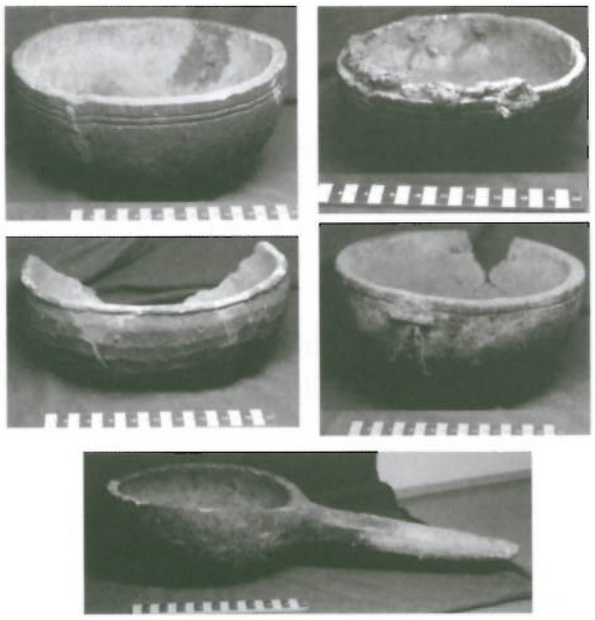

Figure 2: Variations on a theme: Norwegian steatite vessels form the Viking period showing variations in working, decoration and accoutrement. From Historisk Museet, Oslo: 12108, 17719, 15011, 6523, 24770b (scale in cms) (source: author)

Another artefact group manufactured from steatite are bakeplates, flat platters of discoidal form worked with rough tooling on both surfaces. The plates were a domestic utensil, probably used in the production of unleavened bread (Weber 1999, 138). Bakeplates can be manufactured from the same material as vessels but are far more common in a schistose form of steatite. While the non-schistose steatite bakeplates could be seen as a by-product of vessel production, the schistose group were produced at specialist quarries on the west coast of Norway (*ibid.*). The earliest finds of bakeplates in Scandinavia are from Gamlebyen, Oslo and date to *c.*1100 (*ibid.*, 138). The plates are most prevalent in west coast and northern Norway and their use seems to have continued into the 17th century.

Shetland

Steatite was first utilised in Shetland during the Neolithic period as a temper for pottery (Turner 1998, 95). During the Bronze Age/Early Iron Age, the stone was also used to manufacture vessels for domestic and funerary functions (Sharman 2000, 83; Turner 1998, 95). During the Middle Iron Age, steatite continued to be used as a pottery temper but vessel manufacture was limited to smaller objects such as lamps and bracelets, examples of which have been also been recovered from Mainland Scotland and the Western Isles (Steer 1958, 243f.; Hamilton 1956, 37).

The first assemblage of steatite artefacts to be excavated from a Viking period site in Shetland came from excavations at Jarlshof (see Hamilton 1956). The large number of steatite artefacts allowed a basic typological scheme to be devised, linked to the phasing of the site (*ibid.* and Figure 4). The classification was simple and based upon general attributes, such as the shape and size of the vessels. Five classes of vessels were identified:

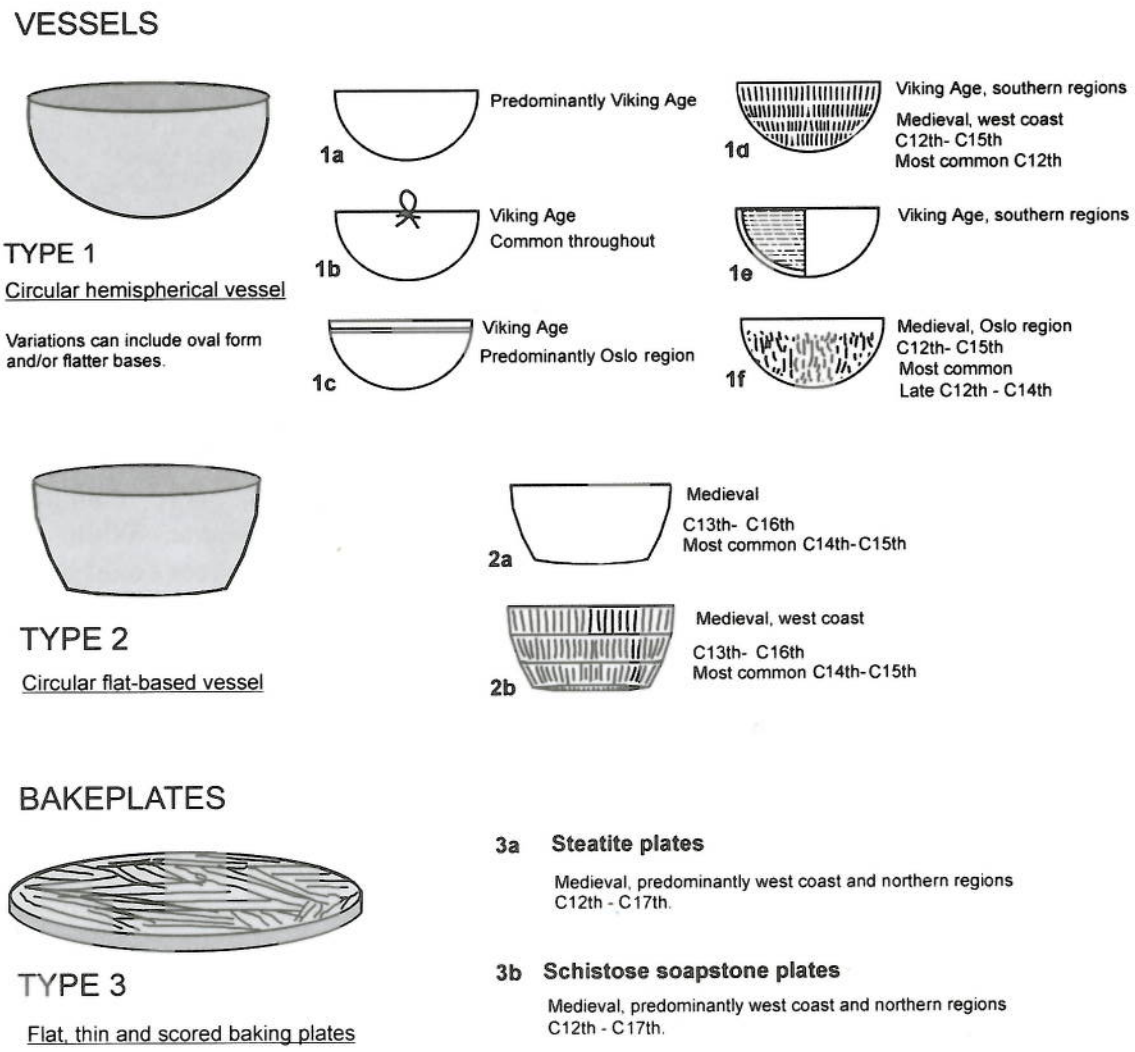

Figure 3: Norwegian steatite vessels and bakeplates, highlighting chronological and regional trends. Rather than being a comprehensive typology of vessel types and other objects, the illustration acts as a reference sheet that may potentially be used for regional or chronological distinction (source: author and after Lossius 1978; Resi 1979; Vaugstad, pers. comm.)

small hemispherical bowls (Class 1), large round vessels (Class 2), handled bowls or ladles (Class 3), large oval pots (Class 4) and four-sided vessels with flat bases (Class 5). The dating of these different vessel types is summarised in Figure 4.

Recent excavations have allowed the classification of vessel types put forward by Hamilton to be assessed in terms of chronology and general applicability within Shetland. Whilst other authors have often used Hamilton's classes, all have modified the series in some way (e.g. Buttler 1984; Smith *et al.* 1999. New artefact types have been added, allowing a more comprehensive outline of Shetland vessel morphology to be given (see Figure 5). In addition, comparison of Norwegian and Shetland artefacts has allowed a greater understanding of the development of the Norse Shetland steatite industry. The predominance of both small and large circular vessels (cf. Hamilton Class 1, 2 and 3) in the earliest Viking phases at Jarlshof probably reflects original Norwegian imports brought into Shetland by the settlers. Norwegian vessels are well-made in comparison with locally manufactured vessels examples, which predominate from the 10th century onwards (e.g. Hamilton's Class 4). Over time, and by the 12th century, four-sided vessels developed.

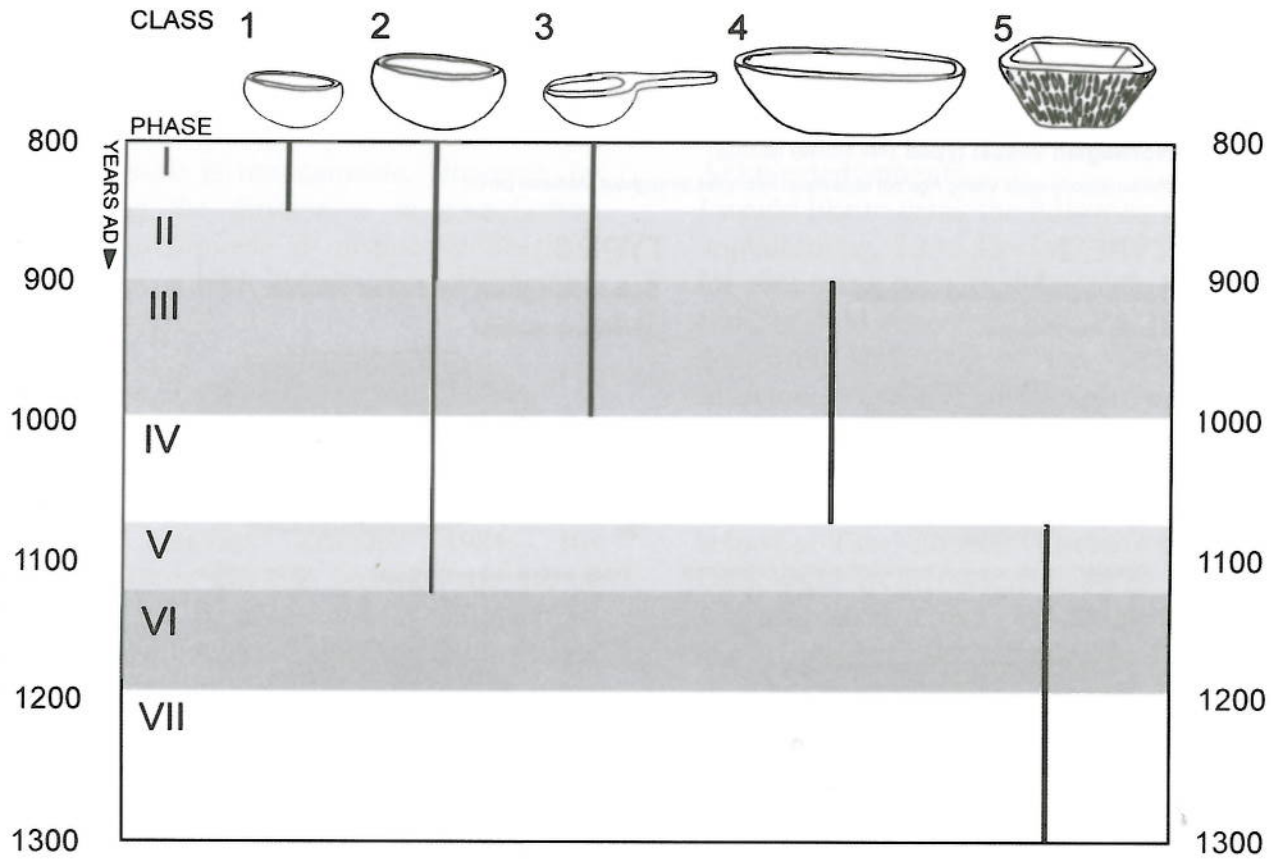

Figure 4: Typology devised by J Hamilton for vessels at Jarlshof (source: author, after Hamilton 1956)

This class (Hamilton's Class 5) includes thick-walled and thin-walled sub-rectangular vessels, both characterised by roughly-tooled external walls. Rather than a lack of refinement, the Shetland-made vessels perhaps reflect the physical properties of the stone. As four-sided forms also predominate early prehistoric assemblages, it is likely that Shetland steatite is more suited to this form (Sharman 2000, 85). Manufacture of four-sided vessels by the Norse in Shetland could therefore be explained in terms of Norwegian settlers finding the best way to use the coarser Shetland stone; local efforts to replace original imports resulted in cruder versions of the types known from Norway, which developed into a rough oval vessel (Hamilton's Class 4) and then to sub-rectangular and square pots (Hamilton's Class 5). This difference between the coarser Shetland vessels and the finer Norwegian vessels can be seen as one of the major attributes distinguishing products from the two regions (see Figure 5 for examples of Shetland products).

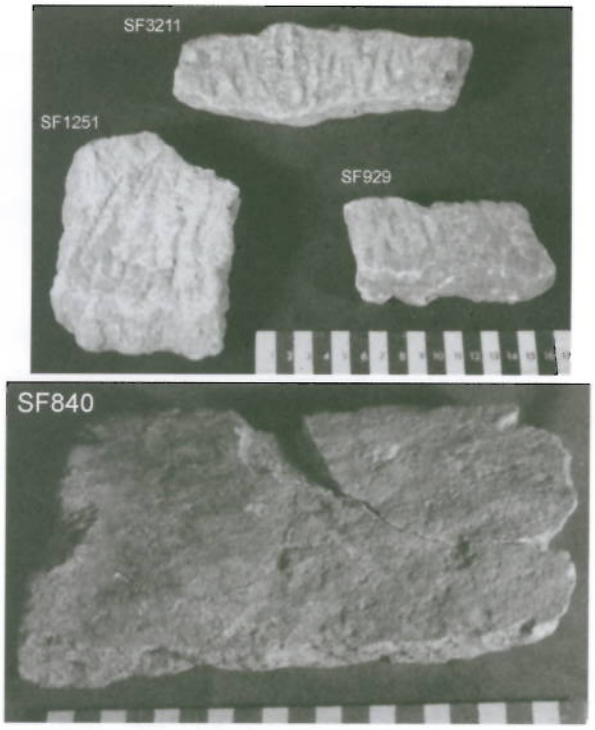

Figure 5: Examples of Shetland manufactured artefacts from Old Scatness Broch. Top: thick-walled sub-rectangular vessel fragments and below, a bakeplate (scale in cms)(source: author)

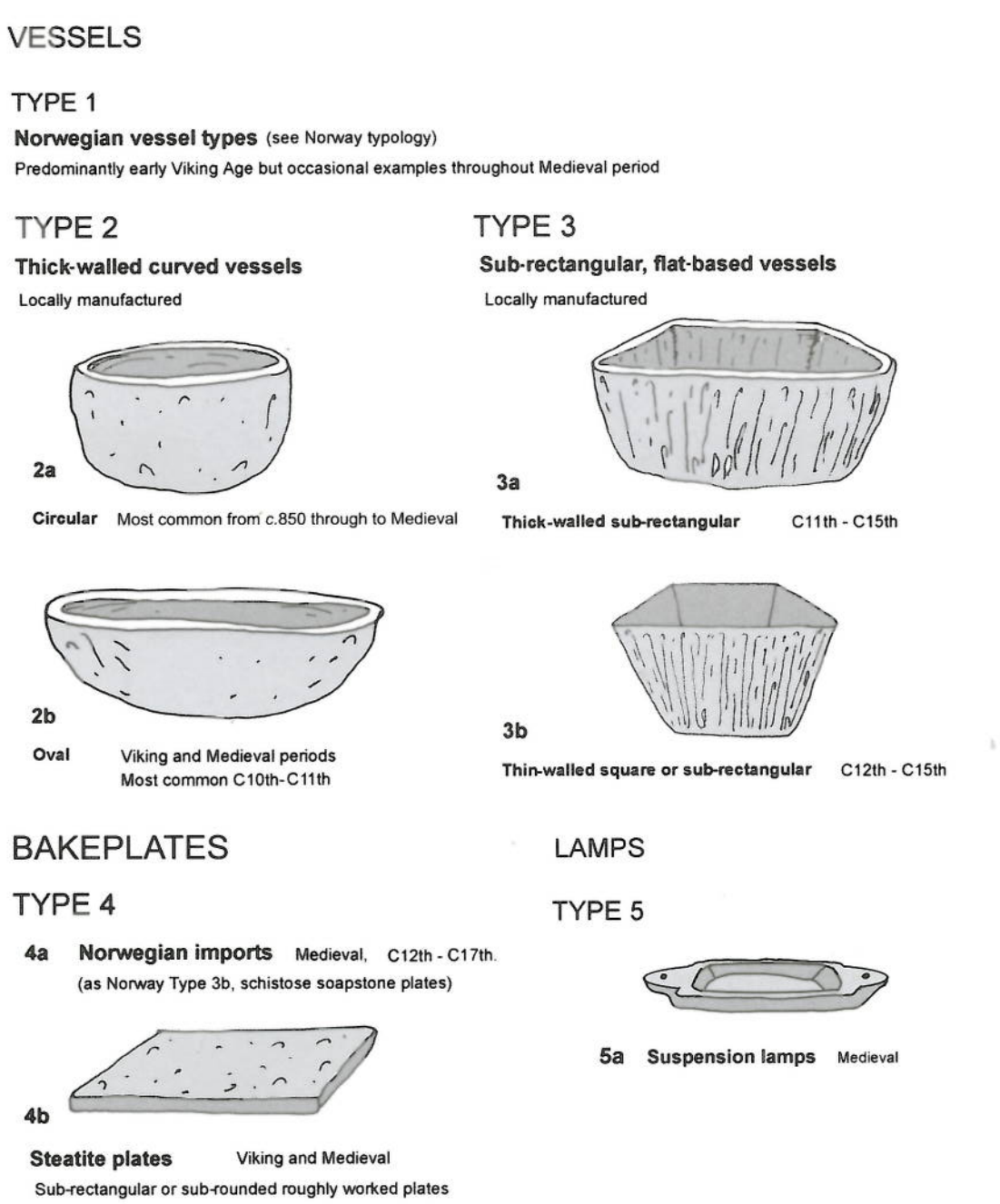

Figure 6: Typology for Shetland steatite vessels and bakeplates, highlighting chronological trends (source: author)

Contact with Norway is still in evidence in the later Norse period, demonstrated by high numbers of imported bakeplates found in Shetland after AD 1100 (Weber 1999). The occasional vessel also seems to have been imported, as at The Biggins (Smith *et al.* 1999, 133) and Jarlshof (Buttler 1984, 51). It is interesting that a cruder form of bakeplate is evident in Shetland from a much earlier date than in Norway (see Forster and Bond forthcoming).

These Shetland-manufactured artefacts are sub-rectangular and relatively thick (compared to Norwegian examples) and have been recovered from Viking period deposits at Old Scatness Broch (*ibid.*). Considering the presence of a similar artefact type in the Western Isles during the Viking period (made from pottery (Lane 1990, Ill 7.6, 124)), this may have been an innovation that travelled from west to east.

As demonstrated by Buttler (1984), and through the author's own examination of artefacts from Old Scatness Broch, Shetland, an elaborate typological series of Shetland steatite vessels is unobtainable. However, by highlighting the differences in manufacture and the development of distinctive Shetland vessel types, a basic typology can be devised (see Figure 6).

The decline of the steatite vessel

In both Shetland and Norway the use of large steatite vessels appears to be in decline by the onset of the 14th century, supplanted by imported ceramics (Buttler 1984, 10; Hamilton 1956, 187). In Norway, the use of the stone for domestic items continued to some degree until the 18th century in towns and until the 19th and 20th centuries in some rural areas (Buttler 1984, 10.). In Shetland, little is known about the use of steatite during the medieval period, although the many recorded uses of the stone during the post-medieval period may well have earlier roots. These include use as fire-bricks and hearth backing, *Koli* (oil and wick) lamps, pot-boilers, for "[...] dressing burns or sores" (Tudor 1987, 658) and, finally, it was noted for its ability to remove greasy spots from woollen clothes (Low 1879, 134).

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