

Viking Age graves in Iceland

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*La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers
Laisserent parfois sortir de confuses paroles;
L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles
Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers.*
Baudelaire 1857

Introduction and definitions

Graves are in many areas of the world an archaeologist's main source for knowledge about past societies. In this paper I will first discuss the definition of a grave and then see what Viking Age graves can tell us about the burial customs during the Viking Age period and how Iceland differs from the other Nordic countries. My starting point is archaeological material from the studied period and works regarding the subject of death rituals. Regarding written evidence, rune script is the only text material included in the material culture of the Viking Age. Text written in Latin by for example Tacitus and Jordanis and Icelandic scripts are considered in the search for information about the Nordic countries during the Iron Age but they are in no aspect regarded as evidence. Text in any form is rarely objective, the Icelandic manuscripts are secondary sources written during the Middle Ages and they are highly influenced by Christianity. Texts written by monks like Adam of Bremen or fictive stories like Ibn Fadlan's description of a meeting with a group of Norsemen, Slavs, Finn Ugrians or a mix of those ethnicities are not considered at all and it should be obvious to anyone why those texts are not accepted as sources of any realistic information. Regarding the value of sources I treat Codex Regius or the poetic Edda with higher regard than the prose Snorra Edda due to the fact that the older text can be built from an oral tradition while Snorri was Christian and tried to place past times in the Christian perspective of history and Heathendom.

Med begreberna er det som med ordene. Vi sætter ord på begreberne og begriber kun hvad vi har ord for. Alt andet er offer for ordmord (Fenger 1989:157).

I use Heathen/Pagan as positive words and as antagonists to that regarded as Christian. The religious perceptions that were commonly spread in the Nordic countries during the Iron Age and earlier are called Old Scandinavian religion or Forn sed/sidr. The perception¹ of Aesir is a part of this sidr and it belongs to the younger Iron Age.

Norsemen or Nordic people are people born in the Nordic countries and Vikings are Norsemen or Scandinavians (not Sámi or Fin Ugrian peoples) that lived during the period called the Viking Age. Regarding the definition of the Viking period I do not accept the year 793 and the raid on Lindisfarne as the starting point due to the lack of archaeological evidence and the fact that raids of this kind was conducted by pirates from many parts of Europe and Norsemen have left traces on the coasts of north-west Europe long before that (Montelius 1873:76; Ambrosiani 1998; Myhre 1998). Oriental coins are one aspect that has been suggested to show that the Viking period could have started by the first half of the eight century (Linder Welin 1974:27f). I consider the definition of the Viking period to be depending on many factors, factors that also are different considering which area we are talking about. Here I start from a Scandinavian point of view. Regarding Iceland the period starts with the settlement in the later part of the eight century. If a definition is necessary I look at aspects like building patterns, economy, outer contacts and changes in art, rituals and the use of weapons and thereby place the start of the period around the year 700. Important "Vikingplaces" or proto-towns like Björkö, Ribe, Kaupang, Åhus and Staraja Ladoga were founded during the first half of the eight century. The end of the Viking period is connected to the changes in society structures and the establishment of Christianity. The battles at Stamford Bridge and Hastings in 1066 are commonly suggested and as a common ending point this is acceptable because this date marks the end of the Scandinavian expansion. Examples of local dating is the year 1000 and the conversion that often is used as a mark for the end of the Icelandic Viking period and in Sweden the year 1164 and the first bishopric in

¹ Vi skulle göra oss skyldiga till en modern, av kristen grunduppfattning beroende felbedömning, om vi talade om tron på gudarna som det mest väsentliga. De äldst åtkomliga nordiska texterna sakna ett ord för den religiösa tron (Ljungberg 1946:41).

Viking Age graves in Iceland

Jasmine Idun Tova Lyman. University of Iceland 2007

Uppsala marks the end of the Heathen period. Montelius called the year 700 to the later part of the twelfth century *Vikingatiden* or *Den yngre jernaldern*, (1873:76) and this is the definition I also use.

What is a grave?

To define the concept of a grave is a problematic task, I here define it as an open or closed room consisting of particles from at least one individual, particles deliberately or not deliberately placed at a certain location. This location can be formed in many different ways, through human or natural effect and in those cases where humans have formed the grave it shows traces of ritual processes that mirrors those humans' perceptions of the surrounding world. "Graves" without or with few bones cannot be defined. They can be considered cenotaphs, graves where the bones have been broken down by taphonomic reasons or by human impact (reburning is mentioned in *Völuspá*), children graves (see Ambrosiani 1973), territory markings, results of an extremely "spiritualistic" perception of death (Bennett 1987:81,189) or some other kind of manifestation. A grave alone can never mirror status or society structure (see Binford 1971:23 or Saxe 1970). The living are forming a deliberate grave and this grave can only mirror their perceptions of death, their will or their perceptions of the dead persons will. *The deceased as he/she was in life may be thoroughly misrepresented in death - the living have more to do than just express their grief and go home* (Parker Pearson 1999:32). A grave is, as Elisabeth Arwill-Nordbladh stated, a social place, to which an event is bound, or created. This place can be seen and experienced and people get a relation to it where it becomes a reference of memory and identity (1998:248). During a funeral people and objects are transformed, they are moved from one context to another and their value or role can be changed. Liv Nilsson Stutz has suggested the term *abject* for a dead individual, the dead is redefined to something between object and subject. In all cultures there are rules on how to take care of the dead and reestablish order (2004:89). *When archaeologists excavate a set of burials they are not merely excavating individuals, but a coherent social personality who not only engaged in relationships with other social personalities but did so according to rules and structural slots dictated by the larger social system* (Saxe 1970:4). Arthur Alan Saxe discusses social identities and relations and their manifestation in graves in his thesis from 1970: *death thus calls forth a fuller representation of ego's various social identities than at any time during life* (1970:6). Parker Pearson wrote that *Death is the most significant of the rites of passage in our progress from womb to tomb* (1999:194). And as van Gennep (1908) has stated concerning death, not only the dead go through rites of passage, the living go through passage rites like separation rites and rites to return to the social life. Death rituals can be divided into three parts; the individual, the collective and the biological (see e.g. Theliander 2000). Graves show traces of ritual processes that mirrors perceptions of the world and the biological as well as the social body. *Collective ritual is a creative process, and ritual is the tool through which social contexts are transformed* (Artelius & Svanberg 2005:7). Grave rituals are as important for the dead as for the living, they are as much social performances as religious (Artelius & Svanberg 2005:8). *Omnes eodem cógimur*. Humans have always lived and in various ways acted with this fact in mind, with the fear of disappearing for ever they have created different systems for survival connected to eschatological perceptions. Those systems contain rituals, rituals that are at most visible in the handling of the dead. Durkheim separated the religious phenomenon in two categories; religious conceptions (opinions) and rites (actions), only when the conceptions are defined we can define the rites (1995:34[1897]). Sorrow is a universal state of mind and the handling of absence and grief is helped by rituals. *Religious ideas have no natural home in the mind* (Mithen 2001:109). Religion is created by man who seems to be the only animal in need of it, as a way to explain and ease the hard situations and questions of life. *Homo religiosus* is according to the knowledge of today, separated from the other animals by a human awareness of its own existence, sometimes formulated with Heidegger's concept *dasein*.

Myth and symbolism are important parts of rituals. Carl Gustav Jung showed that myths of religious nature could be interpreted as mental therapy for human sorrow and anxiety (1968:68[1961]). Also symbols have a therapeutic effect (Jung 2001:224[1951]) and symbols in grave contexts are what often give clues about religious perceptions. Fertility symbols are

Viking Age graves in Iceland

Jasmine Idun Tova Lyman. University of Iceland 2007

common in prehistoric graves; this is natural for societies where the fertility of earth is one of the primary driving forces. Common myths and symbols are seen all over the world, there are universal and culture specific elements which are expressed in both collective and individual actions. There were neither a homogenous Pagan belief nor burial custom in all Nordic countries, but there were similar cultural values. A language of symbols as well as profane utensils or ornaments can be used to interpret the Icelandic grave material and its origins. *Objects of adornment and the rules for their display are among the most potent and resilient tools societies use to communicate their ideologies, enforce a visual sense of shared identity, and differentiate themselves from other societies* (Hayeur Smith 2004:10).

Burial customs in Iceland

In Iceland 157 sites with 316 graves from the Viking Period were known before the end of 1999 (Eldjárn & Friðriksson 2000:590). There are few graves on every site; only 11 sites consisted of cemeteries with five or more graves. There are 100 isolated and 76 paired graves and all known graves are inhumations. The graves are unevenly spread which has been interpreted as a result of the graves being accidentally found due to erosion and constructions, because of volcanism or for the reason that pagan graves were moved to Christian cemeteries (Einarsson 1995:46; Eldjárn & Friðriksson 2000). However erosion occurs all over Iceland and according to Einarsson 55% of all graves are found because of erosion and road/house constructing. Other factors are farming, gravel-digging and of course archaeology (1995:50f). The graves are simple structures with a low working cost placed in connection to farms but not within the boundaries of the homefield, they are of two types *mounds* (long or round) and *graves*. Monumental graves, stone settings, marker stones or double graves are not common. Only four finds of wood coffins, few stone cists, one simultaneous double grave and five boat graves are known. The body was often placed straight on the back, western or southern orientation, in a shallow grave, normally 150-200 cm long, 50 cm wide and covered by stone and/or soil. Kristjánsdóttir describes the typical Pagan graves in Iceland as made of shallow pits where the dead were laid, usually on the back with the knees drawn up, with their belongings, covered by a low mound of soil and sometimes stones (2004:19). Horse burials in connection with human burials are very common, mainly in male graves, also dog bones occur. Rivets and nails, knives, spearheads, axes, beads, combs, spindle whorls, oval brooches and other brooches and pins are artefacts found in Icelandic graves. Also swords, gaming pieces, whet stones, weights, arrowheads, keys and horse equipment have been found. Charcoals have furthermore been found in many Icelandic graves which has been regarded as a symbol of Paganism and sometimes considered a cultural equivalent of cremation (Kristjánsdóttir 2004:99).

One example of an outstanding grave is a boat grave from Vatnsdalur in western Iceland. It was covered by a low mound, in E-W orientation and it was affected by grave robbers. The boat is indicated by a large amount of iron nails; it was 6 m long, 1m wide and made from larch or spruce. Whalebone pieces had been fastened on the inside of the gunwale. Bones from four males two females and one individual of unknown sex, all between 13 and 45 years, and one dog was found. One female seems to have been buried in the boat and the rest thrown on afterwards. Byock means that it must have been a pagan burial ground but only one more grave was found; a single stone-lined grave in which a whetstone and a horse tooth was found. In the boat grave there were 30 beads by which two were of amber, a silver thorshammer, 3.55 cm long, a copper-alloy bell, 2.2 cm high probably from north-west England, fragment of a Cufic coin (870-930 AD), pendant, parts of copper-alloy chain, pin, bracelets and fingering, piece of lead with inlaid cross, parts of three bone combs and a case, 14 balance weights of lead, a wooden pin, a knife and fragments of bone, copper-ally and iron (Eldjárn & Friðriksson 2000:115-119,564; Byock 2001:295f).

The bone material from the Icelandic graves makes 181 individuals of whom 119 are aged; 12 in the age span 0-18, 24 aged between 18 and 35, 54 between 36 and 45, and 29 over the age of 46. 108 individuals are sexed with a distribution of 45 males, 28 uncertain males, 20 females and 15 uncertain females (Eldjárn 1956; Eldjárn & Friðriksson 2000).

Because of poor excavation techniques and publishing the earliest archaeological material from Icelandic graves are hard to put in a context. The material was used to confirm the

Viking Age graves in Iceland

Jasmine Idun Tova Lyman. University of Iceland 2007

written sources and not interpreted in its own (Einarsson 1995:41-45; Eldjárn & Friðriksson 2000:609; Vésteinnsson 2007). The majority of the artefacts found in Icelandic graves are of Norse character nevertheless considering the Pagan burial tradition with cremations and monumental structures in Scandinavia the Icelandic graves are hard to explain. Graves in Iceland are also hard to find due to the lack of monumental structures, most graves lie under flat ground (Einarsson 1995:52). Eldjárn lists only four certain mounds in Iceland; in Grafargerði, Dalvík and Lækjarbakki (1956:206). Also graveyards interpreted as Christian and dated to pre-conversion times are found, as well as circular graveyards in contrast to the otherwise Nordic rectangular. Early private churches as symbols of wealth or Christian belief are found in Iceland and those have been compared to similar buildings in Ireland, Scotland and Greenland where also circular graveyards are used (Kristjánsdóttir 2004:133f,137). In general the graves cannot be defined regarding religion; both Paganism and Christianity are formed after the culture and environment it is practised in and in Iceland burial characteristics from both views are present.



The distribution of gravesites in Iceland. Circled points are cemeteries with 5 or more graves. Einarsson 1995:47.

Burial traditions in Scandinavia

During the Viking age various burial customs can be seen in the different areas settled or visited by Vikings. In Sweden cremations were predominant, in Denmark inhumations and in Norway both cremation and inhumation was common (Floinn 1998:148; Ambrosiani 1998:408). On the whole the most common way of burial was to cremate the dead together with different objects where after a stone setting or mound was built over the cremation, alternatively over a gathered part of the cremation rests put in a cremation layer at another place (Gräslund 1980:72; Seiler 1997:64). There is a varied terminology for cremated bodies, the Iron Age cremations can be clean or sooty, the bones can be spread or gathered and the number of bones varies as well as the depth of the hole in the ground (See Bennett 1987, 1991; Nilsson 1996). Iron Age grave fields show that inhumation and cremation occurred simultaneously, both those customs have been used from the Mesolithic² till today, however cremations became more common in Scandinavia during the Bronze Age which is often interpreted as a change in religious thinking (Almgren 1934:49; Gejvall 1975:17). The

² Cremations from the (hunting) Stone Age have been found in e.g. the Skateholm grave field (Gerdin 1991:55).

Viking Age graves in Iceland

Jasmine Idun Tova Lyman. University of Iceland 2007

expansion of cremations in Scandinavia can be seen as an influence by the Urnenfelderculture in Central Europe. Contacts with the Roman Empire probably also affected the Scandinavian burial customs when inhumations became more common during early Iron Age, however cremation maintained most common. During the sixth century both inhumations and grave goods decreased, something that often seen as a sign of some kind of crisis connected to the climate worsening. This is however not the situation in all Scandinavian areas, the Mälars region in Sweden does not show any signs of a crisis if we look at the grave goods. Agneta Bennett has interpreted the changes in burial customs during Iron Age as a sign of different religious and bodily perceptions (1987,1991). During the Viking period inhumations increased successively at the same time as grave goods decreased and coffins got more common. To place new graves at old ones also became common and this could mirror some kind of forefather cult. The Heathen burial grounds where later used for Christian burials until the medieval establishment of limited Christian cemeteries (Almgren 1934:125; Gräslund 2003:485).

In middle Sweden cremations were common during the younger Iron Age, inhumations were used during older Iron Age and Viking age and in boat and chamber graves during all Iron Age, and double graves also occurred. Inhumations from older Iron Age are according to Peter Bratt mainly oriented in N-S whilst the Viking aged are oriented NE-SW. Christian corpses are said to have their look directed to the east where from Jesus would come on the utter day (Gräslund 1980:26; Bratt 2003:11,19f). Arrhenius has suggested that the bodies in Vendel with their face to southwest could be turned to the local water way which can be compared to Arwidsson's studies in Valsgärde (Arwidsson 1942; Arrhenius 1980:5). Orientation of graves and corpses are too differentiated and may be interpreted in various ways, I therefore rarely reflect on orientation to define religion. Orientation and cremation versus inhumation have often been used to distinguish Heathen graves from Christian regarding late Iron Age (see e.g. Lindqvist 1915:116; Bratt 1998:191f; (Kristjánsdóttir 2004:99) something that I consider to be inefficient criteria. Typical for Christian graves are coffins where the corpse lies stretched on the back with the head towards west and with no grave goods, but there are Heathen symbols in graves with those criteria (Andersson 1997a:76; 1997b:362) and during the end of the Stone Age and beginning of the Bronze Age it was also common to place unburned corpses in coffins or a hollowed-out tree trunk. Graves with profane goods and personal objects could be connected to the Heathen notion of an afterlife in a place where those things are needed (Andersson 1997a:76). However the presence or absence of grave goods cannot alone be used as an absolute indication of a Pagan or Christian grave, as it has often been (Eldjárn & Friðriksson 2000:550; Hayeur Smith 2004:9). At the end of the Viking Age a mixed religiosity is visible; a union of two separate symbolic worlds can be seen and a strict definition cannot be made. Amulets in form of thorshammers, crosses or a mix of both were common, especially in Sweden, and parallels can be seen with Icelandic amulets. Dress ornaments, weapons, utensils, gaming pieces and extraordinary trading goods are found in the Scandinavian Viking graves. Regarding the dress ornaments, in particular, parallels can also be drawn to Icelandic finds. The grave types in Scandinavia are of various types both regarding inner and outer construction and they cannot be related with the Icelandic graves. Either can the larger parts of the Scandinavian landscapes be compared to the Icelandic landscape with its erosion and volcanism. Monumental structures are easily preserved in for example Sweden in comparison to Iceland.

At local levels there is sometimes a distinction between male and female graves, round stone globes are sometimes connected to females whilst raised stones are connected with males. Edge chains with big stones were also common during the Viking period. Bennett's studies of Migration period graves showed that female graves where neater and more conspicuous than the male graves which where larger (1987:147f). Animal bones, mainly from horse or dog, are common in human graves from the Viking period and no general relation seems to exist between species and age or sex, however horses and wild animals are more frequent in male graves (Andersson 1997a:72; Bratt 2001:34). Children graves are rare in many areas. In Sweden Bratt's conclusion about the graves at Dragonbacken where that every fourth child was buried (2001:34), Biuw reached a mean value of almost 3% regarding child graves at N Spånga (1992:298) whilst Andersson's report from Skälby showed that 29% of the studied graves where child graves (2003:65).

Viking Age graves in Iceland

Jasmine Idun Tova Lyman. University of Iceland 2007

Many graves are situated by main roads and water connections, mounds are sometimes regarded as symbols of power and are often connected to people with control- and leadership functions (Andersson 1997a:78; Rindal 2004:198ff). They have also been connected to the "skrytbönder" (Andersson 2004) who were farmers wanting to be buried in the same way as the aristocracy with their king mounds. They built *ättehagar*; village grave fields very common in the middle of Sweden (Almgren 1934:170). Monumental graves have also been interpreted as expressions of social worry and instable society situations where monuments become a way to uphold one self, ones land or ones eschatology (Bratt 2004:291).

Nylén writes that graves almost always mirror an idea of a kingdom of death or an after life (1958:28). Boat graves, wagon graves and some grave goods show that the death was considered to involve a trip, during Viking age to a place like Valhalla mentioned in written sources. Art is an important source for both sacral and profane perceptions. Picture stones, dated to 400-1100, from the beginning placed at graves are a special kind of art mainly found at Gotland. The picture stone from Sanda is one example that illustrates Viking conceptions

of death. My interpretation of the scene is connected to that of Hugo Jungner presented in *Fornvännen* 1930. The top of the picture could be a death world, like Valhalla with Odin and Freya welcoming a dead person. The role of Odin is strengthened by the triskele, the spear and the bird (Odensvala). If the circle below represents the sun, the middle part can be seen as the earth level and the part below the sun is perhaps a pyre and we see three persons holding some kind of symbols or tools, sometimes interpreted as the symbols of Odin,



Sandastone, In Historiska Museet, Stockholm. Photo: J.Lyman

Thor and Frey. The script says *ropuisl:auk:farborn:auk:gunborn* (Jungner 1930:67), three male names which could belong to the persons illustrated in the scene. Maybe they raised the stone to honour a dead friend illustrated as the person entering the death world. Symbols similar to the ones held by the persons on the picture stone are common in graves and hoards, as tools or amulets. They are often seen as symbols for protection and fortune, perhaps important in the next world and during the voyage to that world, as well as a comfort for the survivors. Anders Andrén sees the gotlandic picture stones as a *unik kombination av mäskliga uttryckssätt, som i en samlad tolkning kan ge perspektiv långt utöver Gotlands horisont* (1989:287). Andrén interprets them as symbolic doors raised at the border between *inmark* and *utmark* and as parts of a larger Heathen conception of the world (1989:293f). Werbart also thinks that picturestones, like keys and animal head brooches, can be interpreted as symbols of doors to other worlds and transitions from life to death (1995:125). As Stefan Brink (2004) I question this binary Christian influenced model, Snorri's *Miðgarðr* and *Útgarðr*, often used in interpretations of the ancient world conception. In the sagas nine worlds are mentioned and the relations between those worlds are very complicated. In Nordic mythology the distinction between nature/landscape and body is indistinct, nature is not consisting of passive materia and the dead human is not separated from the landscape (Johansen 1997:40). The relation between men and gods seems ambiguous; the horizontal model shows a metonymical relation between gods and men whilst in the vertical model they are metaphorically related (Hastrup 1985:145-152; Johansen 1997). In *Voluspá* a cyclic concept of time is very visible and our Christian influenced way of dichotomised thinking cannot be applied in interpretations of the Pagan world (see e.g. Eliade 2000 [1969]).

Similarities between the Icelandic graves and Viking Age burials in Ireland and Scotland

The burials in Ireland that show Scandinavian characteristics are mainly connected to the Dublin area. As in Iceland the graves in both Ireland and Scotland are mainly inhumations, however there are traces of cremation graves as well and according to Laing cremations were common in Iron Age Ireland and inhumation seems to have been introduced from Britain in the first century AD (Laing 2006:276). There are also indications of Viking burials at

Viking Age graves in Iceland

Jasmine Idun Tova Lyman. University of Iceland 2007

indigenous cemeteries for example in Kilmainham and Islandbridge where the local burial rite was that of extended supine inhumation with the head oriented to the west and no grave goods (O'Brien 1998:203,213f; Laing 2006:225,287). The minimum number of Viking graves at Kilmainham and Islandbridge is 36, mainly male graves, and in Kilmainham the nearby burials of native Irish are probably connected to a Christian monastery established before the 9th century. There are also finds suggesting at least 20 more Viking graves in the Kilmainham/Islandbridge area. All artifacts from the cemeteries are dated to the latter half of the 9th century, contemporary with the longphort mentioned in the Annals of Ulster (O'Brien 1998:203,213f,217,220). In Ireland and Scotland there are place names indicating a Scandinavian presence and in Iceland there are about 40 place names with Irish elements (Morris 1998:83; Corráin 1998:445). In Kilmainham and Islandbridge there are traces of Norse traditions like bent swords indicating cremations and in e.g. Ireland, Isle of Man and Wales are also found silver hoards. The artifact assemblage from Viking grave fields in Ireland are similar to the Icelandic/Norse with swords, knives, spearheads, arrowheads, balance scales, oval brooches, axes and beads (Graham-Campbell 1998:107,114; Floinn 1998:134f,139; O'Brien 1998:210ff; Laing 2006:268,290). In Ireland burial mounds are unusual and flat graves common. Animals like horses are also found in Celtic Viking graves. Hayeur Smith estimated the Irish Viking graves to be 36 and the total number of Scottish Viking Age graves to 120-140, flat graves and probable mounds were very common and both boat and cist graves occurred, boat graves in larger number than in Iceland. Generally the Icelandic graves are poorer than the Scottish and silver jewelry in burials is unusual (Hayeur Smith 2004:54ff). Einarsson writes that there are some similarities in natural geography between the Breiðafjörður region and the British Isles (1995:48) but that the claim that the settlers were largely of Celtic origin is doubtful and lacks archaeological support. Irish artefacts found in the Nordic countries indicate nothing about ethnic origins (Einarsson 1995:48). Skull measurements have shown that Icelander could be a mix of Gaelic and Norse peoples, skulls from before the year 1000 found in Iceland differ noticeably from those found in Norway but have similarities to skulls from the British Isles (Steffensen 1943:236-245; Sigurðsson 1988:35). The Faeroes show a similar pattern to the Icelandic and Celtic graves (Kristjánsdóttir 2004:21).

A large number of the Icelandic grave goods have close parallels to the Norwegian tradition, for example swords, spears and many of the brooch types from Iceland are common in Norway or of Norwegian origin (Eldjárn & Friðriksson 2000:609f). However there are some artefacts like a sword and chape found in Hafurbjarnarstaðir that indicate contacts with Sweden and the Baltic regions. Three bells are known from Icelandic graves, this type do not, according to Friðriksson, occur in Scandinavia but is found in the British Isles (2000:605). Bells are regarded as Christian symbols and are mentioned in Íslendingabók in connection to the papar who are said to have lived in Iceland before the settlement. However there are no archaeological evidence for those papar being in Iceland, not even at Papey which ruins, according to Eldjárn's studies, all were typically Nordic (Kristjánsson 1998:261f; Byock 2001:295f). It is possible that parts of the population were already Christian when they settled the island. The artefact assemblage in the Viking Age graves in Iceland, Ireland and Scotland show a Norse pattern and Hayeur Smith suggests that the *array of jewellery and burial assemblages from the North Atlantic offer a glimpse of a different cultural make-up in this region, that was no exclusively Scandinavian or Norwegian in origin, but was rather, the result of a mixed cultural community expanding westwards across the North Atlantic and maintaining sufficient connections to constitute a North Atlantic Norse cultural province by the end of the Viking Age* (2004:56f).

Viking Age graves in Iceland

Jasmine Idun Tova Lyman. University of Iceland 2007

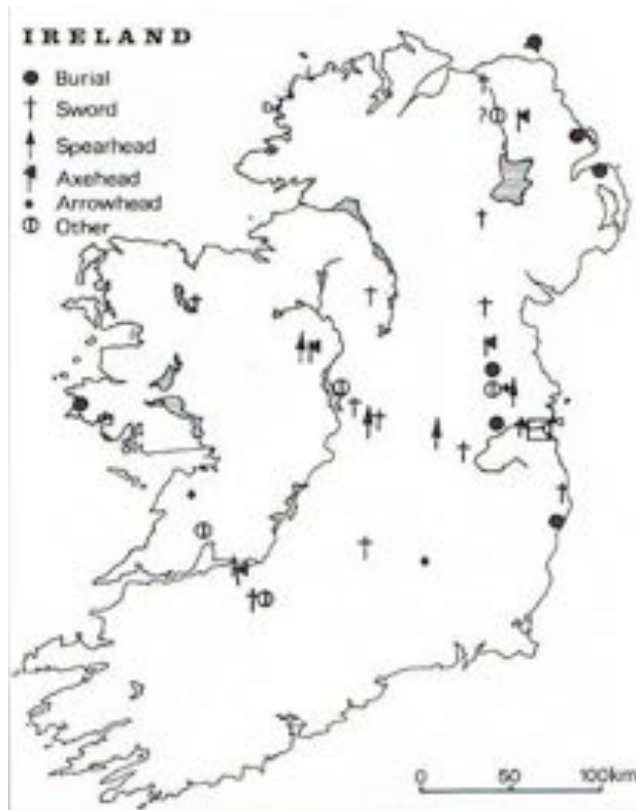


FIG. 5.5: Distribution map of early Viking Age Scandinavian finds and burials in Ireland outside Dublin.

(Floinn 1998:151)

Learning [and Latin] alone does not create Sagas. Thus we are still faced with the initial problem: Why has Iceland alone produced Sagas? (Sigurðsson 1988:9)

Iceland and Ireland are the only countries in north-western Europe where sagas of this kind were written down (Sigurðsson 1988:11) and this is one reason for many scholars to link Gaelic influence to Icelandic tradition. In the Celtic Britain and Ireland, Latin literacy was established during the Roman period (Laing 2006:11).

Forsøg på at sammenholde enkelte konkrete oplysninger i Landnamsbogen eller sagaerne med arkæologiske fund kan ved første øjekast være spændende, men de er i de allerfleste tilfælde dømt til et ufuldkomment og uheldigt udfald. De ender som gætværk som kun bidrager til at bortlede opmærksomheden fra de meget betydningsfulde resultater arkæologien kan fremlægge uafhængigt af den litterære tradition (Eldjárn 1974:14).

We also know that Scandinavians traveled to Ireland and had an influence on the development of the society there as well as the existing society there had influence on them. Could those connections have affected the burial customs of the traveling Scandinavians? Some had probably accepted Christianity, some had married Irish persons and maybe some bought slaves. Also independent Irish settlers are mentioned in Landnámabók (Sigurðsson 1988:33; Kristjánsson 1998:262). However, according to Sigurðsson, the Gaelic influence is not that visible in Icelandic language, place names or material culture which, if accepting the slave theory, could be explained by the fact that slaves did not have personal belongings and received Norse names (1988:33). On the other hand Kristjánsson writes that both personal names and nicknames as well as some words of Irish origin were common in Iceland but that the Irish elements and Irish Christianity decreased when the Icelandic contacts with Ireland declined and the contacts with Scandinavia increased (1998:264f). Sigurðsson has listed influences such as place names and corbelled houses and they are all limited to the western, south-western and southern parts of Iceland where pagan burials are mostly found outside these areas (1988:26f). Another question would also be why the Scandinavian countries do not show those influences considering that not all Vikings that visited the British Isles went

Viking Age graves in Iceland

Jasmine Idun Tova Lyman. University of Iceland 2007

to Iceland. Irish objects are not common in Scandinavia, they mainly occur in Norwegian graves (Ambrosiani 1998:417).

The writing of sagas is not a genetic trait, and the society in which the sagas developed was not the society which they described. Why the sagas were written must be answered in terms of medieval Icelandic society, not of the colonization (Einarsson 1995:48). Sagas were also told, orally, in the same tradition in Scandinavia, even though some sagas might have Irish influences Kristjánsson states that *the Icelanders would not have needed Irish slaves to teach them the art of story-telling* (1998:274).

Conclusion

The Icelandic material culture shows that Iceland was settled in the late ninth century by Norse people and the majority of datable grave goods are from the tenth-century. The Icelandic graves most resemble the modest types of Norwegian burial, but are more akin to those in Scotland (Eldjárn & Friðriksson 2000:610). Regardless of how we choose to see a corpse it has to be treated in some way. However there are ethnoarchaeological studies of nomadic people who just leave a corpse and the provisory settlement without any further treatment. We will never know what reasons were behind the choice of burial during the Viking age, often the grave and the goods seem to be more important than the treatment of the body itself. To burn a body is by some seen as a way to free the soul or as a way to stop the dead to resurrect (see Hagberg 1937; Bennett 1987). Cremation means that the body quickly is transformed to another substance, the process of decay and the separation goes faster than with inhumation. From taphonomic and biological studies we know for example that when bones are cremated all organic material is lost, the calcium salts are transformed to calcium apatite and micro organisms are not attracted to it which means that burnt bone has good preservation chances. Inhumated bones are however easier to work with regarding studies of wounds and sex estimations. Cremation could often have a functional more than ideological function, especially in warmer countries where the decomposition is faster. Seasons of course affect the handling of the dead and for cremation firewood is necessary. Something that cannot be explained functionally is why cremation is common in places and during periods where the access to wood is limited³. The lack of wood can not alone be an explanation for cremation graves not being visible in Iceland. Considering the multidimensional Heathen world dead persons could have been buried in different types of landscapes, the moderate number of graves in many areas can perhaps be explained by water burials in the sea. Cremated bodies could also be spread in water and cremation sites could easily be hidden in lava and tephra layers. In *Flateyjarbók* the death of Tidrande is described; he was buried in a mound according to Heathen custom (Ström 1947:29). Saxo foretells that Balder got a royal burial with a mound erected over the corpse, a mound that no one dared to plunder since a violent flood had stricken a group of people who tried to open the grave and that king Frode had stipulated that fallen warriors should be buried in a mound with their horse and weapons (3.7, 3.8, 7,6(8,1) Liber 3, also 5,1 Liber 8). As earlier stated, Icelandic monumental graves could have been flattened by erosion or perhaps there was no need to demonstrate one's identity or status in that way. Emile Durkheim and Victor Turner saw rites as stabilizing factors of the maintenance of society structure. Monuments have been interpreted in the same way. Saxe's (1970) hypothesis four showed that the bigger the social significance of a dead person is the more would this position be mirrored in the grave. A person's role and relations in a society should affect the way this person is treated after death and the culture of the society affects the perceptions and rituals surrounding a funeral. Perhaps the Icelandic way of writing and telling heroic stories was an expression equivalent with the construction of memorial monuments. Inhumation was practiced in both Scandinavia and the Celtic areas in contact with Vikings; the grave constructions can thereby be influenced by both Christian and Heathen perceptions whilst the grave artifacts have mainly Scandinavian characteristics. In the Viking age society death was treated as a passage from one world to another, or from one sphere to another in the same world, thus some objects were necessary to bring into the grave. The forefathers were regarded as present

³ An interesting comparison is Kristjánóttir's study showing that turfchurches in Iceland and especially Norway were built in areas where the supply of timber was abundant (2004:159).

Viking Age graves in Iceland

Jasmine Idun Tova Lyman. University of Iceland 2007

after their death, sometimes they were believed to live in their mound (se tex Artelius 2004). In Nordic mythology the Aesir and Vanir have different kingdoms where the dead can be placed. Some examples are Ran who took care of the drowned, Hel where mainly the evil ended up (Jungner 1922:129,208; Thålin-Bergman 1975:88) kingdoms like Ymisland, Thor's Trudvang or Freys Alfheim could also have had places for the dead. However Freya's Folkvangr and Odin's Vallhall are mostly spoken of regarding warriors. In the connection with the Icelandic sagas also the part in Snorra Edda where Balder is burned at his ship Hringhorni is of interest. Thor sacred the fire with his hammer Mjöltnir and Odin placed his ring Draupnir at the stake. Our knowledge about ideological systems can never be more than limited regarding past societies. What we can see is general similarities based on universal processes as for example the relation between earth, heaven, water and fire and through a combination of artifact studies and a contextual perception. In a pre-Christian society where the fertility of the ground often is the primary driving force in society symbols of fertility is an obvious part of death rituals. Common myths can be seen all over the world, there are universal and culture specific elements that get a part in both individual and collective rituals. Nevertheless an archaeologist can never be certain that the original entirety is represented in the studied material (see e.g. Brown 1971:93). Regarding graves the risk of getting a misrepresentative picture is substantial, which, beside the taphonomic reasons, is strengthened by the fact that it is the after living who constructs a non natural grave. The sacral and the profane is by humans perceived, according to Emile Durkheim, as two separate worlds with nothing in common (1995:36[1897]). The way I see it graves can belong to both the sacral and the profane sphere. A grave can be a place where someone has died and decayed without any traces of any construction or sacral rituals or a symbolic manifestation over a dead individual that expresses an idea of rebirth and social reproduction. The line between the sacral and the profane is often diffuse. Monumental graves are in my opinion more than storages for dead bodies. They express deliberate ritual actions built upon general, accepted ideals, common perceptions and symbolism. Whether graves can mirror age, sex or status depends on the context. Contexts, discrepancies and recurrences in those, should be placed in a symbolic idea world and tested against a society analysis (Renck 2000:214). To understand a graves appearance and role in a prehistoric society we need knowledge about relations between social, political and economic structures as well as eschatological perceptions and languages of symbols. Variations in grave material and grave language (see Selinge 1991:123; Andersson 2004 and 2005) can in my opinion in some extent be connected to social structures and differences as well as existing eschatological perceptions in prehistoric societies but never lead to any objective truths. Analogies are hard to avoid; even unconsciously we use our own environment and experience as a starting point in our interpretations (Kaliff 2005:133f) which means that an objective interpretation of archaeological material will never be possible. Humans can never step outside their own experiences and values when reflecting around different phenomenon. *Kontekster er, som andre begreber, jo kun vores måde at betragte det arkæologiske og historiske materiale på, og i sidste ende har vi måske ingen anden målestok end den nuværende til at vurdere fortiden med* (Randsborg 1989:19).

Clearly the Icelandic graves have both Pagan and Christian patterns, even though a cross pendant does not necessarily indicate a Christian world view and an axe does not have to be placed in a grave as a ordinary tool. *Certain technically useful objects which serve an important function in daily social activities in an economic and social context are capable at the same time of reflecting spiritual, emotional and symbolic functions* (Werbart 1995:123). Objects like the Buddha figurine found at Helgö can be valued only for its exotic and/or esthetic value. Heathen symbols have been placed in Christian graves and Heathen graves have been placed in Christian contexts. The attitudes towards religion during the Viking Age were complex and multi faceted. The Iron Age was a period of change. During the first part we see roman influences in the cultivation machines, a more strategic building structure and an increasing social stratification. Main villages connected to grave fields start occurring during Migration-Vendel- and Early Viking period. Many of those places had regular contacts with all of Europe, mainly through trade and objects from those trading partners ended up in many Iron Age graves. Hyenstrand speaks of the North as being Europe's sources for raw material, especially regarding skin (1989:165ff). During the Viking period a gift based

Viking Age graves in Iceland

Jasmine Idun Tova Lyman. University of Iceland 2007

exchange system together with an administrated change of goods was prevalent, in the same time the market trading became more and more common (Gustin 2004). Trade created contacts between the North and kingdoms far away, from the beginning of the ninth century we have evidence of Scandinavian and Baltic marketplaces like Björkö and Staraja Ladoga. An example of evidence is the western and oriental coins very often found in the Nordic countries. Trade joined European groups in what Kristiansen calls a *prestige goods ideology* (1986:23) where people spoke the same *cultural language* (Weiler 1999:241). Trade has great influence in cultural development and surplus in an economy makes the ground for exchange and makes specialization and distribution possible. Surplus from cultivation, fishery, handicrafts etc. strengthened the political elite that participated in Viking Age trade in northern Europe (Petré 1984:17; Ringstedt 1989:75,79; Holmquist Olausson 1993:20). A *Do ut des* principle was used where gifts became means of power and gave loyal companions. Artefacts from Iceland are of diverse typological sources; Irish pins, French swords, oriental coins and Scandinavian artefacts like oval brooches. Einarsson describes the Icelandic Viking age trade as subsistence-motivated in an otherwise profit-motivated market (1995:17). If that was the case the objects found in graves can in many cases be interpreted as personal objects and not exotic trade items. Þorláksson also interprets the Icelandic trade with foreigners as hostile and the profit motive as non popular during the early Medieval Period (1992:233-244). The lack of a trading tradition similar to Scandinavia must have put Iceland in an outer position in the North and of course also have affected the burial customs.

During early medieval times we see change in religion, organization and economy. A beginning market economy with coinage and regulated ownership is seen as well as controlled cemeteries connected to church buildings where women were separated from men, placed in less valuable areas. The church wanted to control the relation between the dead and their living relatives. Central trading places were more affected by missionaries and Christian ideas and several merchants probably converted during their travels to countries with other religions (Sawyer 1991:12,170). This explains why those areas have graves which are hard to define from a religious view. Christianity was a *royal religion* (Sawyer 1985:21) because it brought a form of organization that made it easier to control land and people. This makes it easy to understand why kings invited missionaries with hope for more power and control. *At first the Medieval writers may have deemed it necessary to compose a commonly shared history that could legitimize the political dominance of the ruling elite and thereby ensure the continuation of that dominance. The Pagan faith was obviously displayed as a single cohesive faith on the defensive against the Christian religion* (Kristjánsdóttir 2004:116f). Also the European kings feared the Heathens in the North and all over Europe the conversion was favored by giving gifts and bribes to the aristocracy and others who gained from the conversion. Those material rewards had a larger effect than the missionaries though they often were provided with bribes (Sanmark 2003:553f). According to Vésteinsson at least two missions had been sent to Iceland in the late tenth century, the first not successful and the second not very friendly (2000:17). In the British isles Christianity was introduced in the 6th and 7th centuries, before Scandinavians came to the areas (Kristjánsdóttir 2004:22). Thus the Pagan Scandinavians mixed with Celtic Christians before Iceland was settled. The people moving to Iceland were groups from different clans or families who all brought a piece of their own culture with them to the new land where a North Atlantic Norse culture was developed and later an Icelandic one.

One day the Saint and his crew found themselves being blown towards a stony island, very rough, rocky and full of slag, without trees or grass, full of smiths' forges. As they sailed alongside it they heard the sound of bellows blowing like thunder, and the sound of hammers on iron and anvil. One of the smiths thre a red-hot lump of iron at the sailors but missed, the red-hot projectile making the sea boil where it fell. Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis, 6th Century.

Viking Age graves in Iceland

Jasmine Idun Tova Lyman. University of Iceland 2007

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Jasmine Idun Tova Lyman. University of Iceland 2007

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