



ILLUSTRATED REFERENCE

The Illustrated Guide to Viking Axe Types

Head shapes, the Petersen typology, real museum finds, and history versus fantasy. A free reference for students, teachers and reenactors.

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A Viking axe was first a tool, cheap to make and in every household, and only second a weapon. Because iron was affordable while a sword was a costly status object, the axe became the most common arm of the Viking Age (793–1066), buried in the graves of both warriors and ordinary people. This guide sets out the real head shapes, the standard scholarly typology, dated museum finds, and where the history parts ways with the fantasy.

Anatomy of a Viking axe

Every Viking axe has two parts: an iron **head** and a wooden **haft**. Smiths built the body and socket from tough, shock-absorbing wrought iron, then forge-welded a strip of harder, high-carbon steel onto the cutting edge, so the tool kept a keen edge without being made entirely of scarce, expensive steel. Hafts were cut from hardwood, usually ash or sometimes oak, typically around 70–90 cm for a one-handed axe and longer for a two-handed one.



The parts of an axe. A bearded axe (skeggøx) shown. Illustration · VikingsBrand.

The three families

Beneath the scholarly type-letters, Viking axes fall into three practical families: the light **utility / hand axe** that did everyday work and fought when it had to; the **bearded axe (skeggøx)**, whose extended lower edge

made it a fine dual-purpose tool and weapon; and the wide, thin, two-handed **broad axe (breiðøx)**, the purpose-built war axe better known as the "Dane axe."



Utility / hand axe

Compact, symmetric head with a modest curved edge. The everyday wood axe that could fight at need.

THROUGHOUT THE VIKING
AGE



Bearded axe · skeggøx

Lower edge drawn down into a "beard" below the haft line, adding cutting edge without extra weight. Tool and weapon.

EARLY · 8TH–9TH C.



Broad axe · breiðøx

Wide, thin, flaring crescent edge on a long two-handed haft. The elite battlefield "Dane axe."

LATE · 11TH-C. FLORUIT

The three plates above are original illustrations. For photographs of surviving pieces, see [Museum examples](#).

The Petersen typology (A–M)

The standard scholarly framework for Viking axes comes from the Norwegian archaeologist **Jan Petersen**, whose 1919 study *De norske vikingesverd* classified axe heads into a lettered series, commonly cited as twelve types (**A through M, with J omitted**). It has been refined by later Scandinavian and Baltic scholars but never replaced. The table groups the letters by family; because most surviving hafts are lost and iron corrodes, **dates are approximate and given at century level**.

TYPES	FAMILY	APPROX. PERIOD	HEAD SHAPE	ROLE
A–B	EARLY / TOOL	8th–9th c.	Small, light, fairly symmetric; low spurs; edge often only 7–15 cm.	Utility wood axe; hand-to-hand at need.
B–E	BEARDED · SKEGGØX	8th–9th c.	Lower rear corner drawn into a "beard" below the haft line; curved edge (most extreme on Type C).	Dual-purpose tool and one-handed weapon.
F–K	Transitional	9th–10th c.	Varied spurs and necks; mostly slender, one-handed hand-axe forms (note: no Type J).	Weapon & utility hand axes.
L	BROAD · BREIÐØX	c. 10th–11th c.	Narrower broad axe; long, slightly curved edge, toe often swept forward; blunted spurs.	Purpose-made war axe.
M	BROAD · BREIÐØX	c. 950 → 11th-c. floruit	Classic "Dane axe": wide, symmetric, very thin flaring crescent (bit ~2–5 mm) with lugs at the socket.	Two-handed battlefield weapon.

Framework after Jan Petersen, *De norske vikingesverd* (1919); groupings and dating follow later museum syntheses. Fine per-type date brackets vary between authors.

Periods & use

Across the Viking Age the axe stayed close to its farming roots. The National Museum of Denmark notes that "whilst the swords of the Viking Age were preserved for the use of just a few, many Vikings owned axes," and that it is often "difficult to tell whether an axe was used as a weapon or a tool." Early heads were small and light; over the 10th–11th centuries a distinct class of large, long-hafted war axe emerged.

That two-handed broad axe, the **Dane axe**, became the signature weapon of elite bodyguard troops: the **huscarls** of Anglo-Saxon England and the **Varangian Guard** of Byzantium. It is one of the most prominent weapons on the **Bayeux Tapestry** (embroidered c. 1070s), wielded by the armoured axemen around King Harold at Hastings in 1066.



Two-handed Dane axes at Hastings, 1066. Bayeux Tapestry, scene 52.

Bayeux Tapestry (11th century), Public Domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Were axes thrown? Rarely, if at all, by Vikings. The purpose-built throwing axe of the early Middle Ages is the Frankish **francisca** (c. 500–750), a Merovingian weapon that predates the Viking Age. You would not willingly throw away a prized axe mid-fight; Norse axe-throwing is better read as a display of skill than a battlefield tactic.

Museum examples

A handful of surviving axes anchor the whole subject. Two are prestige pieces with verifiable dates; the rest show the plain, functional reality, plus one late, ornamented example that is the exception rather than the rule.



The Mammen Axe

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF DENMARK · C. 970

An iron head inlaid with silver in the style it gave its name to. From the rich Bjerringhøj chamber-grave at Mammen, Jutland. Dendrochronology dates the burial to the winter of **970–971**. A ceremonial magnate's axe, not a battlefield tool.

Drawing: Stefan Bollmann, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons. Artefact: Nationalmuseet, Denmark.



A surviving axe head

THE MET, NEW YORK · 11TH–12TH C.

A genuine Scandinavian iron axe head. Centuries of corrosion have thinned it, but the single-bladed form and slender profile are unmistakable, nothing like the thick slabs of fantasy art.

Ax Head, Scandinavian, 11th–12th century. The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Open Access / CC0).



An axe in its grave

MUSEUM OF CULTURAL HISTORY, OSLO · LATE 10TH C.

The Nordre Kjølén weapon grave from Solør, Norway: sword, spear, arrows and an iron axe head, buried together. Axes appear in graves far more often than swords, which is exactly why they define the age.

Photo: Wolfmann, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons. Artefacts: Museum of Cultural History, Oslo.



An ornated late axe

LANDESMUSEUM SCHWERIN · 11TH–13TH C.

A decorated, inlaid iron axe from the late Viking / early medieval Baltic world. Ornamented pieces exist, but even here the underlying *shape* is a normal functional axe; only the decoration is exceptional.

Photo: Wolfgang Sauber, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons. Archäologisches Landesmuseum Schwerin.

The Langeid broadaxe (Museum of Cultural History, Oslo; acc. C58882/4) deserves its own mention: a two-handed war axe from Setesdal, Norway, dated to the early 11th century, with a cutting edge just over 25 cm and a rare band of brass wrapped around its wooden haft. The brass's corrosion products preserved a stump of the original handle. It is the clearest surviving example of a purpose-built Viking battle axe.

Where they were found

The most important axe finds cluster across Viking-Age Scandinavia (Norway, Denmark and Sweden), with the two-handed war axe reaching Anglo-Norse England. The map below locates the sites named in this guide.

FIND SITES

WHERE THE AXES WERE FOUND

Selected Viking-Age axe finds & sites · approximate locations



- 1 GJERMUNDBU**
Norway · two Petersen type-K axes (helmet grave)
- 2 LANGEID**
Norway · brass-clad two-handed broadaxe
- 3 BJERRINGHØJ / MAMMEN**
Denmark · silver-inlaid ceremonial axe, c. 970
- 4 OVER HORNBÆK**
Denmark · silver-and-copper-inlaid long axe
- 5 TRELLEBORG**
Denmark · ceremonial axe, ring-fortress cemetery
- 6 BIRKA**
Sweden · warrior-grave axes, trading town
- 7 HASTINGS**
(off map, SW) England · Dane-axe huscarls, 1066 (Bayeux Tapestry)

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Selected axe finds & sites. Approximate locations across Viking-Age Scandinavia.

Base map © NordNordWest, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

History vs fantasy

Much of the popular image of the Viking axe was invented long after the Viking Age. Here is where the evidence actually stands.

THE MYTH

Vikings swung double-bladed "battle axes."

THE EVIDENCE

Real Viking axes were **single-bladed**. No surviving example, artwork or text supports a double-bitted Viking axe. The twin-bladed axe is a 19th-century North American forestry tool later borrowed by fantasy art.

THE MYTH

Axe-wielding warriors wore horned helmets.

THE EVIDENCE

No horned Viking helmet has ever been excavated. The image was popularised by costume designs for **Wagner's *Ring* cycle in 1876**. Real helmets were plain iron caps, like the one from Gjermundbu.

THE MYTH

Viking axes were huge, heavy cleavers.

THE EVIDENCE

They were **light**. Hand-axe heads ran a few hundred grams up to about a kilogram (the Langeid broadaxe ~800 g); even a big two-handed Dane axe was only ~1–2 kg, because the bit was thin. Power came from balance and a long haft, not mass.

THE MYTH

The francisca is a Viking throwing axe.

THE EVIDENCE

The **francisca is Frankish**, characteristic of the Merovingian period (c. 500–750) and described by writers like Gregory of Tours, generations *before* the Viking Age. It belongs to Frankish, not Norse, material culture.

Keep exploring Viking axes

- ◆ See how the two great fighting forms differ in [Bearded Axe vs Dane Axe](#).
- ◆ [What Is a Bearded Axe?](#) explains the skeggøx and its beard in full.
- ◆ [Viking Axe Throwing Guide](#) covers technique, targets and safety, plus the francisca myth.
- ◆ [The Best Viking Axes](#) rounds up our hand-forged pieces built on these historical forms.
- ◆ Use the [Rune Translator](#) to write your name in authentic Norse runes for your axe or jewellery.

Frequently asked questions

What were the main types of Viking axe?

Two forms matter most: the **bearded axe (skeggøx)**, an early dual-purpose tool and one-handed weapon whose lower edge is drawn into a "beard," and the wide two-handed **broad axe (breiðøx)**, the purpose-built "Dane axe." Both sit within Jan Petersen's 1919 typology, which runs from Type A to M.

Did Vikings use double-bladed axes?

No. Every surviving Viking axe is single-bladed. There is no archaeological, artistic or written evidence for a double-bitted Viking axe. The twin-headed axe is a modern forestry tool later adopted by fantasy art and film, not a historical Norse weapon.

How heavy was a Viking axe?

Much lighter than most people expect. One-handed axe heads weighed roughly 0.5–1 kg, and even the large two-handed Dane axe was only about 1–2 kg because its blade was thin, often just 2–5 mm at the bit. Cutting power came from balance and haft length, not weight.

What is a bearded axe?

A bearded axe, or **skeggøx**, has its lower rear edge extended downward into a hook-like "beard" below the haft line. This adds cutting edge without adding weight and lets the hand grip close behind the blade. It appears early (8th–9th century) and served as both a woodworking tool and a weapon.

Is the francisca a Viking axe?

No. The francisca is a throwing axe of the **Franks**, typical of the Merovingian period (about 500–750 AD), before the Viking Age began in 793. It is often confused with Viking axes but belongs to Frankish, not Norse, culture.

Where can I see a real Viking axe?

The **National Museum of Denmark** holds the silver-inlaid Mammen axe; the **Museum of Cultural History in Oslo** holds the Langeid broadaxe and the Gjermundbu grave; and museums such as the Swedish History Museum and the Met display surviving axe heads. Many collections publish openly-licensed photographs online.

Sources & further reading

1. Jan Petersen, *De norske vikingesverd* (Kristiania, 1919): the foundational axe typology.

2. [National Museum of Denmark: Axes and the Mammen grave.](#)

3. [Museum of Cultural History, Oslo: The Langeid broadaxe.](#)

4. Hurstwic (W. R. Short) on Viking axe manufacture; Regia Anglorum on arms and armour; English Heritage on the weaponry of 1066.

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