

Shields

An Gaill Glais – Historical Recreation Group.

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Kite shield

A **kite shield** was a distinct type of shield from the 10th–12th centuries. It was either a reverse teardrop shape or later on, flat-topped. The tapering point extended down to either a distinct or rounded point. The term is a neologism, created by Victorian antiquarians due to the shape's resemblance to an early European [kite](#).



believed to be an evolution of the simple round shield purely to guard one whole flank of a rider when in combat, the shield gained popularity amongst professional soldiers as it allowed them to guard their foreleg when in a *mêlée*. It was either flat in section, or featured a gradual curve, to better fit the contour of the human torso, much in the style of a [scutum](#). The shield is most closely associated with the Normans, who were one of the first cultures to use it widely, and can be seen throughout the [Bayeux Tapestry](#).

The kite shield was an evolution in the development of shields, representing a change in the popular circular shape which had been dominant in Europe since at least 500 AD. The shield was still in widespread use throughout the 12th century, and is illustrated in art such as on the

small Carlton-in-Lindrick knight figurine, but began to be phased out at the end of that century, and had largely disappeared by the 14th century as limb armour became more efficient, and therefore less leg cover was required of shields. Modifications to the kite shield occurred gradually, the top first being truncated, then the tail shortened and the resultant smaller shield that developed is referred to as a [heater shield](#).

The kite shield predominantly features [enarmes](#), leather straps used to grip the shield tight to the arm. Unlike a boss, or centralised grip, this allows a greater degree of weight distribution along the arm, rather than the weight pulling on the wrist. It also allowed the horse's reins to be gripped with the liberated left hand. Kite shields were strapped in a variety of different patterns, such as a simple left-right grip (where the left side strap is looser than the right, thus allowing an arm to be slid in and then grip the right strap), top-bottom (the same configuration but with the loose strap below the tight strap) and various cross-bracing (where two straps meet in an x shape). All these types of grips have appeared on various illuminated manuscripts, and it appears to have been a matter of preference which was used. The shield sometimes featured a domed metal centrepiece (shield boss), but it has been generally accepted that this was decorative rather than providing protection for the hand as on a round shield. It is also taken that a large number of kite shields featured no boss, and this was also a matter of preference. However, the addition of a boss may have made the deflection of incoming blows easier. The shield was usually made from stout but light wood, such as lime, and faced in either leather or toughened fabric, such as canvas. Most shields featured some form of reinforced rim, generally toughened leather, although some historians believe the rims on certain shields would have been constructed from metal.

It could also be slung across the back with a [guige](#) strap when not in use. It was superseded by the small triangular [heater shield](#) by about 1250.

Viking Shields

The Viking shields were large round wooden shields with metal enforcements. Unlike other shields, the Vikings did not hold the shield by strapping it on the arm, as might be expected. Instead they were held with a single grip at the centre of the shield, behind a metal boss.



Back of a Viking Shield

This way of holding the shield, opened up a wide variety of techniques in the usage of the shield. The single grip gave the user a possibility to turn and twist the shield in various ways, thus making the shield a formidable defence tool, as well as opening for the possibility of using it in an offensive.

The shields were normally around 80 to 90 cm or around 35 inches in diameter, making it a rather large object to carry around for warfare. The size might be an indicator to the importance of the shield, when it came to the defence of the Viking warrior, as such a large shield would always be difficult to carry around.



Holding a Viking Shield

There are some archaeological finds that give us an idea about how these shields might have looked like and what they might have been made of. Another indicator of the design is the Gulathing's law, where it describes in detail how the Viking shields are to be made.

According to the description of the shields made for the Gulathing community, the shield was to be made of wood with three iron bands and a handle fastened to the back side by iron nails. Later the law was revised to include a description of the front, which was to be made of a double layer of boards.

In the description of the Gulathing law, there is also a text indicating a certain colour scheme, in this case white and red. The colours were most likely regional colours for the Gulathing area, as other shields are known to have had other colours, for example the colours found on shields from the Gokstad excavation show shields with fronts painted black and yellow.

The shields that have been found were made of fir, pine or spruce but most shields that are mentioned in Nordic literature indicate that the Viking shields were made out of linden or basswood as it's known in the America.

The edge was most likely trimmed with leather to keep it together in case of an impact splitting the wood. With a leather or a rawhide on the edges, the shield would be more resistant to breaking apart.

Another way of enforcing the shield, would be to cover the front with leather. This increases the strength of the shield and prevents it from splitting up.

When looking at the shield from the opponent's side, one would notice the size, as the shield would cover the bearer from the head to his legs. The flexibility of the bearer would also be noticed, as the shield could be maneuvered much more freely than had it been fixed to the forearm, as is the norm with larger shields.

When the Vikings were on the move, or not engaged in battle, the shield would be carried on the back using a leather sling. This reduces the weight a little, as well as giving extra protection from rear attacks.

Though the shield was first and foremost a defence tool, its design and usability made it a dangerous weapon in the hands of a trained warrior.