

VIKING SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND GENDER ROLES IN SCANDINAVIA BASED ON
BURIALS AND GRAVE GOODS

By

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ABSTRACT

The Vikings have always been a mysterious culture particularly the women who lived in that time and the questions that surround them. This paper looks to answer some inquiries by examining specific burials and the meanings behind the grave goods contained within them, and explain these by using Viking mythology. All to gain greater understanding of what women's role meant in Viking society as well as what roles they were able to have.

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INTRODUCTION

In modern society when we consider the word class when referring to a person's position in society people usually think about lower social classes, working classes, and upper classes. It is common knowledge that although individuals may live in a specific class, individuals are able to move up and down this hierarchy. As we know this was not always the case, there was a time when slaves were present in societies and had absolutely no capability to move from their rank. Social statuses have evolved and changed over time and with them the roles and rules of the different societies. Often these social statuses were formed and followed by the different characteristics that people had. An example would be the idea that women have defined roles and they could not participate in activities that were part the male status and vice versa as well as the different roles that were based off the hierarchy of the society, for example the extreme differences between a slave and royalty. These lines between the statuses were varied throughout the ancient world. And for past cultures that no longer exist, it is very difficult to fully understand what the roles of groups and individuals were. Through archaeology the discoveries of different burials aid in piecing together the social structures of the society. By looking at the burial locations within the community as well the grave goods and other features we can gain great insight into the statuses of those individuals whose graves have been uncovered. Such is the case for Viking age societies in the Scandinavia area of Denmark, Norway and Sweden (Figure 1). By looking at the burials in these areas we can see how their social structure was constructed as well as how different characteristics of individuals affected their roles, specifically those of male and female.

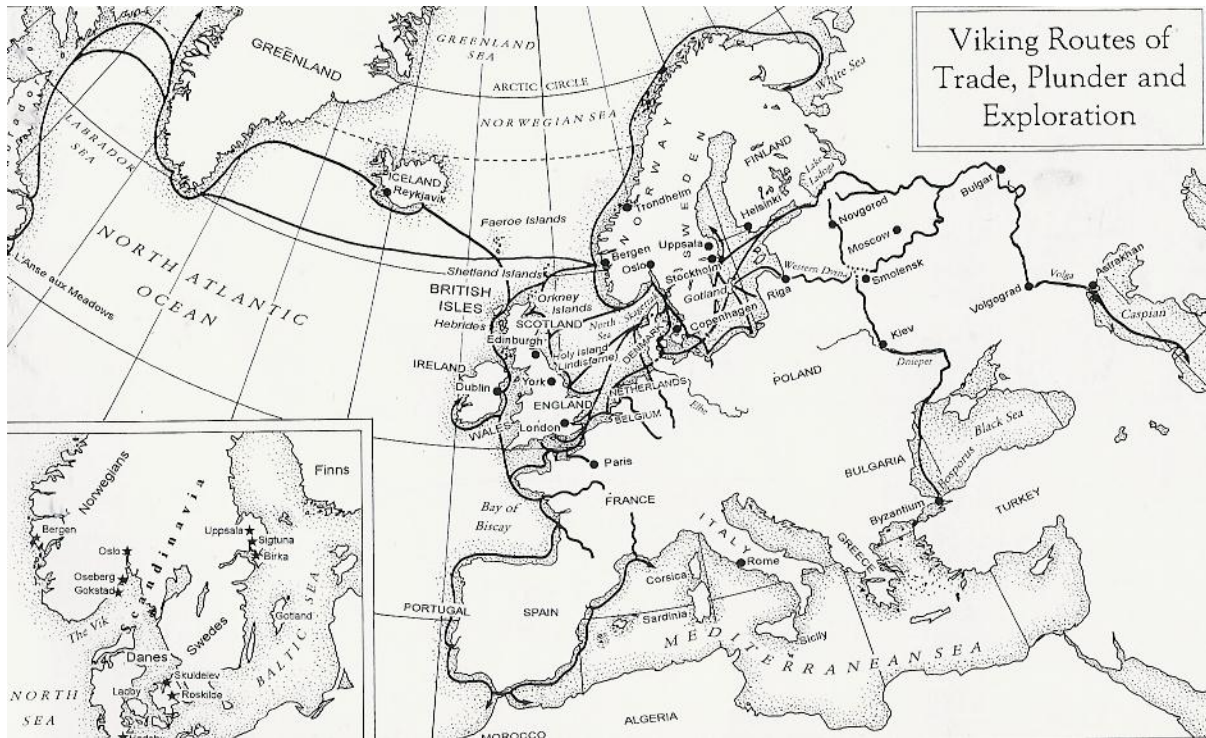


Figure 1. Map of Scandinavia showing various Viking voyages (Chartrand et co. 2006: figure 1)

BACKGROUND

The word Vikings usually invokes a picture of a large horde of people wearing horned helmets while pillaging an English village. In truth the Viking way of life in Scandinavia is much more than this prejudiced picture that has been painted for us. The basic origin of the Viking Culture comes from the areas of Scandinavia, mainly the lower portions of Norway and Sweden, along with Denmark. The Viking culture existed from around 700 AD through the eleventh century, or around the early middle ages (Christiansen 2002). Much of their time was spent on sea voyages to explore new lands, as well as obtain other necessities. It is because of this that many times they receive the title of pirate or raider. They would go out on voyages for long periods of time, and as such became extremely talented at maneuvering through water. The Vikings traveled throughout the ancient European world as well as other continents, as can be seen in figure 1.

However, Vikings also lived on land and experienced what was considered normal lives during this time period as well when not at sea.

Viking Social Classes

Although much of their time was spent away from home, they usually would spend their winter at home. While at their homes and away from the sea, they lived as farmers, fishermen, merchants, shipbuilders, craftsmen, blacksmiths or carpenters, to name a few professions. Like many other cultures the Vikings had specific social classes. From sources on Viking culture we know that at the very top of the social hierarchy is the King. The king would collect taxes, own land throughout the territory, and in return would work to protect and allow for the best conditions for those living under their reign (Chartrand 2006). Below the King was a small aristocratic group called the *jarls*, who owned land and leased it to tenant farmers. Below the *jarls* is a group called the *bóndi* who comprised the bulk of the Viking culture. All of these groups were free people whose opinions could be heard, and was of importance. At the bottom of the social hierarchy were the *thrall*, this groups was equivalent to what we would consider as slaves, and were completely owned by their master and put to all and any task that was needed to be done (Du Chaillu 1890).

Viking Religion and Afterlife Beliefs

The Vikings were a pagan people, and believed in the presence of multiple gods, and we hear about these gods in their myths and legends. Odin is thought of the Father of Thor, but in true Viking mythology Thor is the God of Thunder and the real chief divinity. Other key gods include Loki who was half god and half demon, and Freyja. She is the Goddess of love and

fertility as well as war and death. With the belief in these gods were the specific beliefs in multiple realms that an individual would be received at after their death (Page 2004). Viking belief was that depending on the individual they would be allowed to enter certain death realms, which were presided over by one of the gods. When warriors would die on the battle field it was said that half would be welcomed into Odin's realm of Valhalla or Valhol, as well as the Valkyrie or female warriors that were considered divine, would collect the men's souls from the battle field. All gathered to fight in the final battle with Odin. The other half of the deceased in battle was entered in the realm ruled by the Goddess Freyja. Helgafjell was a realm believed to be much like life on earth, where the people continued their daily lives in a beautiful environment. In contrast to the others, the realm of Hel is depicted as a place of punishment and pain. Ruled over by the Goddess Hel, who was considered the daughter of Loki, and devilish in appearance (Mortensen 1913). With these as well as a variety of lesser gods the Vikings took great care to practice their religion through rituals and specific people who were shaman or priests and priestesses, Women did have almost an exclusive role as a Völva, or a priestess that specialized in prophecy, and were known by their magic staff called a völr (Shetelig 1937). Magic could be used to solve problems in life as well as be used on the battle field to fight. These beliefs and practices have an important impact on the method that the Vikings bury their dead.

METHODOLOGY

Archaeology on the Vikings in Scandinavia occurred though out the years, but there is still a limited amount of Viking burials that are available to be studied. However Viking age burials

are one of the best ways to look at the social status aspects of Viking culture specifically the gender roles and how they play a part in the society. While focusing on Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, and examining the variety of graves in these areas and the differences and similarities in the grave goods that they contain. Between these areas there is great diversity within the burials that I will be looking at. The presence or absence of certain artifacts along with the unique burial styles will give great insight into how the social structure and its rules that affected women in Viking culture. Some of the items that I will be focusing on will include the presence of weapons, artifacts that suggest economic power, as well as other individuals that may have been sacrificed for the burial, and whether the person was buried with a ship, carriage or other unique aspects that show importance of the individual buried.

The presence or absence of artifacts like these can indicate the amount of prestige the deceased individual had, and how much status was shown even in death. By comparing these artifacts between male and female graves a greater idea can be gained about the role of women in Viking culture. From historic knowledge we know many of the roles that men played within the culture as well as their activities on the seas and abroad. It is because of these roles that men tend to be buried with specific artifacts that show their skills, for soldiers to be buried with weapons like spears and swords, or a black smith with the tools of his trade, then logically the same would follow for the burials with women. If there are women buried with swords then that could indicate their fighting power, or to be buried with scales that would show her economic strength since these types of items are used in trade and exchange situations. The differences in the type of grave can also tell a story about the individual who is buried there. If they were buried in a ship grave that would present the option of not only prestige but also their ability on the seas, while burials with horse carriages have a different connotation that may represent

power but not the travel. With some burials there have also been above ground presentations of elites through the use of Rune stones (Christiansen 2002). Although the majority of rune stones for women are scarce as is also the case with ship burials for women, there are still examples of this throughout Scandinavia as seen in Figure 2. The variety of different grave styles found within the Viking culture also includes cremations as well as other chamber burials; a map showing the areas with the greatest concentrations of particular burial types can be seen in Figure 3.

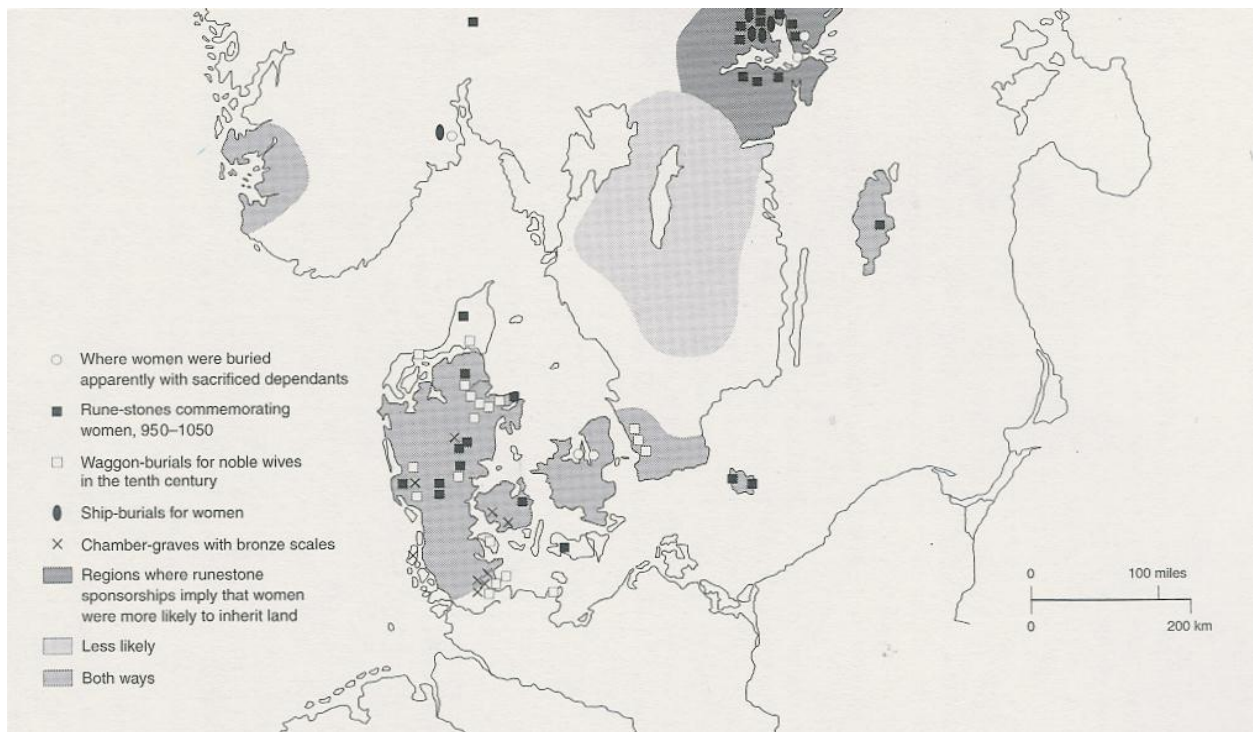


Figure 2. Map of Important Women burials and Rune Stones (Christiansen 2002: Map1)

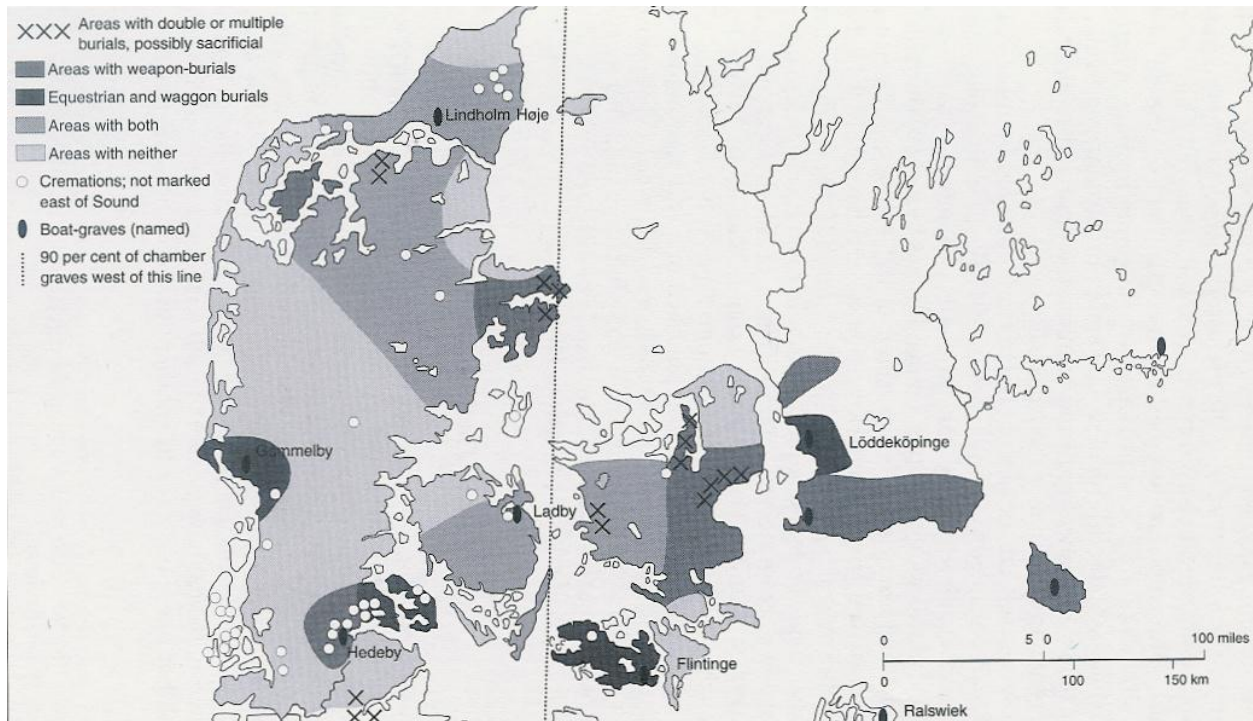


Figure 3. Map showing regions' prominent burial type (Christiansen 2002: Map 12)

Norse Myths and Legends

Much of the knowledge that we can draw upon to discern the meanings behind the artifacts that we find within the Viking culture comes from oral histories and other documents that have been passed down from Viking times. These Viking and Norse myths and folklore help to add some explanation and significance to the variety of grave goods found, also to gain greater understanding of the social statuses that were in place within the culture itself. The information that is obtained from such documents helps us to understand the different roles that both men and women had in Viking culture because these stories and myths show us their own perspectives, ideas and beliefs through songs and tales of their religion, as well as battle stories.

When reading these epic sagas and the myths we see women portrayed in a variety of ways. Some Viking women went overseas and traveled with the men and took part in the killing, fight alongside them, while others followed a more feminine role with an image of fertility and

dedication to the home. Many of the Norse myths and legends that we have come from the *Prose Edda* which was written in the thirteenth century, and is a collection of Norse myths, a similar work is the *Poetic Edda* which is an anthology of poems written in the 1200's (Jesch 1991). By looking at the death realm mentioned earlier, including Valhalla, Hel, and Helgafjell we see some of the reasons behind the actions of the Vikings placing such artifacts and belongings with a specific person, and their reasoning behind it.

Women with Rune Stones

Rune stones, also referred to as memorial stones are larger stones that were erected to remember and honor the individual who had died. Out of all the rune stones in Scandinavia only about 4.2 percent are dedicated to women alone (Figure 2) (Christiansen 2002). The Gotlandic Stones which were the burial stones found at the Oseberg burial show images of the afterlife and how the deceased was greeted at the gates by a woman, who many times is holding a drinking horn, while others depicted a woman riding to the afterlife on a chariot or carriage, which would give an explanation to the appearance of such goods inside of a female grave (Figure 4).



Figure 4 Image of one of the Gotlandic Stones depicting a man riding an eight legged horse, being greeted by a woman with drinking horn (<http://www.lessing-photo.com/dispimg.asp?i=30011056+&cr=11&cl=1>).

RESULTS AND DATA

In the archaeological record we can make the assumption that the Viking people took great care of deceased individuals. If they were family, they were still thought of as family even after death, including keeping their specific rank and were treated as such. According to the Viking customs based off of the available Sagas the eyes were closed, hair was brushed and they were laid on a bed of straw and then was either burnt or buried depending on the beliefs and wishes of those individuals. There are also a variety of practices when it actually comes to the burial itself, including circular, triangular, oval, in the shape of a boat, surrounded by stones in the form of a ship, there were also the use of mounds, many of these practices were said to be a heathen practice according to The Church Law (Larson 1935). To understand the social roles available to women the artifacts within the burials themselves I specifically looked at burials that contained artifacts that point to the possibility of a specific social class or status. Female graves in Scandinavia are difficult to find, only about one in four is a female grave, as seen on Table 1. Of the female graves we see the distinction between the different classes of people in the Viking age. By grouping the graves into three different groups we see a distinction of the hierarchy. The groupings are as follows; group one, when a grave includes five beads or more and the presence of textile implements, group two, at least one conical or oval brooch, beads, textiles and or agricultural tools and textile implements, group three, three conical and or oval brooches, beads, keys, tools, textile implements, and other metal works. In eastern Norway only 13% of female graves were part of group three, 54% were part of group two, and 33% in group one. Other regions of Norway, as well as the male graves follow this trend of the highest status burials being the least represented (Solberg 1985). Viking burials are unique within themselves, with

none exactly the same, therefore when looking at Viking burials it is difficult to make norms for their graves as well as for standards set for the hierarchy (Gardeła 2009).

Site	Percent of Female Graves
Sør-Gudbrandsdal	10
Nord-Gudbrandsdal	12-13
Telemark	12-13
Østfold	32
Vestfold	25
Rogaland	35
Sogn	33
Stryn	33
Nordland	33

Table 1 Sites in Scandinavia with percent of graves that are female adapted from (Stylegar 2012: Tabell 1)

For those women who were buried as higher ranking individuals, the grave goods that they were buried with can help indicate what parts women were playing in the Viking culture. One of the most well-known and richest Viking ship burials is the Oseberg ship burial, which many people do not realize was a burial for a woman. In the wooded chamber inside the ship were the remains of two women, one about the age of fifty, and the other between twenty and thirty years old, one was believed to be of high status, while the other as a slave. Artifacts found also include a four wheeled cart, tapestries, wool working tools, wood works, spades, and a staff (Shetelig 1937). With the review of these artifacts and women found in the grave there are interpretations that the burial was either for a prestigious noble woman or for a religious völva. There was a similar male burial in the same area as the Oseberg ship burial, the Gokstad Ship burial. It was not quite as rich as the Oseberg burial, but the male seems to be the remains of a Viking chieftain (Cremin 2007). This shows that women can hold a position just as high as a male, and perhaps even higher with in the Viking culture.

The idea of the ferocious Viking women is written all over the myths of the Vikings. One such story is that of Fraydis who was said to be the daughter of Erik the Red, in which she travels to Vinland and stands and fights alongside her family (Jesch 1991). As well as the stories of the Valkyrie who fight with Odin as well as mortal men (Page 2004). In the archaeological record we see the appearance of women who were buried with weapons, although in very few. One example is the grave found at Gerdrup, Denmark, this particular burial contained the bodies of both a man and a woman both buried with knives. The significant part of this grave is the presence of a spear with the female (Figure 5). This spear has been argued to have been used as a weapon, as well as seen as a possible staff used for magic purposes (Gardela 2009).



Figure 5, an artist's representation of the Gerdrup Burial (Gardela 2009: Figure 1)

These burial practices have strong connections with the afterlife beliefs of the Viking culture. For instance according to the sagas and mythology as well as the context on the memorial stones the theory that the Vikings believed that the dead would bring all those items that were buried with them to the hall of the afterlife, which is why men and women would have been buried with specific grave goods as well as sacrifices both animal as well as human. According to Snorri there is an even more specific connection between the cremation of an individual and their arrival to the afterlife with the Odin in his realm of Valhalla.

“...all the dead were to be burned on a pyre together with their possessions, saying that everyone would arrive in Valholl with such wealth as he had with him on his pyre...His ashes were to be carried out to sea or buried in the ground. For notable men burial mounds were to be thrown up as memorials. But for all men who had shown great manly qualities memorial stones were to be erected...”, (Sturluson1964).

Valhalla was a death realm that was reserved for the Viking warriors so that they could ride into the final battle with Odin. Other myths included the actions of a women who wished to follow her husband, or man she wished to be her husband in the death realm. This was accomplished many times by her being burnt on his burial pyre (Ellis 1968).

After examining the variety of grave goods as well as historic data from the Viking age the picture of Viking women and their roles in society has become clearer. Although I believe that with many social questions it is impossible to fully answer. The majority of women who lived in the Viking world played the traditional role, but with respect. This is different from many of the cultures during this time. From the Myths and written laws from Iceland we see that women did have the authority of run their estate, to inherited property and to make their own choices for the most part. There were also those who broke tradition and chose a different path for themselves. This might include those who decided to fight along men and were buried with weapons. By looking at the grave goods as well as their possible relation to the death realms and

women's role in ritual practices we can see that some of the Viking women played important roles in the Viking religion, both physically as well as mentally with the idea of the female greeting in the afterlife and their presence in the death realms themselves.

CONCLUSIONS

With the results received from my data collected based off of written historical work as well as the archaeological evidence I believe that women had a very unique role in Viking society, especially when comparing their position in many other societies during this time frame. The women of the Viking culture were powerful when it came to household economics and their home or farm, but they seemed to have much less to do with the overall government and laws. Women were also free to own land and property as well as inherit money and prestige from their families. Through myths and legends we see the female population of the Vikings as strong fighting women, and although many of them probably did not fight and pillage like the men, it was while the men were out on the sea that women began to take up more power and responsibility allowing them to raise themselves up. We see this through the written literate as well as through the grave goods as well as the burials themselves when looking at the distinctive roles that Viking women played. With this in mind, we do see women appear in high status graves and roles including those of the völva and shield maidens or Valkyrie. We may never completely understand their role or the beliefs and practices of the Viking culture, they are a unique group that will continue to intrigue our imaginations and curiosities.

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