

# Bone Dice

**Period:** Neolithic onwards  
(c. 4000 BC onwards)

**Material:** bone

**Complete item**

These dice have been carved out of bone. The earliest dice in Scotland were found at the Neolithic site of Skara Brae, but they are more commonly found at Iron Age, Viking and Medieval sites.



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*Neolithic bone dice from Skara Brae*



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*Iron Age die found at a broch at Foshigarry, North Uist.*

Early dice were not always a perfect cube, and in the Iron Age we find rectangular dice at several broch sites, including Pap broch in Caithness. The replica here, from a broch on North Uist, was originally made from a hollow cattle bone. Being hollow, there are no numbers at the end, and the dots mark out numbers 3 to 6 on other faces. The replica Viking period die is a cube, and the six sides have been cut with a saw, and circular marks scored with a double-pointed tool used like a compass to create a central hole and even ring.

Along with dice, bone gaming pieces have been found at Iron Age sites, Viking burials and Medieval castles. Gaming pieces are usually circular bone disks or half-spheres, sometimes with pegs to fit into boards. These artefacts suggest that games were a popular leisure activity, with specialised objects.

We do not know what games were being played. Dice games could be simply predicting the next number to be rolled, or more complex betting games with intricate rules. Dice could therefore be evidence of an understanding of mathematical principles of probability.

**How many games using dice can you think of?**



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*Bone and iron gaming pieces buried with a Viking boy at Balnakeil in Sutherland. The objects are in the NMS, Edinburgh*

**See also:**

CT Bone and Antler Working

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