

History/Time Period

The Viking Age is generally considered to run from the 8th century to the mid-11th century, although some parts of the Scottish Hebrides and other remote areas continued with Norse culture until the mid-13th century. What we often call treasure chains are more appropriately called "festoons."

Graves

The Birka graves are some of the best examples of beads, chains, and necklaces for the Norse era and is readily searchable with a bit of help from Google Translate. <http://mis.historiska.se/mis/sok/birka.asp> will let you search by grave number or you can do a general search via <http://mis.historiska.se/mis/sok/sok.asp?qtype=f&page=4>. In Iceland, villages were buried, Pompeii-like, by the volcanic eruption of Mt Hekla in 1104 C.E. These finds are not as well-documented online (the national museum of Iceland does not yet have a virtual gallery), but can be found if you dig.

Composition of Festoons

Beads came in a wide variety materials which are not too dissimilar from beads we can get today. A sampling of some popular and less-popular materials: glass, carnelian, amber, crystal, bronze, silver, clay, limestone, as well as precious and semiprecious stones. There are even finds with cowrie shells from the Indian Ocean!

Based on current evidence, it is unlikely that beaded treasure chains hung down to one's navel; chains that length would be massively impractical and catch on everything. Festoons hung slightly less than taut between two brooches, bars, or chatelaines. A single short strand between 20-30 cm is most common, although festoons with up to six strands have been found. These are still fairly close to each other rather than drooping with large gaps. In the Baltic region, chains are preferred and hang lower than their beaded, westerly counterparts.

Some festoons are monochromatic and others are highly varied in material and color. Most Norse chains are balanced in appearance, although not in a way that is necessarily intuitive to our modern aesthetics. Do not stress about perfect symmetry; the Norse certainly did not. Colors might run from warm to cool around a length, or be mixed throughout a strand.

To attach your strand, create a loop at the end of your wire by wrapping the tail around your pliers. Twist the tail and lead until secure, then thread your brooch's pin through the opening. Alternatively, slip a lobster claw or a jump ring onto the wire loop before closing it up, then attach to your brooches.

Loops are a great way to add beads or decorative elements without having to restring your entire festoon. A loop can fit anything from a single bead or decorative element up to four or five beads. Twist the tails together, then attach to the wire of the chain, spacing them evenly.

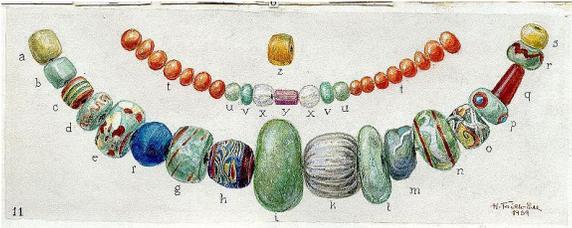
String Theory

Your best choice is metal wire. This is primarily what is found in Birka and elsewhere. Silver is best, followed by bronze and sterling silver. Gold is too soft; don't use it. Next best choice is a natural thread: linen or cotton; you'll want a thicker strand. Wool is not a good choice unless you have long-staple fingering weight yarn. After this, polyester thread; again, preferably something thicker with some strength. Avoid using fishing wire. It's strong but very obviously out of period.

References:

- <http://vikinganswerlady.com/vikbeads.shtml> (with a substantial bibliography at the bottom of the page)
- <https://io.ua/13507382p> - visual guide to some of the various beads found in the Birka graves.
- <http://mis.historiska.se/mis/sok/birka.asp> search the graves and finds at Birka
- <https://www.flickr.com/photos/historiska/> objects in the National Museum of Sweden
- <https://dawnsdressdiary.wordpress.com/2014/09/06/viking-festoon/> photos and discussion of Icelandic festoons

Festoons



Grave 550. Glass, carnelian, millefiori

<http://mis.historiska.se/mis/sok/fid.asp?fid=558651>



Glass, some rock crystal, silver wire loops

<http://mis.historiska.se/mis/sok/bild.asp?uid=19251>



Glass, polychrome, millefiori, etc.

<http://mis.historiska.se/mis/sok/fid.asp?fid=841776>



Glass beads, fish heads

<http://mis.historiska.se/mis/sok/bild.asp?uid=350577>



Glass, fossil, ruby, crystal

<http://mis.historiska.se/mis/sok/fid.asp?fid=422678>



Beads of bronze, glass and gold in a set of six rows.

<http://mis.historiska.se/mis/sok/fid.asp?fid=108059&g=1>

Materials



Glass

<http://mis.historiska.se/mis/sok/bild.asp?uid=305857>



Silver

<http://mis.historiska.se/mis/sok/fid.asp?fid=106696>



Carnelian

<http://mis.historiska.se/mis/sok/fid.asp?fid=270077>



Crystal

<http://mis.historiska.se/mis/sok/fid.asp?fid=181622>



Limestone

<http://mis.historiska.se/mis/sok/fid.asp?fid=454532>

Design and Layout



Grave 632. Carnelian, glass, crystal, silver
Loops and decorations feature.

<http://mis.historiska.se/mis/sok/fid.asp?fid=549427>



Glass, gold- and silver-foiled glass

Weighted, with small beads used to emphasize showier beads.

<http://mis.historiska.se/mis/sok/fid.asp?fid=578002>



Glass, bones. Sorted by weight and color.

<http://mis.historiska.se/mis/sok/fid.asp?fid=107403>



Glass -- haphazard colors, more sorted by weight

<http://mis.historiska.se/mis/sok/fid.asp?fid=885287>



Glass, crystal, carnelian, amber with a fragmentary
tooth plate to single comb.

Color shading and weight guide this layout.

<http://mis.historiska.se/mis/sok/fid.asp?fid=420401>