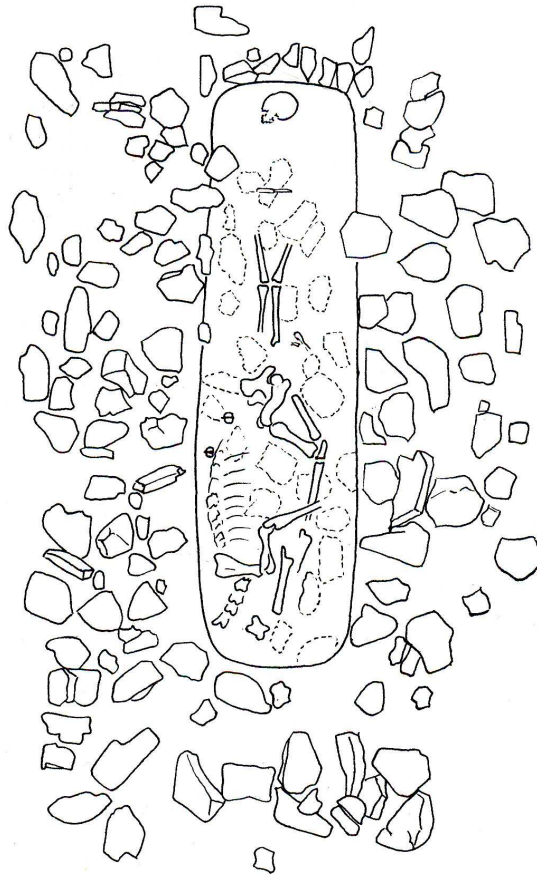


“DEYR FÉ, DEYJA FRÆNDR”

Re-animating mortuary remains from Viking Age Iceland



Þóra Pétursdóttir



MA-Thesis in Archaeology
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ABSTRACT

Research on the material culture of Viking Age graves in Iceland, and Icelandic Viking Age archaeology more generally, has long been strongly influenced and restricted by the established authority of the written sources. In accordance with this the material has mostly been used to shed light on questions concerning the origin of the first settlers, the timing of their arrival and their technological progress and connections overseas in the years to come. These studies, whether or not deliberately performed to illustrate or corroborate the historical record, have consequently focused more or less on how the corpus deviates from other traditions and particularly the Norwegian. Moreover, the constant contrast with either the historical record or the other traditions has led to a devaluation of the material at hand. It is often described as homogenous, poor and simple, and hence believed to have a scarce informative potential.

This thesis attempts to provide an alternative to this established view of the Viking Age graves and their interpretive potential by employing a theoretical framework that pays credit to the social as well as personal significance of material culture, and by emphasizing the corpus on its own terms without much comparison to other traditions. By acknowledging the variation and recurring characteristics within the material not as deviations but as significant traits the focus will be reoriented to what the material actually has to provide for our understanding of Viking Age Iceland.

PREFACE

It is with mixed feelings that I write these last, although first, words of this thesis. It is a relief to finally see the product of your hard work and it is exciting to think of what challenges the future might bring. However, it's also with certain sadness and regret that I leave Tromsø, the Institute and all the wonderful people here. To come here was a difficult decision, but one I have never regretted. I have felt welcome and at home from the very first day and I would like to use the opportunity to thank IAR for accepting me into the MA program in the first place, but, first and foremost, I thank you all for making my stay here both enjoyable and rewarding. I am deeply grateful.

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Tromsø, May 15th 2007

Þóra Pétursdóttir

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION	- 1 -
2. SETTLEMENT AND SOCIETY IN VIKING AGE ICELAND	- 3 -
THE NORSE COLONIZATION.....	- 4 -
SETTLEMENT PATTERNS AND SUBSISTENCE ECONOMY.....	- 5 -
SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ORGANIZATION.....	- 6 -
3. PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON VIKING AGE GRAVES IN ICELAND	- 8 -
RESEARCH INSPIRED BY FOLKLORE AND SAGAS.....	- 8 -
FROM ANTIQUARIANISM TO ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH.....	- 9 -
THE WORK OF KRISTJÁN ELDJÁRN.....	- 10 -
RECENT AND CONTEMPORARY RESEARCH.....	- 12 -
CONCLUSION.....	- 13 -
4. THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS AROUND MORTUARY REMAINS AND MATERIAL CULTURE	- 15 -
THE MESS RECONSIDERED – A SYMMETRICAL APPROACH.....	- 17 -
“A DEMOCRACY EXTENDED TO THINGS”.....	- 19 -
BIOGRAPHICAL OBJECTS – BIOGRAPHIES OF THINGS.....	- 20 -
THE COLLECTIVE NATURE OF BURIAL.....	- 24 -
5. AN INTRODUCTION TO VIKING AGE GRAVES IN ICELAND	- 28 -
DISTRIBUTION AND LOCATION.....	- 28 -
MORPHOLOGY.....	- 30 -
OSTEOLOGICAL MATERIAL.....	- 31 -
DATING.....	- 31 -
GRAVE GOODS.....	- 32 -
HORSES.....	- 34 -
6. PRESENTATION OF THE SELECTED GRAVES	- 36 -
KT-5:1-2, HEMLA.....	- 36 -
KT-15, MÖRK.....	- 37 -
KT-17, GALTALÆKUR.....	- 37 -
KT-18:1, STÓRI-KLOFI.....	- 38 -
KT-21, KARLSNES.....	- 38 -
KT-25:1-4, TRAÐARHOLT.....	- 39 -
KT-26:1-2, SELFOSS.....	- 40 -
KT-37, KALDÁRHÖFÐI.....	- 41 -
KT-47, ÖNDVERÐARNES.....	- 42 -
KT-63, KORNSÁ.....	- 42 -
KT-65, SMYRLABERG.....	- 43 -
KT-66, TINDAR.....	- 44 -
KT-87:1-10, YTRA-GARÐSHORN.....	- 44 -
KT-89:1-14, BRIMNES (DALVÍK).....	- 45 -

KT-98:1-4, SÍLASTAÐIR	- 49 -
KT-122, GRÁSÍÐA	- 51 -
KT-130:1-2, REYKJASEL	- 51 -
KT-131, HRÓLFSSTAÐIR	- 52 -
KT-134, STRAUMUR	- 52 -
KT-142, KETILSSTAÐIR	- 53 -
KT-144, EYRARTEIGUR (ÞÓRISÁ)	- 53 -
KT-145, VAÐ	- 54 -
KT-151, ÁLAUGAREY	- 54 -
KT-155, HRÍFUNES	- 55 -
SUMMARY NOTES	- 56 -
7. RE-ANIMATING MORTUARY REMAINS IN A BROADER CONTEXT	- 58 -
RITUAL PRACTICES – DISPOSING OF THE DEAD	- 58 -
OBJECTS IN ACTION IN EARLY ICELANDIC SOCIETY	- 60 -
THE VISUAL <i>RE-MEMBERING</i> OF THE DEAD	- 63 -
ANCHORS IN PEOPLE’S LIFE AND DEATH	- 68 -
LIMINAL BEINGS IN LIFE AND DEATH	- 72 -
8. CONCLUSION.....	- 78 -
REFERENCES.....	- 82 -
APPENDIX.....	- 98 -
TABLE OF THE SELECTED GRAVES	- 98 -

LIST OF FIGURES

<i>Fig.1</i>	Distribution of graves and burial grounds	29
<i>Fig.2</i>	Grave goods from Hemla (Kt-5:1)	37
<i>Fig.3</i>	Grave goods from Karlsnes (Kt-21)	38
<i>Fig.4</i>	Grave goods from Kaldárhöfði (Kt-37)	41
<i>Fig.5</i>	Beads from Kornsa (Kt-63)	42
<i>Fig.6</i>	Grave goods from Kornsa (Kt-63)	43
<i>Fig.7</i>	Spear from Tindar (Kt-66)	44
<i>Fig.8</i>	Grave 3 at Ytra-Garðshorn (Kt-87)	45
<i>Fig.9</i>	Grave 12 at Brimnes (Kt-89)	48
<i>Fig.10</i>	Grave 2 at Sílastaðir (Kt-98)	49
<i>Fig.11</i>	Grave 4 at Sílastaðir (Kt-98)	50
<i>Fig.12</i>	Trefoil brooch from Ketilsstaðir (Kt-142)	53
<i>Fig.13</i>	Grave at Vað (Kt-145)	54
<i>Fig.14</i>	Arm ring from Álaugarey (Kt-151)	55
<i>Fig.15</i>	Horse grave at Hrífunes (Kt-155:1)	55

Figure on cover: Grave 3 at Ytra-Garðshorn (Kt-87) (Eldjárn 1966: 37).

1. INTRODUCTION

*Deyr fé,
deyja frændr,
deyr sjálfir it sama,
en orðstírr
deyr aldregi,
hveim er sér góðan getr.*

(*Hávamál* 76 in Jónsson 1924)

The title for this thesis is borrowed from *Hávamál*, the words of “the high one” or Óðinn himself. The verse above belongs to *Hávamál*’s first section, *Gestaþáttir*, a set of guidelines for wise and respectable behaviour, and refers to the inevitable fate of every living creature – its mortality. However, at the same time the stanza underlines the immortality of a good reputation, gained through an honourable living. Thus, “cattle may die, and friends die, but a good reputation never dies”. Originally, however, the term *fé* not only referred to cattle, but also to other valuable possessions, as for example elaborate things (Fritzner 1867; Heggstad 1930). That things, as well as animals and humans could be regarded as animate beings, and bearers of fame and reputation is also in accordance with the preceding verses of *Gestaþáttir*. Here, things, or gifts more specifically, are presented as a central theme of social significance.

Nevertheless, when it comes to the *archaeological* valuation of the *material* culture of early Iceland, and the Viking Age graves in particular, things seem to have been deprived much of their significance. Instead of engaging with the material actually at hand the focus has often been on what the archaeological record *does not* consist of. There is much talk about the scarcity of finds, the uniformity in raw material, the absence of rich graves and the assumed low technological level of the society. “Icelanders were very much the poor cousins, compared with Norway, when it came to personal objects taken to the other world” (Eldjárn cited in Vésteinsson 2000: 169). The material assembled from the graves has mostly been sorted into typological sequences that have served to throw light on, or confirm the origin of the first population, the timing of its arrival and its technological progress and connections overseas in the years to come. The graves themselves, however, as collectives of different but entangled elements, and as constructions of social significance, have received little scholarly attention.

It is in my opinion obvious that the material has a much greater interpretive potential. I think there is ample reason to believe that whatever the nature of the material culture is in comparison to other areas, it was of fundamental importance to those who lived and died

with it. As will be explored later (cf. chapter 4) this study is grounded on the premise that people's conception of and relations to things and animals were very different from the modern rational mode and that the delegation of tasks and responsibility to these non-human counterparts was probably to some extent consciously performed. Objects or animals were not merely useful – pots for cooking, weapons for killing and horses for travelling – but were, as implied in *Hávamál*, deeply woven into dynamic social networks as interactive entities. And it was largely through these networks that their value, and reputation, arose.

In the following thesis my main objective is to provide an alternative to the established doxa of “the poor cousins”. My general approach to the early Icelandic grave corpus may be described as both “empirical” and “contextual”: I will try to view the material at hand on its own terms, in its actual social context and without much comparison with other areas. Instead of thinking of the graves as “capsules” of inert material traces from *a* moment in *a* past I will investigate the possibility of seeing them as collectives of different elements which through their “agency” brought to them a web of relations involving a multitude of pasts, places and people. Rather than splitting up these enmeshed elements I will try to inquire into the significance of each part, the relations between them and how they actually came into being as grave goods and the ancient artefacts we know them as today.

Before moving on to the graves particularly I will briefly discuss the various sources and studies concerning the settlement of Iceland and the earliest society established. This will provide a certain framework within which the material can be placed and will furthermore serve as a background for the following discussion.

2. SETTLEMENT AND SOCIETY IN VIKING AGE ICELAND

The period of interest for this research is the ca. 130 years between the first Norse settlement in the late 9th century and the islanders' conversion to Christianity around the year 1000. Traditionally this period is divided between two separate historical phases; the age of settlement (*landnámsöld*), lasting from 870 until the establishment of *Alþingi* in 930, and the commonwealth or free-state period (*þjóðveldisöld*) referring to the period between 930 and 1262, when Icelanders submitted to Norwegian rule (Þorláksson 2005: 136). Thus, for my purpose only the earliest stage of the commonwealth period is of interest.

Images of the earliest phase in Icelandic history were long primarily based on the various written sources preserved. Particularly important were the Sagas of Icelanders, a body of stories set in the period 850 to 1050, but also other sources as the the *Grágás* law book, *Landnámabók* (*Book of Settlements*) and *Íslendingabók* (*Book of Icelanders*). However, despite the abundance of written sources the period in question is pre-historical. Ari Þorgilsson wrote his *Book of Icelanders* in the period 1122 to 1133, and the *Book of settlements* is believed to be written shortly after that. According to Ari work on the documentation of the law was started in the winter of 1117-1118, and the Sagas are believed to be written in the thirteenth to early fourteenth centuries. Many of these sources are moreover not preserved in their original form but in various later copies (cf. e.g. Benediktsson 1996; Ólason 2005). Understandably, this and the long time-lapse between the recorders and the events described has caused many scholars to doubt the authenticity of these sources, and whether they are informative of the society described or the one that created them.

The written sources have from the beginning greatly influenced the development of Icelandic archaeology (Friðriksson 1994) and to some extent limited original thought in Viking Age research (Friðriksson and Vésteinsson 2003: 141). It has been claimed that during the 19th and 20th centuries archaeology in Iceland has moved from one extreme to another; from a national-romantic, Saga inspired search for identified sites and figures, in order to illustrate and confirm the literary accounts, to a rather extreme attempt to refute them altogether (Friðriksson 1994: 45; Friðriksson and Vésteinsson 2003: 141). Neither approach has proved truly fruitful in adding to our understanding of the Viking period, but has actually hampered dynamic archaeological discourse in the country (Friðriksson and Vésteinsson 2003: 157-158).

The relationship between written sources and archaeology is and will remain complex. Nevertheless, while the absolute historical value of these sources is admittedly restricted, I believe there is yet an important advantage in allowing them to act as analogical inspiration in critical research.

THE NORSE COLONIZATION

According to Ari Þorgilsson's *Íslendingabók* Iceland was colonized from Norway in the time of king Harald finehair in AD 870, and became fully settled in a matter of sixty years (Benediktsson 1968: 4, 9). Ari only mentions settlers arriving from Norway, while *Landnámabók* tells in addition of people coming from the Norse settlements in the British Isles, the Orkneys, Shetland, the Hebrides and Ireland (Grímsdóttir 1996: 33). The Norse origin of the Icelandic population is well supported by archaeological evidence and debate has been focused around its Celtic component. While the supposed numbers of Celtic colonists have varied exceedingly, the overall image is of a mixed group of predominantly Norwegian origin but also containing settlers from the British Isles (Aðalsteinsson 1987, 2005; Helgason et al. 2000a, 2000b)

Ari's date for the first settlement, AD 870, is so far supported by archaeological and paleo-ecological research, although earlier dates have been suggested (e.g. Hermanns-Auðardóttir 1989, 1991). Tephro-chronology is a widely used dating method in Iceland (see Þórarinnsson 1944), based on the identification of stratigraphic layers of volcanic material (tephra) in the soil and the relation of these to dated eruptions. Recent identifications of trace elements from the so called "landnám tephra" (the most crucial tephra layer in the study of the earliest settlement) in Greenlandic ice cores has now allowed its more or less secure dating to AD 871±2 (Grönvold et al. 1995). So far there is no firm evidence of human activity below this tephra deposit, while research on early medieval sites has often demonstrated human occupation right above the layer (Vésteinsson 1998: 4; Vésteinsson et al. 2002: 105).

Palynological analyses are also indicating a clear change associated with the "landnám tephra" in the late 9th century. Grass pollen increase drastically while birch pollen drop, and cereal traces start to appear. Further research in the southern part of the country also suggests that the altering processes following the colonization end by 920 and are replaced by a new balance in pollen profiles (Hallsdóttir 1996: 130-132). While more

research is still needed this information corresponds well with Ari's brief description of the rapid and extensive colonization of the island.

SETTLEMENT PATTERNS AND SUBSISTENCE ECONOMY

Most scholars agree that the first settlers would have chosen to settle in the best agricultural areas, claiming vast portions of land with access to a wide variety of resources (Byock 1999; Smith 1995; Vésteinsson 1998; Vésteinsson et al. 2002). However, ideas differ on the fate of these extensive early land claims. Byock (1999: 105-106) believes they were divided into smaller units as more settlers arrived, causing the first comers to gradually lose some of their authority and privileged position. This, he argues, explains the apparent growing number of small, evenly distributed farms in the later phase of the settlement period. Byock, however, does not consider the geographical differences or various agricultural qualities of the land in question.

Smith (1995) and Vésteinsson (1998), on the other hand, believe that the first settlers would have maintained their leading position well into the medieval period. To explain this Vésteinsson (1998; et al. 2002) has suggested that the first phase of the *landnám* period was characterized by large and complex settlements made up of a number of households occupying the best agricultural land with access to a variety of resources. These were typically situated in wetland areas close to the coastline or on river estuaries where clearings would have been in the forest cover. However, according to Vésteinsson the multi-household phenomenon was only a short-term arrangement, which in a matter of years or decades was replaced by a single household settlement pattern. This, he claims, is reflected in the early abandonment of many complex settlements or their division into dispersed autonomous units in the surrounding areas. During the second settlement phase, lasting into the 11th century, the remaining arable land could be systematically divided between newcomers or even "imported" followers of powerful individuals who thereby gradually secured and increased their authority. Vésteinsson bases his argument on combining medieval documentary evidence with present settlement structures and archaeological information. However, it only refers to economical and political factors thus leaving little room for other possible aspects influencing settlement arrangement or preferences in the selection of land.

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

During the 19th and early 20th century early Icelandic society was often described as a particularly egalitarian one, a proto democracy founded by a people independent and democratic of nature. An egalitarian image has also more recently been implied by archaeologists. Thus, Hermanns-Auðardóttir (1991: 9) claims that early farm sites and grave finds do not "...show signs of striking class stratification or large differences in wealth", while Einarsson (1995: 64) interprets the simplicity of Icelandic Viking Age burials as being "...a clear indication of an egalitarian society which is supported by the other artefacts found in the country". However, the aforementioned research on settlement patterns and subsistence economy do not give an impression of an equal, classless society and neither do the written sources.

Broadly speaking there were two basic social categories in early Iceland, the freeborn and the slaves (Hastrup 1985: 108). These basic categories of free and unfree do not explain the whole reality of the social order and Hastrup has recognized two modifications to the pattern; first that of freed men or *leysingjar*, and secondly that of tenants or *leiglendingar*. Both are distinguished through differentiation of rights by law. The social order then consisted of four classes; freeborn landowners (*bændur*), freeborn tenants (*leiglendingar*), freed men (*leysingjar*) and finally slaves (*þrælar*) (Hastrup 1985: 108-109). These are the principal social categories found in the *Grágás* law code and, in their broadest sense, they applied to men as well as women although the rights of women, unlike men, also depended on their marital status.

The dominant group, economically and politically, was that of freeborn landowners and the political leaders (*goðar*) came from among the wealthiest of those. The tenants were freeborn but their freedom was restricted by their relationship with the landowners. They had many of the same rights as landowners but a more restricted access to political influence. Individuals with enough capital could cross the boundaries between landowners and tenants, enabling also poor landowners to be categorized as tenants (Hastrup 1985: 109-112).

Byock has described early Icelandic society as a mixture of state and statelessness. Although the early Icelandic society did develop some elements of statehood, as a national judicial system and legislature (*lögrétta*), it was in fact "headless" because it lacked the centralization of a common executive power (Byock 2001: 64-65). The society's formal governance was based on a system of annual assemblies (*þing*) and the political leadership of chieftains (*goðar*). The most important of the assemblies was the national *Alþingi*, held

on annual basis at Þingvellir in SW-Iceland. The number of chieftains is somewhat unclear but based on *Grágás* they are generally believed to have been 36 on the foundation of *Alþingi* in 930 and 39 from 965 and on. However, based on the Sagas Sigurðsson has argued that during the establishment of the system from 930 until the mid 11th century their number was around 50-60. The reason may have been a greater opportunity than in later times for enthusiastic farmers to establish themselves as chieftains (Sigurðsson 1995: 318; Sigurðsson 1999: 55). The actual authority of the chieftains (see e.g. Sigurðsson 1999; Karlsson 2004) and the nature of their secular and possibly religious functions are further issues of debate (cf. Sigurðsson 1994).

The *goðar* were the holders of political offices, or chieftaincies, called *goðorð*. These did not apply to defined geographical units¹ but were interest groups based on mutually beneficial personal alliances between free farmers and chieftains (Byock 2001: 13, 119). Each landowner or tenant was by law obliged to form such an alliance with a chieftain and thus become his follower or *þingmaður*. Together with kinship and friendship the bonds established between chieftains and followers were of fundamental significance in a social system devoid of a common executive power, where one's honour and ability to act was based on assembled support from others (Byock 1982: 212, 217). The actual authority of the chieftain may however have been scarce and was utterly reliant on his followers' consent (Byock 2001: 120).

In general, this may appear as a well established and defined social order. However, reality may have been otherwise, and as Hastrup (1985: 117-118) has pointed out the "juridical pin-pointing" characterizing the social order and law may actually be an indication of a society in constant combat against acute disorder. Despite the impression of a rather graded social environment it is also important to keep in mind that one's position in the social order was not fixed and could in principle be altered through economical achievement. However, property was not the only decisive factor for the social ordering (cf. Þorláksson 2001). Þorláksson (2005: 140), for example, maintains that the chieftain's status was above all based on prestige and social esteem and only secondarily on wealth. Honour and reputation were hence fundamental factors in their policy and decisive for people's status in the social order as a whole.

¹ When the country was divided into quarters around 965 the alliances between chieftains and followers were restricted to them, so that both parts had to reside in the same quarter.

3. PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON VIKING AGE GRAVES IN ICELAND

Graves are the most numerous group of recorded monuments from Viking Age Iceland. These remains have long been objects of mystical curiosity to people inspiring folklore and superstition but can also boast a long tradition of scholarly interest and research. In this chapter I shall review these studies in more or less chronological order, from the first survey performed to the contemporary research in progress. This is nevertheless a selective overview. Many scholars have adverted to this material in their work and others have performed thorough studies on categories of artefacts of which the majority comes from graves. These studies are not included in this review, which concentrates solely on those that have the graves as their main focus.

As mentioned in the preceding chapter archaeological research in Iceland has been strongly influenced by the established historical tradition and the written sources it is grounded in. This has generally resulted in a rather sceptical conception of the informative and interpretive potential of early Icelandic material culture, apparent, not the least, in research on the Viking Age graves. My aim in this review will therefore be to illuminate how these scholars, individually and generally, have conceived of the material and its potential.

RESEARCH INSPIRED BY FOLKLORE AND SAGAS

The first known survey of Viking Age graves in Iceland was carried out by Jón Ólafsson from Grunnavík (1705-1779) as early as 1753. His unpublished manuscript, *Um Fornmanna hauga nokkra, kumla og dysjar nokkra á Íslandi og Noregi* (AM 434 fol.), is however a more valuable source on 18th century superstitious conceptions of ancient remains than of the graves themselves. The same holds for a survey performed by the Danish “Commissionen for oldsagers opbevaring” in 1817-1823 (Rafnsson 1983), where graves were the most frequently mentioned type of monument.

In 1860 the discovery and excavation of a pagan burial at Baldursheimur in Mývatnssveit, Northern Iceland, triggered the foundation of the Icelandic National Museum in 1863. Together with the foundation of the Archaeological Association in 1879 this marked the beginning of organized antiquarian research in the country. In the years to come antiquarians such as Sigurður Vigfússon (1828-1892) and Brynjúlfur Jónsson (1838-1914) recorded monuments all around the country and performed small excavations at various

sites. Antiquarian curiosity and research in this period was to a great extent impelled by the strong national-romantic atmosphere culminating around the struggle for independence in the last three decades of the 19th century. Strong confidence in the Icelandic Sagas was a coherent theme in this research and to verify the historical record became a major objective. Many graves excavated by Vigfússon and Jónsson could be, or rather were, related to identifiable Saga characters and further interpretation of the material was rarely attempted unless the excavation disturbed this relation. The intention was in essence not to seek new knowledge but to confirm and illustrate the already existing historical record.

FROM ANTIQUARIANISM TO ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Two Danes, philologist Kristian Kålund (1844-1919) and Captain Daniel Bruun (1856-1931), were the most prominent in archaeological research around the end of the 19th and early 20th century. Between 1872 and 1874 Kålund travelled all around Iceland gathering information on Saga sites which became the bulk of his book *Bidrag til en historisk-topografisk Beskrivelse af Island* a few years later. In 1882 Kålund published his article “Islands Fortidslævninger” in which he catalogued all the known Viking Age graves and grave goods in Iceland. His work is a mere description of the known graves and although detailed information is presented, interpretation of the finds rarely follows. Neither does Kålund seem to be very impressed by the Icelandic material corpus; *Island, der ved sin ældre litteratur har så stor betydning for studiet af Nordens oldtid, yder med hensyn til oldsager og andre fortidslævninger langt fra noget tilsvarende; og i henseende til fundenes mængde og de bevarede genstandes antal vil dette land vel altid stå betydelig tilbage for de fleste andre egne af Norden* (Kålund 1882: 57). As stated earlier this disbelief in the material culture’s potential was to become a tenacious perception within Icelandic archaeology and an inhibiting factor in the field’s development.

Daniel Bruun spent fourteen summers travelling around Iceland recording and excavating archaeological monuments, thereof several pagan graves in various parts of the country. As with Kålund, Bruun’s research was not completely determined by the historical record and in many cases he clearly avoided direct reference to the Sagas. However, the strong connection to the historical record was far from broken as is for example apparent in the fact that the chronological references of their research were anchored only in the written sources. Bruun, notwithstanding, has to be acclaimed for introducing more elaborate methods of work within the field. For example, he was the first to use osteological analysis

to determine age and sex of buried individuals (e.g. Bruun 1928: 62-64). He furthermore stressed the importance of comparing the Icelandic material to that from other parts of the Viking world and often related his findings to material from Scandinavia. Here, like Kålund, Bruun called attention to the “poorness” of the Icelandic graves in comparison to the corpus of the other Nordic countries.

The Norwegian archaeologist Haakon Shetelig (1877-1955) visited Iceland in 1936 to study the collection of Viking Age artefacts in the National Museum in Reykjavík. The results of his work were published in *Viking* in 1937 and two years later in *Árbók hins íslenska fornleifafélags* in Icelandic translation. Shetelig analysed the artefacts by means of typology and came to the conclusion that they confirmed the known historical chronology of the settlement, as well as the predominant Norwegian origin of the settlers (Shetelig 1939: 10). At the same time he was very concerned with how the Icelandic burial tradition deviated from the Norwegian, for example in the absence of cremation burials and the “poor” and generally “unprepossessing” appearance of the graves. The Icelanders, Shetelig claimed, have in this sense been entirely devoid of any ambition, as it is the simple and modest type of burial that characterizes the period (Shetelig 1939: 8). Although not dwelling with alternative explanations, Shetelig, however, recognized that the poorness of the graves might not merely reflect economical conditions among the settlers but could have other causes (Shetelig 1939: 10).

THE WORK OF KRISTJÁN ELDJÁRN

The most prominent and renowned scholar within Icelandic Viking Age research is undoubtedly archaeologist Kristján Eldjárn (1916-1982), former director of the National museum (1947-1968) and president of Iceland in 1968-1980. Eldjárn’s main interest was the Viking age grave material and his work is still of primary importance within this field today. Eldjárn began his study of the graves in 1943 and his earliest work is characterized by much the same approaches and objectives as his predecessors. However, he soon turned his back on Saga inspired objectives and brought the archaeological material into the foreground, often avoiding reference to the written sources. The publication of his doctoral thesis *Kuml og haugfé úr heiðnum sið á Íslandi* in 1956 has come to represent this turning point in Icelandic archaeological research. In its preface Eldjárn declared that it was the aim of the book to conduct archaeology in strict terms and hence he would not endeavour to place the

material within the historical corpus or relate it to characters or events known from the Sagas (Eldjárn 1956: 9).

Nevertheless, Eldjárn often revealed his disbelief in archaeology's potential in contrast to the historical record and despite his efforts to bring out the material he still conceived of it as of secondary importance: "It is only natural that sparse and scattered archaeological finds cannot compete with these splendid and unique literary records as sources for our oldest history" (Eldjárn 1958: 25).

In *Kuml og haugfé* Eldjárn presented a thorough but systematic study of all known Viking Age graves in the country, describing the nature of each grave in terms of morphology, content, location and preservation. He analysed all artefacts typologically concluding that the bulk of the material could be dated to the tenth century, occasionally to the late ninth century, and that it showed closest affinity with Norway and the Scottish Isles. The few anomalies could only support the main rule established by the by the historical record, that Iceland was settled by heathen people from Norway and the Scottish Isles in the late ninth century who then converted to Christianity around year 1000 (Eldjárn 1956: 428-430).

In his comparative analysis Eldjárn, as others, emphasized how the Icelandic material in many ways differed from the Norwegian. The most obvious being the overall "modesty" of the graves and the absence of cremation burials. The "poorness" of the graves, he proclaimed, was however demonstrated through the quantity of objects rather than their low quality. The paucity of grave goods should therefore not be seen as a consequence of poverty but rather as a conscious reluctance to forfeit valuable objects in this way (Eldjárn 1956: 243).

Eldjárn also recognized that horses were much more common in Icelandic graves than anywhere else in the Viking world. However, rather than acknowledging this as a unique and significant trait he de-emphasized it as a result of the general miserly inclination of the corpus. Thus, he claimed, the abundance of horses simply resulted from the quantity of horses in the country which made their deposition relatively inexpensive and hence less regretful (Eldjárn 1953: 68-69).

Eldjárn's work has not really been criticized to any degree and one can even claim that his doctoral thesis, *Kuml og haugfé*, has come to earn itself a monumental status, on level with the historical record earlier, from where it still sets the agenda for Viking Age research in Iceland. This canonization was further reinforced by its republication in 2000,

edited by archaeologist Adolf Friðriksson, where graves and material discovered since the first publication in 1956 were systematically added to the prescribed catalogue and typology.

RECENT AND CONTEMPORARY RESEARCH

In 1986 Margrét Hallgrímsdóttir wrote a thesis on Icelandic Viking Age graves at the University of Stockholm. She built her work on Eldjárn's catalogue from 1956 and sought to answer much the same traditional questions concerning the settlement chronology, places of origin and possible Christian influence. However, in addition Hallgrímsdóttir also raised questions on whether information on status, social conditions and gender relations could be gained through study of the grave material (Hallgrímsdóttir 1986: 3). This clearly signalled a new attitude despite the fact that her approach, grounded in traditional ideas about gender and gender roles, may be highly criticized. Her conclusion was that no apparent difference in status between men and women was recognizable as men and women seemed to be buried with the same number of artefacts. To further support this she pointed out that the twenty burials she identified as rich were divided equally between the genders, ten were male burials and ten were female (Hallgrímsdóttir 1986: 49, 57).

The ever apparent "poorness" of the graves also engaged Hallgrímsdóttir. Like others she did not really recognize it as a significant trait in itself but rather as a deviation from an established norm which had to be explained by reference to external factors. Thus, she proclaimed that the general simplicity of the corpus was most likely a result either of the settlers' adjustment to new environmental conditions where access to iron was restricted, of Christian influence, or of the general poverty of this people (Hallgrímsdóttir 1986: 48, 57).

In recent years archaeologist Adolf Friðriksson has been the most prominent scholar within grave research in Iceland. Unlike his predecessors he has criticized the tenacious conception of the Icelandic grave corpus as poor and homogenous. If we inspect it closely, he says, the graves are far from homogenous and, furthermore, we cannot simply assume that a scarcely furnished grave is necessarily the grave of a poor man. The material culture may be involved in far more complex associations than simply reflecting the social status and wealth of the deceased and hence, he states, it is likely that the significance and value of these objects was completely different from contemporary conceptions of them (Friðriksson 2004a: 60-62).

In his study Friðriksson has primarily focused on the location of graves in relation to settlement patterns in order to establish what factors may have determined the different

locations. His results are that the majority of graves can be related to a specific farm and, furthermore, that in general the graves are either located close to the farm, on a suitable spot outside the infield, or further away from the farm, often at boundaries between farms (Friðriksson 2004a: 60). Interestingly, several additional features also seem to differentiate the two groups. Graves located near farms are more often single graves, they date to an earlier period (before the mid 10th century), and they show a higher number of males as well as individuals of older age. Graves located further away tend to be richer both in terms of the number and variety of grave goods, however, and somewhat contradictory, they also seem to indicate a possible Christian influence in terms of orientation (Friðriksson 2004a: 61-63, 2004b: 22-29).

Friðriksson's findings are very interesting and, though he hasn't performed any further interpretation of the material, he has managed to show that there is a valuable potential in this corpus to do so. The preconditions for such interpretation are however, as he has demonstrated, to handle the material on its own terms – as a significant and unique trait in itself and not as deviation from other traditions.

CONCLUSION

Whether or not intended to corroborate or supplement the historical record this review shows that the Icelandic research tradition since the late 19th century has more or less circulated around questions of typology, chronology and origin, which undeniably are often grounded in the written sources. The perpetual contrast with the historical record as well as with the Norwegian corpus has resulted in a tenacious disbelief in the material culture and its informative potential. This is apparent through the general reluctance to see the Icelandic material as a unique trait in it self and in the frequent conception of it as *poor* and *simple*. A symptomatic example of this is Kristján Eldjárn's presentation of the Icelandic grave material at an international conference held by the National Museum of Antiquities in Edinburgh in 1981 where he opened with the following declaration; "The material at hand is probably more or less known to my audience. I do not pretend to offer any striking novelties, nor do I think we should expect any" (Eldjárn 1984a: 3).

Furthermore, the emphasis on comparative analysis, especially with the Norwegian material, has facilitated a tendency to focus on what the material corpus *lacks* instead of perceiving of it on its own terms. Emphasis has been on the scarcity and homogeneity of finds, the uniformity in raw material, the absence of rich graves and the assumed low

technological level of the society. As stated by Vésteinsson (2000: 169 [with ref. to Eldjárn]) “[t]he grave goods support the general impression of material poverty among the first generations of Icelanders...[and hence]...the Icelanders were very much the poor cousins, compared with Norway, when it came to personal objects taken to the other world”. Norway, in this sense, has been the established “norm” against which the Icelandic corpus has been measured and evaluated. At the same time the recurring conclusion has been that the society at hand was constructed through a cultural coalition and, although *predominantly* Norwegian, was not simply that.

Another apparent tendency in this research is the lack of consideration given the act of burial as an important social practice. It is generally regarded as common knowledge that people’s belief in an afterlife urged for the disposal of objects, or “necessities”, in the graves with the deceased. Any further consideration of this practice and its probable social meaning, or of the objects buried, is nowhere to be found. Rather, one can observe a certain degradation of burial practices, as if they were acts of trivial importance. Suggesting that the abundance of horses in Icelandic graves as well as the paucity of other grave goods merely reflect economical aspects and a conscious reluctance to forfeit valuable objects is an example of this. Actually, if this really was the case we may as well not have had any grave goods to puzzle over.

4. THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS AROUND MORTUARY REMAINS AND MATERIAL CULTURE

Graves and burial customs have from early on been enthusiastically studied by archaeologists. In this research archaeologists have employed a wide range of theoretical frameworks with which to approach this material and to infer about the complex associations between the interred and the society he or she was part of. This research and its development may be viewed in parallel with the wider course of theoretical and methodological development within the discipline. Nineteenth and early twentieth century archaeologists examined burials primarily as “closed finds” providing assemblages of artefacts, and morphological aspects suitable for correlations and identifications of different “cultures”, cultural diffusion and population movement (Klindt-Jensen 1975; Trigger 1989).

Through “new” or processual approaches from the 1960’s and 70’s, influenced by evolutionary and structural functionalism, emphasis shifted towards the assumed generality of human behaviour. How societies disposed of their dead was believed to reflect their broader social organizations (e.g. Saxe 1970; Binford 1971; Tainter 1977): “Indeed, to the extent to which a mortuary population contains individuals who held membership in the various structural components of a system, one can expect the mortuary population to reflect the structure of the extinct society” (Tainter 1977: 329). That is, the material representation of a burial context was believed to reflect the fixed social status of the interred. By comparative analysis regularities and patterns could be identified and the social organization of the past society thus reconstructed (Parker Pearson 2000: 246).

Already in 1969 Peter Ucko criticized the use of funerary remains as sources for social formations or identity pointing to their immense variability in ethnographical records. He argued that means of funerary rites might not at all reflect beliefs or social aspects of the burying society, nor the status or gender of the interred. Grave goods might just be objects associated with the act of disposal (Ucko 1969: 265). From the 1980’s various approaches, conceptually assembled under the generalizing term of post-processualism, have moved away from the “mirror-like” conceptions of mortuary remains. Among these are various approaches inspired by feminist theory where the social construction of gender is considered through analysis of material variation (e.g. Arwill-Nordbladh 1998; Arnold and Wicker 2001; Dommasnes 1982, 1991). Instead of being caught up in a fixed web of social roles and status, people are seen as active in the construction and manipulation of their and others social being. It can not simply be assumed that burials reflect social and ideological

conditions of the living, nor the deceased. It is even possible that burials may “mask” or deny actual conditions of for example social inequalities, whether intentionally so or not (e.g. Bloch 1982: 218; Chapman 2000: 30; Shanks and Tilley 1982: 152). Funerals, or the acts of disposing of the dead, should rather be seen as dynamic and contested events where social roles may be manipulated, acquired and discarded and structures of power radically altered. They may be representations of a perceived social reality but are at the same time open to negotiation, conflict and misrepresentation (Parker Pearson 2003: 86). From the 1990’s many studies of burials and mortuary remains have also been inspired by various phenomenological approaches where the social construction of landscapes and other lived spaces are emphasized (e.g. Bradley 1998; Thomas 1996; Tilley 1994). Of central importance are the interactions between humans and their material surroundings and how these encounters affect life experience and contribute to the creation of memory and meaning. However, in these approaches meaning almost invariably seems to stem from the subject and the qualities possessed by the material world become subordinated to subjective perception (Olsen 2004: 29).

What has characterized many studies of burial remains, and archaeological research more generally, is the perpetual strife to reach beyond the mere presence of the material. The things in themselves have not been the aim or subjects of research but the only means to get to the extra-material essence, whether functional, symbolic or ideological, that lies behind their supposed material expression (Olsen 2003: 90). In most archaeologies, independent of “-isms”, material culture has not been conceived of as a component of society but primarily as a source to knowledge about society (Olsen 2006: 16).

Graves particularly, and more than any other category of archaeological remains, have been thought to hold some general qualities that facilitate social reconstruction. The material culture of burial deposits has therefore repeatedly been reduced to a social, symbolic essence or a form of “accessory”, distinctly different and subordinated to the human remains. However, as will be argued here, the significance of a burial does not emerge from some vague immaterial essence or from distinct and isolated sets of things and bodies, but from their collective and material presence. What meets the eye in an opened grave is not just a symbolic reflection of society or identity, but above all a collective of human and non-human remains entangled in a complex and even chaotic nature that often makes little immediate sense to us. This is not to say that the objects do not or can not have a symbolic meaning, but simply that their material quality and physical proximity to the

buried individual may be of at least as much significance. So, instead of dealing with either ideas or things alone, collectives – the muddle and mess – will be our focus.

THE MESS RECONSIDERED – A SYMMETRICAL APPROACH

The reason for this disregard or devaluation of the material is not merely found in the simple fact that things do not speak and therefore do not, in a verbal way, call attention to themselves. As pointed out by Bruno Latour (1993) and others it is rather the result of a certain “modern” way of thinking characterized by the segmentation of our surrounding world into enclosed and distinct categories, “a hierarchy of opposites” like those of mind and matter, culture and nature, where one side is considered as primordial in relation to the other. However, this order of things or “Great Divides”, the asymmetrical separation of people and things, culture and nature, mind and body, past and present was not so much *discovered* by modern thinking as it was *invented* and *constructed* by it.

Within archaeology there has lately been a growing interest in a more symmetrical way or “attitude” of reasoning and acting, which focuses on the material world and its integral part in social relations (e.g. Olsen 2003, 2004, 2006; Shanks 2005; Witmore 2005). A more egalitarian regime based on the simple assertion that there is only one unbounded and indivisible world, a common ground, inhabited by humans and non-humans (things, fauna, flora) who, because of their differences, are able to compensate for each others weaknesses in cooperative “programs of action”. Much of the inspiration for these studies has been sought from network approaches or Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) originally developed within science studies. Sociologist John Law has described Actor-Network-Theory “... as a *semiotics of materiality*. It takes the semiotic insight, that of the relationality of entities, the notion that they are produced in relations, and applies this ruthlessly to all materials – and not simply to those that are linguistic” (Law 1999: 4). Through ANT it is claimed that the world is composed of endless and ever changing networks of relational actors, both human and non-human, which reduction into asymmetrical binary domains is utterly impossible (Olsen 2003: 98). This is not to say that there exist no differences between entities, but simply that these are constructed simultaneously (Latour 2005: 75-76) and reasoning as if one (the social) precedes the other (the natural) does not hold. The prevailing divides between humans and things, natures and cultures are not to be erased but ontologically disregarded.

To start with it is sensible to consider ANT's conception of "the social", as prefiguring this will illuminate the integral role material culture plays in social relations. As argued by Bruno Latour the mistake done by many sociologists has been to allow the term "social" to designate both the face-to-face local interactions as well as the underlying force causing the durability of these same interactions (Latour 2005: 65). Societies have been seen as something formed more or less by and between people devoid of things, above or a priori to the material world. However, citing philosopher Michel Serres, had this been the case then our social ties and relationships would have been as "airy as clouds" (Serres 1995: 87). Societies are constructed, not just socially or metaphorically but literally, and the building material can not be provided by air alone. Clearly then, *something* is missing. What about subways, cars, banks, traffic lights, houses, telephone lines, playgrounds, sewage pipes, etc. Are these not indispensable parts of our Western societies? Yes, they are and if it wasn't for them a society as we know it would be unthinkable. "We live in collectives, not societies" Latour (1999: 193) declares, and these collectives are made through the cooperation and constant shifting between non-humans and humans. We extend our social relations by enlisting things, delegating tasks to them, they stand in for us, are present where we are not, and they may therefore in a similar way act upon us and guide our doings. It is this complete chain of interactions that makes up "the missing masses" (Latour 1992) of the social. Society is therefore to be seen as a hybrid complex constructed through heterogeneous associations or networks between actors – between people and things. Thus, the term "social" in Actor-Network-Theory does not apply for an item or a realm of reality but rather stands for the momentary *associations* created between dynamic entities constantly transforming and gathering into new shapes (Latour 2005: 64-65).

Moreover, things bring stability to society, because it is through our relations with them that we are tied together, normalized and restricted. "Making society hang together with social elements alone is like trying to make mayonnaise with neither eggs nor oil – that is, out of hot air alone" (Latour 1986: 277). As an example we can take the nation (Olsen 2006: 15-16), a concept which is even hard to grasp without enrolling various socialized things. Although originally an idea neither the nation nor the nation state could possibly have been represented or constructed without the recruitment of various voluntary actors as printing presses, newspapers, telephones, transportation systems, schoolbooks, landmarks, horizontal control points, national museums and so on. The significance of things goes far beyond national symbolism. It is through their working that airy ideas can be represented, transported, constructed, institutionalized and sustained, and thereby tie together a crowd of

otherwise heterogeneous and fragmented groups and individuals. Social elements as institutions, hierarchies or culture have no efficiency if everything else is not solidly tied together. Referring to an underlying social force, as so often is done, does not explain the practical details, “the steel”, making it possible for such a force to last for more than a single minute. According to ANT this steel is provided by things which relentlessly lend their solid qualities to an otherwise hapless society (Latour 1986: 277; Latour 2005: 66-68). In other words, “society is not what holds us together, it is what is held together” (Latour 1986: 276).

“A DEMOCRACY EXTENDED TO THINGS”

However, a revised definition of the “social” may not be enough to actively involve the material world in interactions with humans. There is still the fundamental distinction between things and people which resides in the usual understanding of the terms “agency” and “actor”. Agency is traditionally understood as based on purposive, independent action performed by an actor with intentions – which has restricted it to humans only as animals or objects don’t have intentionality. This may well be true but as defined in Actor-Network-Theory intentionality and purposeful action are not properties of humans either but of associated entities. One actor may be credited with the role of prime mover but action is nevertheless believed to be conceived and executed by an assembly of forces (Latour 1999: 182), as in the example of the nation above. When we for example enrol an object, a tool, it transforms our state of being and ability for action because someone else, a third (composit) agent emerges. Latour (1999: 176-180) takes an example of a citizen with a gun and how the folding or merging of gun (actant) and citizen (actor) modifies both parts. Neither of the original two can be claimed to be *the* actor, but something/someone else: a “citizen-gun” or “gun-citizen”. Through enlisting the gun an angry citizen suddenly becomes armed and life threatening. As well, in her hand the gun is no longer a-gun-in-a-drawer or a-gun-in-a-pocket but the-gun-in-her-hand, a weapon. The translation is symmetrical: The citizen is different with a gun in her hand, and the gun is different with her holding it. Their folding qualities make possible a crime and the responsibility for action is shared between them. So, by definition *any thing* that does make a difference in the course of other agents’ actions or modifies their state of affairs is an actor – or an actant if it has no figuration (Latour 2005: 71).

Recognizing that there are several implements participating in our manifold courses of action in daily life is therefore not to claim that things have intentions but rather “...that

there might exist many metaphysical shades between full causality and sheer inexistence” (Latour 2005: 72). In addition to serving as mere “backdrop for human action”, things may allow, authorize, block, suggest, encourage, permit, influence, forbid, render possible, and so forth (Latour op.cit). So we have to swallow the paradox that material culture is active though it does not act (with intention) and thereby resist “a voluntarist position in which persons are seen as context-free rational decision-makers, endowed with the ability to act just as they desire” (Thomas 1996: 141). Agency is not the property of any actor or actant. Therefore, being an actor (or actant) is really not something one *is* but something one constantly *becomes* through associations (translation, articulation, delegation or shifting) with other actors/actants – and it is this field of actor-actant relations or networks that unceasingly makes up and holds together “the social”.

What the network approach requires is not that we treat humans like objects or objects like subjects, but that we avoid using the subject/object distinction at all because it prevents us from understanding these collectives, the interwoven relations people and things find themselves in. Such distinctions, as between object/subject or nature/society, only “exist” in the same way as east and west, north and south, that is, as relative but convenient reference points for comprehending *everything* that happens in the field between them (Latour 1993: 85). Instead Actor-Network-Theory can be thought of as “a democracy extended to things” (Latour 1993: 12) where studying society or social relations means exploring the dynamism within hybrid networks, how they are assembled and stabilized, and not to look at abstract relations between humans without things.

BIOGRAPHICAL OBJECTS – BIOGRAPHIES OF THINGS

If we accept, as has been argued above, that the social is a field of relations between different but comparable and interacting entities we can also overcome the skepticism towards the authenticity of person-thing relationships. In modern thought there is a deeply embedded fear of becoming too intimately involved with things, a superstitious and fetishistic inclination incompatible with rational behavior. “Don’t cry for dead things”, I was told as I quite regularly burst out crying over a broken toy – an experience I presume most of us recognize. It is shameful and unacceptable to be emotionally attached to material things because it ascribes to them some of the attributes we want to reserve for humans only. We tend to presume, as Daniel Miller (1987: 11) has pointed out, that peoples relations to things are “...in some way vicarious, fetishistic or wrong; that primary concern should lie

with direct social relations and “real people.” This attitude has been propelled by modern social theory and philosophy, where technology, mass production and massive consumption have become the incarnations of our alienated and inauthentic modern lives where objectification is absolutely the ultimate of evils (Olsen 2003: 94).

However, symmetrically speaking, our lived existence is not obscure or abstract but a concrete involvement with a non-discursive and tangible world. As things stabilize society and provide glue to social networks, things also bring stability to our local, personal lives. To lose one’s belongings, to experience that one’s home disappears in flames or flood is traumatic and life challenging, because the things we surround us with are parts of us and our identity (Palmsköld 2003: 81). They bring meaning to us and provide the grip and foothold in our journey through life. They absorb and hold on to the passing moments of our lives, memories of people and relations, and bring them back to us through their appearance, smell and touch as well as through our practical use of them.

In her research among the Kodi in eastern Indonesia Janet Hoskins (1998) discovered how ordinary objects “contained” the stories of peoples lives – stories which otherwise might have been lost. Through her strife to record the life histories of her informants it became ever clearer to her that their stories could not be collected separately from the stories of the everyday objects they surrounded themselves with. By being constantly and intimately entangled in peoples everyday lives ordinary possessions among the Kodi became vehicles for self definition and stepping-stones in the retrieval of people’s life histories – as a kind of “memory-boxes” (Hoskins 1998: 2-5). An ordinary object possessed and used by a Kodi person was therefore not simply a “metaphor for the self” but became “...a pivot for reflexivity and introspection, a tool of autobiographical self-discovery, a way of knowing oneself through things” (Hoskins 1998: 198).

In her work Hoskins seeks inspiration from the ideas of sociologist Violette Morin (1969) and her distinction between “biographical objects” and “protocol objects” in modern France. Though both types of objects may be mass produced the relations people establish with the former endows them with an identity which is unique, localized and personal. Unlike protocol objects, which are eternally youthful and replaceable, biographical things share the lives of their owners and may grow old, fade and deteriorate alongside them. As a witness of a person’s life a biographical object may anchor its owner to a certain time and space and provide a mirror for identity construction and reflection. As such, everyday things are not just what they momentarily appear as but are rather complex “gatherings” through which we become entwined in a web of relations between people, things and places at a

“spatiotemporal distance” (Witmore 2005). Material culture relentlessly brings us the past so that it never leaves us but endures and makes up our present as an amassing polytemporal whirlpool of elements from all times, of pasts that do not pass and will not be sorted (Latour 1993: 72-76; Oliver 2001). Thus, a Viking Age grave can not be thought of as a “time capsule” that captured a moment in a certain Viking Age but contains and is part of innumerable times, all equally present.

By extending agency to things and making them active participants in social relations, as is argued in Actor-Network-Theory, we are also bestowing things with a sort of personality, a social life of their own. Through their transactions with people objects not only come to contain or anchor the life histories of people, as “biographical things”, but they also accumulate histories of their own – become subjects of their own biographies. This idea is most often traced back to Igor Kopytoff who, in an influential article from 1986, was among the first to argue for a “biography of things”. According to him things, like people, have biographies which may be arrived at by asking the same questions as one would tracing the life history of a person (Kopytoff 1986: 66-67). In the course of its life an object travels through a range of places and contexts, where its physical appearance, role and identity are constantly transformed. Therefore, Kopytoff argues, things can not be fully comprehended in any isolated moment of their existence but through exploring the whole span of their cultural biography.

Like Violette Morin, Kopytoff also rests his argument on a traditional distinction between commodities, those things which are exchangeable, and those things which are uncommon, unique or singular and can not be exchanged with anything else (Kopytoff 1986: 69). However, a commodity to Kopytoff is not a closed category of things which hold the characteristics essential to be defined as such. A commodity is rather something an object, any object, may become more or less temporarily through its involvement in exchange. As a phase in its life it affects the identity of the object but will not necessarily determine its future. An object which at one moment is defined as a commodity may later undergo decommoditization and become singularized due to changes in supply, its involvement in gift exchange or any other life changing event. Meaning, value or identity are thus not fixed in the object itself but become invested in it through its involvement in dynamic relations with humans and non-humans, the processes of which may be illuminated through exploring an object’s biography. As identity and material properties are circumstantially renegotiated the study of things’ life history should “...not assume anything about *what they are*, but try to understand *how they come to be* ancient artefacts or whatever

else” (Holtorf 2002: 55) – that is to focus on the networks they compose and are themselves composed by.

Through complex networks life histories and identities of people and things are closely entwined and inform each other. Comprehending one will only happen with reference to the other. This is clearly demonstrated by Marilyn Strathern (1988) in her work on gift exchange in Melanesia where she emphasizes just how objects can be active in mutually creative relationships between people and things. According to her the objects set in circulation through gift exchange are regarded as detached parts of persons moving around in networks of social relations. The identity of an object is therefore never fixed as its process of production continues along its route through new links and new networks. The same can be said of persons, who are composed through their contacts and transactions with different objects that build their networks in increasingly complex ways, relating them to an accumulating web of people and things in past and present. Moreover, because the things circulated “contain” or “gather” the whole trajectory of persons interwoven in their past these persons become “distributed” or “partible” through the travels of things once in their possession. A person’s agency is therefore not bound to the individual body but can be thought of as distributed in space and time.

Building partly on these notions anthropologist Alfred Gell (1998) has also suggested that the organic captivity of the individual is to be blurred. Using the example of Pol Pot’s soldiers Gell demonstrates how the weapons and mines in their possession were just as much parts of their identity as was their belief in a common cause. Moreover, through their delegation of tasks to these material operators the agency of Pol Pot’s soldiers was not bound to their physical presence but could be extended or distributed in space and times, acting in horrifying ways even today (Gell 1998: 20-21).

The creation of identity, meaning and value is a symmetrical process between people and things in relations. Objects may gain or lose fame and value through their links to powerful individuals and a person’s status may be enhanced or lessened through relations to well known objects (Gosden and Marshall 1999: 170). The identity of an object is therefore not a direct result of its singularity, uniqueness or use value but will have “...emerged from a background of materials, persons, practices and histories” (Thomas 1996: 155). Hence, to determine the value of things in relation to economical aspects only is really to devalue them and underestimate the complex relations they are parts of. In many cases the value of a thing is its very materiality, the fact that it is there and is seen, and moreover that it will last as a material reminder/part of a relation, person, event or other.

Our relationships with things are complex, intimate and constitutive for us as persons. As Heidegger notes, our being in the world is a “dwelling alongside” other beings, and it is through our daily activities among and “towards” those that we come to understand ourselves and our existence (Heidegger 1982: 137). We are from day one always *in* the world – a world which *is* an inevitable part of our being and not some external essence awaiting its incarnation (Olsen 2003: 96). Our identities, as well as object’s identities, can not be comprehended without reference to each other and the heterogeneous networks we are parts of. This is the whole principle of symmetry, that humans and things are constructed simultaneously (Witmore 2005) and constantly, by way of the relations between them.

THE COLLECTIVE NATURE OF BURIAL

If we claim that objects have biographies and social lives, it might also be argued that objects at some point may “die”. Julian Thomas has for example suggested that the deposition of objects as hoards or in the graves of humans could be considered as burials of things which had come to the end of their social lives (Thomas 1996: 173). This is a very relevant consideration, however in a “long term” biographical sense somewhat insufficient. It would be more adequate to see the deposition or burial as the end of one phase of a thing’s social life. As we excavate an object it becomes enrolled in new networks. Through recovery, conservation, interpretation, public exhibition, reinterpretation, and so on new links are established, its biography continues to accumulate and its identity continues to be negotiated. This material can therefore not be thought of simply as a product, reflection or evidence for a gone entity. It was and still is integral to that entity which remains and interacts with us in the present (Thomas 2005: 15). Furthermore, although concealed the material in the grave did not cease to exist until we “found” it. During part of the funeral it would have been visible to the living, who may have known the entangled and individual life histories of the various components. Also, the visual presence of the grave in the landscape would not only have reminded the living of past relations but would have held on to those relations through the passing of time and as such made them part of ever new networks in ever new presents. The widespread activity of plundering graves is a further example of this, where the living retrieve and employ certain things in order to extend their relations or stabilize their networks.

While the modern western regime tends to produce a rather alienated narrative of the relations between people and things other cultural contexts may generate other and more

consciously intimate relations between the two (Fowler 2004: 77-78). The life world of a person in Viking Age Iceland was undoubtedly very much unlike my own. The closeness and interactions with nature and animals bred, worked with or haunted would have been essential in the construction of a person's identity. Similarly, everyday objects as pots or knives may have come to be or contain a key part of self definition and communication. Therefore, these items may be argued to be deposited in graves with human remains not as accessories of the deceased but because they were "*a part of the person*" (Fowler 2001: 160). In that case, sorting out the mess, removing non-humans from humans, stripping clothes from bodies will not reveal any such thing lurking inside as society or social relations. Because the things, the clothing do not metaphorically *stand for* the person but are rather *parts of* a literally integral phenomenon – "the clothing-person" (Miller 2005: 32).

We can never be certain whether grave interments relate to the interred, those who organized and buried, to both parts or neither. Grave goods may have been possessed and used by the deceased in life and thereby come to hold a biographical status as well as become integral to his/her identity construction. Grave goods may also include items given to the deceased by the living, at the time of burial or later, as a means to withhold or build relations that reached beyond life and death. Or they may have been thought of as equipment to be employed in the afterlife awaiting the deceased. Possibly these items or animals were selected and placed in the grave to commemorate the dead or even to gratify them and thereby prevent the dead from returning to haunt the living (Parker Pearson 2003: 7). It is well possible that all of these may have affected when, how or what was placed in the grave, one aspect does not exclude the other. Funerals are dynamic and contested events which may represent a perceived social reality but are nevertheless open to negotiation, conflict and misrepresentation (Parker Pearson 2003: 86). In light of the analytical symmetry argued for in this chapter so far these events only grow more complex and more dynamic where the living, the dead, things, animals and even place come together as actors/actants and may all insist, restrict, and/or enable action.

Obviously the dead do not bury themselves. However, what all funerals have in common is that they are driven by the death of a person and gathered around his or her material remains. In a modern Western perspective the dead body is generally regarded as inert, vulnerable and defenceless matter. Deprived of the mind/self that once occupied and animated it the corpse is thought of as a numb and empty shell incapable of action (Hallam and Hockey 2001: 133). However as the "object" around which the collective practice circulates the physical presence of the dead body may be argued to affect those burying, not

only emotionally but by tying them together, temporarily at least, in an actor-network and insist on that the action is fulfilled. As pointed out by Hallam and Hockey (2001: 109) the dead body may be conceived of as a “boundary being”. It is simultaneously the material residue of life and the physical indicator of death. This comes close to what Michel Serres (1987) and Bruno Latour (1993: 51ff.) would call a “quasi-object” – an indefinable hybrid in between the dimensions of life and death, mind and matter, nature and culture. As such, the physical remains of a deceased person, the corpse, can be considered as an archetype of a biographical or memory object as it stands “...not only as a material reminder of the embodied, living person, but as a medium through which the dead might communicate directly with the living” (Hallam and Hockey 2001: 134). Although intentionality may have been taken away from the dead body its ability to make a difference in the course of other agents’ actions or modify their state of affairs (Latour 2005: 71) is no lesser than before. The dead body may silently insist that the things that were part of the person’s identity in life – with and through whom it formed networks – should be deposited alongside it. That the animals, a dog and horse, which it loved, bread, played and worked with be put to death and follow it in the grave. Through her ethnographical research Marilyn Strathern (1981: 219) has recognized that funerals actually often “remember” the dead through the person’s reconfiguration. That is, by bringing together the parts he or she demonstrated in life and thereby uniting the otherwise distributed person. However, playing the rules of symmetry claims may just as well be made by things or non-humans, which may have insisted on or resisted to being deposited in the grave. Being relational entities the deposition of one thing may also have called for the deposition of another or otherwise prevented it.

All the constituents of a grave were brought to the place of deposition by the living – they did not fall from the sky. But not one, not the body, the things, the animals, or other were brought there as inert passive materials. And moreover, not one came into being at this moment but brought with it a life history, “...a series of networks of significance, involving places, the personal histories of people, substances, skills and symbolic references” (Thomas 1996: 159). As well, after their burial they did not cease to be but remained as parts of all the presents to come, open to new negotiations, links and networks.

There is, as mentioned by Gerd Aarsland Rosander (1992: 15), a “secret world” between people and things, which we are not able to penetrate directly. However, working through these material traces with the kind of logic provided by the theoretical frameworks discussed here may allow a fresh perspective on the relations between humans and non-humans. This may furthermore emphasize how things that may seem trivial and ordinary

also are socially integrated and important. That the affluent or spectacular is not always what counts but what actually *is* there.

5. AN INTRODUCTION TO VIKING AGE GRAVES IN ICELAND

In this chapter I will present the Viking Age grave material in Iceland in order to provide an image of its overall characteristics before addressing the graves I have selected for further consideration in the following chapter. I will discuss the whole corpus on general terms, focusing, for example, on aspects of the graves' distribution and location, their morphological character the various types of grave goods and its arrangement. The following discussion is to a considerable extent based on Eldjárn's and Friðriksson's catalogue and study of the graves and grave goods in *Kuml og haugfé úr heiðnum sið á Íslandi* (2000), from where the graves also gain their numbers. A map (fig.1) demonstrating the distribution of graves and burial grounds in the country is to find on the following page.

DISTRIBUTION AND LOCATION

There are at this point 322 recorded Viking Age graves in Iceland, on 161 localities across the country (Friðriksson pers.comm., 8.3.2007). Most of the graves are single but around one third are found on burial grounds with more than one grave, the largest being the Brimnes burial ground in Dalvík (Kt-89) with fourteen recorded graves. However, less than half of the known sites have originally been studied by archaeologists and it is quite possible that some of the single grave sites would have yielded additional graves through more thorough investigation (Eldjárn 2000: 266-267; Friðriksson 2004b: 17-18).

The graves are unevenly distributed over the country, the most striking characteristic being the scarcity of graves in the Western part. In other parts of the country there are distinct clusters in Árnes- and Rangárvallasýsla in the Southwest, in Fljótsdalshérað in the Northeast and in Eyjafjörður in the North (see fig.1). Erosion caused by wind, water and sea has led to the discovery of most of the sites along with cultivation and road construction, while very few graves have been found through direct survey or research. This means that many of the graves have been disturbed and some, therefore, have little or restricted informative value (Eldjárn 2000: 258-261; Friðriksson 2004b: 20-21). According to Eldjárn and Friðriksson (Eldjárn 2000: 263) there are thus only 46 graves of which we may claim to have a "complete knowledge". Although this evaluation is made with reference to finds conditions, preservation of the material and its documentation it is nevertheless subjective and hence it is not always obvious why some graves have been included in this exclusive group while other, which seem rather "complete", are left out.

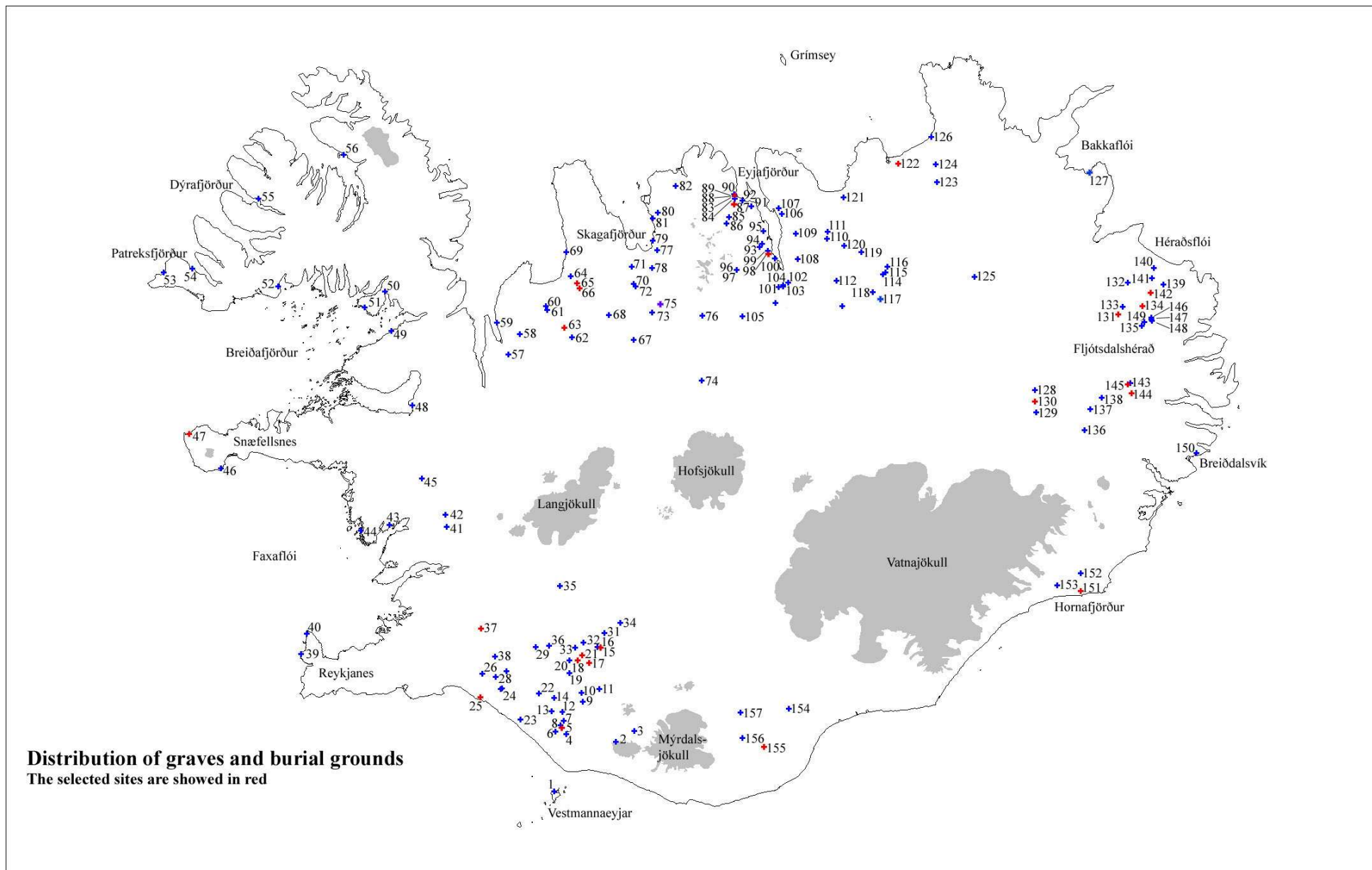


Fig.1: Distribution of graves and burial grounds

For long it was considered that burial sites had been more or less randomly chosen within the vicinity of the farms or, based on the Sagas, on high ranging spots, even on mountain ridges, with spectacular views. The latter is, however, not supported by archaeological finds (Eldjárn 2000: 266). Recent studies have showed that most graves can be related to specific farms and their location can generally be divided into two categories; those located near the farm (95% of which are within 300 m from the farm) and the majority, or $\frac{3}{4}$ of the total, located far from the farm (95% being 300-1500 m from the farm), often close to landmarks between farms. Distances in this relation are obviously relative as the sizes of estates vary. In both groups the graves also tend to be located by or close to old communication routes (Friðriksson 2004b: 22, 28). The general rule seems to be that graves are not located within the infield, but a short distance outside the home-field wall, often on a small hill or ridge (Eldjárn 2000: 265).

MORPHOLOGY

There is not the same variety in Icelandic graves' morphology as is known from many other areas of the Viking world. Firstly, all graves in Iceland are inhumations and apart from the Faroe Islands and Greenland Iceland is the only country in the entire Viking world where no cremation graves have been found. There are also few "true" burial mounds in Iceland and on the whole graves seem to have been small heaps of earth, often with a stone core, but rarely more than 1 m high and 5 m in diameter. Flat graves, without superstructure, also occur. However, in relation to mounds it must be taken into consideration that erosion is harsher in Iceland than most places and mounds may have eroded although the grave itself remained unharmed under the surface. Generally a small grave pit with oval, round or square outlines was also dug, often around 0.5 m deep and 1.75 m long, and the body laid in it. Obviously, if a horse was also buried with the corpse the grave could be up to 4.75 m long. Stones were often arranged around and over the body and thereafter covered with soil. Graves with no stones do occur but pure stone mounds have never been found. Headstones or other similar markings have as well never been recorded and are not mentioned in the Sagas (Eldjárn 2000: 267-270). In some cases charcoal was spread over the body, but only in small amounts (Eldjárn 2000: 307).

The body was generally laid in the grave on the bare ground although coffins (or the like) do occur (Eldjárn 2000: 272-275). Five definite cases are also known where the body had been placed in, or beside, a small boat (Kt-37, 88, 89, 54 and 120) (Eldjárn 2000: 279).

Most commonly the body was laid flat on its back or on one side and then generally with the feet flexed up against the body. In a few cases the interred is also described as “sitting” in the grave (Eldjárn 2000: 283). Generally individuals were buried in separate graves. Examples of double graves are only four (Kt-37, 40, 129 and 132) and in one case, in Vatnsdalur (Kt-54), the grave contained the remains of seven individuals (Eldjárn 2000: 282).

There does not seem to have been any rule concerning the orientation of the grave or body although it seems most common that the interred lay with the head to the south or west. In many instances it seems likely that the landscape, for example a valley or a fjord, influenced the graves orientation (Eldjárn 2000: 286-288).

OSTEOLOGICAL MATERIAL

In relation to the republication of Eldjárn’s doctoral thesis, *Kuml og haugfé*, in 2000 all human remains from the graves were osteologically analyzed (Gestsdóttir 1998). Biological sex and age could be identified for 109 and 120 individuals respectively. Of the 109 individuals 46 were “definitely” male and 20 were “definitely” female. In addition 28 individuals were identified as probable males and 15 as probable females. The age distribution among individuals was estimated as follows (Gestsdóttir 1998: 5):

<i>Age</i>	<i>Individuals</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Individuals</i>
0-2 years	2	18-25 years	11
3-6 years	0	26-35 years	13
7-12 years	5	36-45 years	55
13-17 years	5	46+ years	29

Although a few graves have been excavated since these statistics were published, they do not alter the over all image. Considering these numbers the majority of males is interesting, but it is also an aspect characterizing grave material from other parts of the Viking world. Another puzzling feature is the scarcity of children and juveniles.

DATING

Of course, one can assume that the whole corpus belongs to a period of approximately 130 years, from the first settlement around 870 to the Christianization around year 1000. A more exact dating of the graves has not been performed systematically and is also very hard.

Tephro-chronology has in a few cases enabled a more exact dating but as most of the graves are discovered through various kinds of unintentional disturbances this is most often difficult or impossible. Dating by decoration or typological means is also hard as only a small portion of the material holds such identifiable characteristics and because the period at hand is relatively short.

GRAVE GOODS

Grave goods are what most evidently distinguish a pagan grave from a Christian one. However, in the Icelandic corpus a number of graves identified as pagan are without grave goods. This is in many cases problematic, especially with single graves where dating is difficult and therefore hard to assert if they are actually pagan. In other instances graves with no grave goods are found on burial grounds among others with clear pagan characteristics. The bulk of the Icelandic corpus, however, contains items, often three, four or five, like for example a spear or an axe, one or two brooches, or some beads along with small items like whetstones, knives or combs. Less common is to find graves with only one single thing. A few graves also outdo the average in terms of furnishing, as those at Kaldárhöfði (Kt-37), Hafurbjarnarstaðir (Kt-40:3), Vatnsdalur (Kt-54), Kornsá (Kt-63), Baldursheimur (Kt-117), Daðastaðir (Kt-126), Ketilstaðir (Kt-142), Eyrarteigur (Kt-144) and Álaugarey (Kt-151) (Eldjárn 2000: 301-304).

Listed in the table below are the various types of artefacts or animals found in Icelandic graves as well as the number of graves they have been found in. The most striking feature is of course the high number of graves containing horses. When considering these numbers it is also interesting to recall that Icelandic graves have often been defined as homogenous. However, relatively few artefact types can be defined as common while a far larger proportion are uncommon and occur in four graves or less.

<i>Type of grave goods</i>	No. of graves	<i>Type of grave goods</i>	No. of graves
Horses	115	Sickles	4
Spear heads	57	Arm rings	4
Knives	54	Spindle whorls	4
Beads	42	Bells	3
Saddle remains	41	Finger rings	3
Whetstones	29	Forging tools	3
Axes	24	Fish hooks and line sinkers	3
Bridles	23	Gaming pieces	3
Oval brooches	23	Pendants	3
Weights and scales	21	Tongue-shaped brooches	2
Dogs	21	Penannular brooches	2
Combs	19	Iron spits	2
Textile fragments	17	Arrow heads	2
Swords	17	Belt buckles and strap ends	2
Strike-a-lights	14	Weaving implements	2
Shield bosses	14	Bone pins	2
Cauldrons and vessels	9	Crampons	1
Ringed pins	8	Horse crampons	1
Disc brooches	8	Buttons	1
Shears	8	Hobbles	1
Chests and keys	7	Sword chapes	1
Trefoil brooches	6	Quernstones	1

(Eldjárn 2000: 301-302, 596-597; Friðriksson pers.comm., 12.3.2007)

As the osteological material from the graves has been analysed, this allows us to say something about gender and grave goods, at least for the most common artefact types. However, it must be kept in mind that in the whole corpus of 322 graves 74 are defined as male while 35 are defined as female, and that few children and juveniles are identified. Horses occur with both men and women but seem to be more common with men. They also occur in graves of juveniles, as at Hemla (Kt-5:1) where a horse is buried with a 13-17 year old. Dogs have only occurred in two women's graves and not in graves of children or juveniles (0-17 years old). Knives, saddle remains, bridles, whetstones, weights, combs, strike-a-lights and cauldrons are found in both women's and men's graves. The same is to say about beads, though they are more numerous in women's graves. Weapons have never been found with women nor oval or trefoil brooches with men. It is not tenable to speak of other artefact types in this relation as the incidences are so few.

The arrangement of grave goods in the grave has often been much disturbed when archaeologists arrive at the site. However, it can be stated that the deposition and arrangement followed certain traditions. Weapons, swords, spears and axes, usually lie beside the dead with blades down towards the foot end. Shields were generally placed over the deceased's head. Knives are often found by the person's waistline along with smaller items like whetstones, strike-a-lights, combs or weights, which sometimes had clearly been

carried in small leather or textile pouches. When undisturbed, jewellery and clothing articles like pins are found on the body indicating that it was fully dressed. Brooches are most often on the chest and beads around the person's upper chest and neck (Eldjárn 2000: 306).

Where a dog is deposited in the grave it tends to be placed at the deceased's feet. In two instances (Kt-89:7 and Kt-118) it is described as lying between the deceased's feet or under the knees. More than half of the graves where dogs have been found also contain a horse and in one case (Kt-63) a horse and dog also seem to have been buried together, separately from a human grave (Eldjárn 2000: 311-312).

HORSES

Horses are the most common of grave goods in Icelandic graves, and more common than in any other part of the Viking world. Most often one horse is deposited with the deceased but there are also occasions where an individual is buried with two horses. How horses are deposited varies, but can overall be divided in two categories; the horse is either buried with the person or in a separate grave, the latter being less common. Instances where horse and person are buried together also vary as there is either one large grave compartment containing both or there are two connected graves separated by a small barrier or section but covered with one heap of soil and stones.

Where horse and human are buried together the horse usually rests in the foot end of the grave and most often with its back against the interred. Occasionally the horse is described as lying beside the deceased. Generally the horse lies on one side with its back slightly curved and the feet either clenched under the belly or straight. In the burial grounds at Brimnes (Dalvík Kt-89) and Brimnes (Kt-79) as well as in a few single graves the animals' heads were cut off and placed up against the belly or neck (Eldjárn 2000: 308-311). In a double horse grave at Gímsstaðir in Mývatnssveit (Kt-116) both animals had been divided in two and then mixed so the forepart of one horse lay with the hind part of the other (Eldjárn 2000: 199-200). However, the tradition seems to have been to place whole animals in the graves and not parts. There is only one clear example, at Miklibær in Blönduhlíð (Kt-75), where just parts of a horse were deposited in the grave (Eldjárn 2000: 138).

Exclusive horse graves, where the horse is buried separately, occur in nine instances according to Eldjárn and Friðriksson; at Dalvík (Kt-89:9), Kálfborgará (Kt-112:4), Glaumbær (Kt-120:1+6), Núpar (Kt-121), Stærri-Árskógur (Kt-91), Kornsá (Kt-63), Hemla (Kt-5:1), Enni (Kt-77) and Stafn (Kt-67) (Eldjárn 2000: 308-309). However, I would also

include in this group the two exclusive horse graves at Hrífunes (Kt-155:1 and 4). These horse graves are usually interpreted as belonging to a human grave in their vicinity. Yet, even if there usually is a human grave close by, the distance between the two varies from less than 2 m up to 14 m, or, if we include the Hrífunes graves, up to 30-50 m (Eldjárn 1984b: 7-8). Whether the horse should be considered as belonging to, a human burial rite or be perceived as part of the grave goods of the individual in the closest grave, is therefore not at all self-evident. Not the least when considering that the horse is often equipped with grave goods itself, a saddle and/or bridle.

After this general discussion I will now proceed to a presentation of the graves selected for further consideration. As an introduction to the general traits of the corpus I believe the preceding discussion will serve as a relevant background for considering the unique characteristics of each of the graves in the following chapter.

6. PRESENTATION OF THE SELECTED GRAVES

It was evident from the start that I could not use all the 322 graves for this thesis, mainly because of the impaired information many of them can provide. However, using only the 46 “complete” graves proved insufficient, although the bulk of that group is among the selected graves below. In addition I have selected graves which I consider representative for the corpus and which in many instances could, in my opinion, as well be among the “complete” ones. Altogether I have selected 49 graves from 24 localities. I have consciously eschewed single graves without grave goods as it is most often impossible to verify their pagan origin. However, graves with no grave goods found on burial grounds with obvious pagan characteristics are included in the selection. Also, when handling burial grounds, I have chosen to describe all the graves although their condition and informative value may vary.

I have preferred to present the material in a descriptive way. This because, in accordance with the theoretical framework employed, I wanted to give the reader a chance to “get to know” the material on its own terms – in its true state of “disorder” and confusion – which would not have been possible had I boiled it down to neat and tidy, and easily digested statistical columns and rows.

KT-5:1-2, HEMLA

In 1932 and 1937 two eroding graves were discovered about 185 m NE of the home field wall at the farm Hemla in Rangárvallasýsla, SW-Iceland.

Kt-5:1 was badly eroded and its outlines were hard to define. The grave contained the skeleton of one individual lying on the right side with the head in the south end and feet slightly flexed. A considerable amount of grave goods were found. A spear head and a small axe (13.5 cm long, edge 6 cm) lay by the person’s feet, a knife by the waist and a shield boss was placed over the skull. A small whetstone with hole in one end, a rounded lead weight, a broken green glass bead, a bone comb and four pieces of red jasper were found together by the waistline and had probably been in the person’s pouch. An unidentified piece of wood was also found in the grave.

About 1 m north of the individual’s feet was a horse skeleton and 2-3 m SE of the human grave was another one. The former was lying on one side with the head in SW (and most likely its back against the person), the other with the head to the south and its back turned against the person. An iron bridle bit and a buckle were found by the northern horse

skeleton and by the other some iron fragments and other probable saddle remains (Eldjárn 2000: 49-50; Þórðarson 1932a: 55-57). Whether the horses are buried at the same time as the individual is not clear although it is likely that the northern horse was part of the same burial complex as the human grave. Osteological analysis indicated that the interred was a juvenile, 13-17 years old, whose sex could not be identified (Gestsdóttir 1998).

Kt-5:2 was located a short stretch south of grave 1. It contained a whole but much decayed skeleton of one individual obviously buried in a coffin, 1.7 m long and 0.4 m wide, which seemed to have been slightly too small. The body was laid on its back with the head in the west end and the feet slightly flexed. No grave goods were found (Eldjárn 2000: 49-50). Osteological analysis did not reveal the individual's age or sex (Gestsdóttir 1998).



Fig.2: Grave goods from Hemla (Kt-5:1) (Eldjárn 2000: 49).

KT-15, MÖRK

An eroding grave was discovered about 1 km south of the farm ruins of Mörk in Rangárvallasýsla, SW-Iceland, in 1936. The grave contained a poorly preserved skeleton lying with the head in the west end. A weaving instrument of iron and a stone pebble were the only items found in the grave, but their placement is not specified. About 1 m east of the foot end was an eroded horse grave. The horse lay on one side with the head to the north. A piece of a bridle bit was found by its skull (Eldjárn 2000: 60). Osteological analysis did not reveal age or sex of the interred (Gestsdóttir 1998).

KT-17, GALTALÆKUR

A grave was discovered in 1929 at the farm Galtalækur, on the eroding banks of the river Rangá ytri in Rangárvallasýsla, SW-Iceland. The grave was close to an old ford on the river. It contained no stones and seemed to have been more or less flat. In it was the skeleton of one individual, lying on the back with the head in the north end and feet slightly flexed. By the person's feet, in the same grave it seems, was a horse. Its bones were not intact. Nothing is known about the placement of grave goods, but they were as follows; a broken spear head

and halyard, a shield boss and an axe; two worn whetstones, the other small with hole in one end; two pieces of flint (one with traces of iron, possibly from a strike-a-light), a knife blade and four lead weights of different shapes corroded together. Finally some vices of bone, three fish hooks of iron tied together with a string and one iron hook without fluke or eye. In addition, and most likely belonging to the horse, were a bridle bit, a buckle and about fifty iron fragments which may be the remains of a saddle. Some pieces of charcoal were also in the grave or its fill. Bones from the grave are now lost, but in the description it is maintained that the individual had died in old age (Eldjárn 2000: 61-62; Gestsdóttir 1998; Þórðarson 1932b: 50-54).

KT-18:1, STÓRI-KLOFI

An eroding grave was discovered in 1933 at the farm Stóri-Klofi in Rangárvallasýsla, SW-Iceland. *Kt-18:1* was 200-300 m SSE of the farm ruins. The grave contained the skeleton of one individual resting with the head in the west end. An “old and worn” knife was found by the person’s right hip and a much worn whetstone lay by its feet. A worn piece of yellow jasper was found close to the person’s waist together with a piece of iron (possibly a strike-a-light). Some horse bones were found a few metres northeast of the grave, most probably the remains of an eroded horse grave (Þórðarson 1936a: 28-29). Þórðarson (1936a: 29) believed the human bones belonged to a female, however, osteological analysis indicated that the interred was probably male, but age could not be inferred (Gestsdóttir 1998).

KT-21, KARLSNES

An eroding grave was discovered on the headland Karlsnes east of the river Þjórsjá in Rangárvallasýsla, SW-Iceland, in 1932. There are no farms or any known earlier settlements in the surrounding area. The interred had been laid on the back with feet crossed, left arm behind the back and right arm by the neck most likely holding a spear shaft off which nothing remained. A spearhead lay by the person’s feet and the remains of a knife by the right hipbone. Two lead weights and a small quadrangular transparent stone were found together



Fig.3: Grave goods from Karlsnes (Kt-21) (Eldjárn 2000: 66).

by waistline and were most likely in the person's pouch. Three beads were also found by the neck, one of green glass with white stripes, one of a white porous stone and the third of amber (Eldjárn 2000: 66-67; Þórðarson 1932c: 54-55). Osteological analysis indicated that the interred was male, 36-45 years old (Gestsdóttir 1998).

KT-25:1-4, TRADARHOLT

In 1880 four burial mounds were excavated at Haugavað, close to the farm Traðarholt in Árnessýsla, SW-Iceland. The mounds were all close to the banks of the lake Skipavatn, at a ford called Haugavað.

Kt-25:1 called "Hrafnshaugur" was 6.25 m in diameter and about 1 m high (which makes it the largest recorded burial mound in Iceland). It was covered with stones on top as well as stones were arranged around it. In the grave was the skeleton of one individual, with the head in the west end. A large stone covered the upper part of the body. Traces of wood were in the grave fill, and a length of corroded iron, which Vigfússon believed were the remains of a sword, along the left side of the skeleton. Thirteen small glass beads were found in the grave but their placement is not specified. One was green, two yellow, six with a silver shine and four with a golden shine (Eldjárn 2000: 71-73; Vigfússon 1882: 49-50). Osteological analysis did not reveal the individual's sex or age (Gestsdóttir 1998).

Kt-25:2 was quite eroded and contained the skeletons of one individual and a horse, both resting on a large stone slab. The grave seems to have been undivided. The person lay with the head in the NW end and the horse by its feet on the right side. Large stones had been placed on both human and horse. A bridle ring and some corroded remains of a bridle bit were found by the horse (Eldjárn 2000: 73; Vigfússon 1882: 50). Osteological analysis did not reveal the individual's sex or age (Gestsdóttir 1998).

Kt-25:3 contained the skeletons of one individual, a horse and three dog bones. The human skeleton lay in the southern part with the skull in the south end. The horse lay by the person's feet, on its right side with its back curved against the human and feet clenched under the belly. The grave seems to have been undivided. An iron buckle and a broken bridle bit were found by the horse's head. Where the dog bones were placed is not specified. A shield boss was placed over the human's head. Other items found in the grave were a knife blade, a worn belt-buckle of bronze, an iron buckle and four unidentified pieces of wood. The placement of these items is not specified (Eldjárn 2000: 73-74; Vigfússon 1882: 49-51). Osteological analysis did not reveal the individual's sex or age (Gestsdóttir 1998).

Kt-25:4 contained poorly preserved skeletons of one individual and a horse, both resting on a large stone slab. The person lay in the western part of the grave probably with the head in west end, and the horse by its feet, in what seems to have been an undivided grave. No artefacts were found (Eldjárn 2000: 74; Vigfússon 1882: 51-52). Osteological analysis did not reveal the individual's sex or age (Gestsdóttir 1998).

KT-26:1-2, SELFOSS

Two graves were discovered during field levelling in the town Selfoss in Árnessýsla, SW-Iceland, in 1958 and 1962.

Kt-26:1 was about 900 m SE of the settlement farm Selfoss. It contained the skeleton of one individual lying on the back with the head in the SW end. By the pelvis was a lump of a blue claylike material which contained a few dark pebbles and some small unidentified iron fragments. Slightly higher, by the mid spinal column, was another lump containing some unidentified iron fragments, a small transparent stone with a hole through (like a bead), a conch and two unusual stones, one gray and oval with a hole through, the other hollow with a beautiful crystal fill. According to Eldjárn these items seemed nothing but worthless reflections of eccentricity or superstition (Eldjárn 1966: 9-11). Osteological analysis indicated that the interred was probably female, whose age could not be defined (Gestsdóttir 1998).

Kt-26:2 was about 150 m east of grave 1 and more disturbed than the previously found. The interred seemed to have been laid on the back with the head in the SW end. By the neck and strayed around in the disturbed soil were 12 beads, one crushed. Eleven were of glass, eight of which were dark-blue, one blue-green, one black and one (the broken) was white. There was also one large amber bead with an attached ring of a winded silver thread. Other items were an iron knife, a sickle, an iron spit and a lump of textile fragments. Two iron rings, some nails and fragments of wood, an iron key and an iron leaf with a keyhole (most likely the remains of a small wooden chest) were found on the person's left, close to the waist (Eldjárn 2000: 76-77; Gestsson 1966: 69-74). Osteological analysis indicated that the interred was probably female and 36-45 years old (Gestsdóttir 1998).

KT-37, KALDÁRHÖFÐI

A grave was discovered in 1946 by the water level on a small island in the lake Úlfljótsvatn, SE of Þingvellir in SW-Iceland. The island, which was land fast until 1937, is in the land of

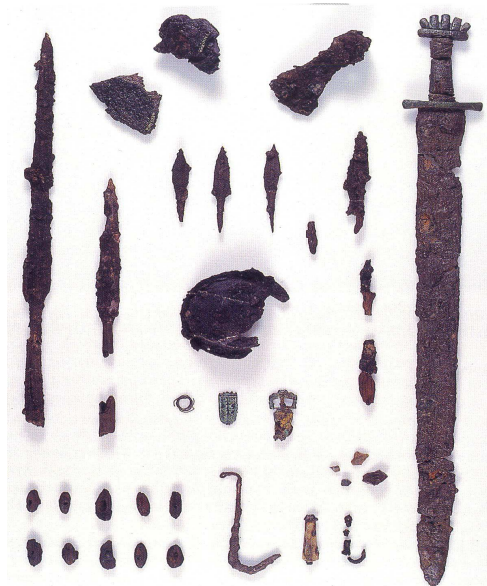


Fig.4: Grave goods from Kaldárhöfði (Kt-37) (Eldjárn 2000: 90).

Kaldárhöfði in Árnessýsla. When the farm was first settled is unknown but the area was settled during the first phase of the *landnám* (Eldjárn 1948: 25-27). The grave was much prolapsed, shallow and had a core of water worn stones from the shore. Apart from water erosion in the western most part the grave was intact. In it was a poorly preserved skeleton of one individual lying on the back with the head in the west end. Beside it, to the west, were two teeth from a young child (7-8 years old according to Eldjárn), and the grave therefore interpreted as double.

The grave was richly furnished with grave goods. By the adult's right side was an exclusive sword (O-type), one of two unusually elaborate swords found in Iceland. The hilts and pommel are of bronze, decorated with a silver inlay and the grip entwined with a wool or linen thread. An unusually large spearhead was found by the person's feet and five arrowheads and fragments of a sixth lying next to it. Two of the arrowheads showed traces of leather, possibly from a quiver. Arrowheads have only been found in one other grave in Iceland. A broken axe lay close to the adult's waist, a belt buckle of bronze decorated in Borre style was found by the person's waist along with a strap end of bronze and a small wad of silver wire. The strap end is decorated with acanthus motifs and is possibly of Frankish origin. In all 80-90 rivets and nails with traces of wood were spread in the soil north of the deceased, clearly from a small boat (2.8 m long and 0.8 m wide), also indicated by the impression in the soil. Two shield bosses (one not whole) were found by the east and west end of "the boat" as if the shields had been placed up against it. A spear head and axe, considerably smaller than the other ones found, were placed under the side of the boat and were interpreted by Eldjárn as belonging to the child (or boy). Other items were two small knives, two pieces of red jasper, a fish-hook, a boat-hook, a lead sinker and some unidentified fragments of iron and textile (Eldjárn 1948: 25-44; Eldjárn 2000: 87-91, 324-

325). Osteological analysis of the bone material did not reveal sex or age of those interred (Gestsdóttir 1998).

KT-47, ÖNDVERÐARNES

A grave was discovered during road constructions utmost on Snæfellsnes in West Iceland in 1962. The grave is in the land of Öndverðarnes by the landmarks to the settlement farms of Gufuskálar and Saxahóll. The grave was filled with sand, which was unusual, and a few small lava slabs. It contained the skeleton of one individual lying flexed on the left side with the head in the NE end. A sword lay alongside and partly under the interred. Other items were a spear head, fragments of a shield boss, a knife blade, a bone pin with an engraved “x” and some unidentified iron fragments. Where the items were placed is not specified (Eldjárn 2000: 106-107; Grímsson 1966: 78-84). Bone material from the grave was unusually well preserved but its analysis has been problematic. In the original report it is stated that the deceased was a boy around 14 years old (Grímsson 1966: 78). According to osteologist Gestsdóttir (2000) biological sex could however not be inferred and age was difficult to define. Unfused bone ends indicated an age of 10-12 years while dental maturity pointed to the age of 19-21. An estimated height of the individual was also 176.9 +/- 2.7 cm which is unusually high for this time. Gestsdóttir’s conclusion is that the individual was 18-25 years old (most likely male) but that something (possibly Klinefelters-syndrome or castration) had prevented its normal bone development (Gestsdóttir 2000).

KT-63, KORNSÁ

A grave was discovered during house constructions in 1879 by the farm Kornsa in Vatnsdalur valley, East-Húnavatnssýsla, in North Iceland. The grave contained a poorly preserved skeleton of one individual lying on the back with the head in the NW end. A layer of small stones covered the body and was possibly overlying a disintegrated wooden cover.

The grave was richly furnished with grave goods. An iron cauldron had been placed over the deceased’s head. By the person’s neck were 33 beads of various size, colour and material. One is very unusual, quadrangular and



Fig.5: Beads from Kornsa (Kt-63)
(Photo: Elin Ósk Hreiðarsdóttir).

oblong, 2.9 cm long and decorated with flower motifs on each side. It is made from a red stone which is believed to be agate, jasper or opal (Hreiðarsdóttir 2005: 83-84). Shetelig (1939) believed the bead to be of Frankish origin and most likely of a rosary. Also by the



Fig. 6: Grave goods from Kornsa (Kt-63) (Eldjárn 2000: 125).

deceased's neck was a small silver pin with eye in one end (now lost). On the person's right was a scale pan of bronze and two tongue-shaped brooches of bronze decorated in Jelling style. These are the only tongue-shaped brooches found in Iceland and the type seems to have been uncommon in Scandinavia as well (Eldjárn 2000: 370). Also to the right of the interred was a small bronze bell with an eye on top so it could have been carried on a chain with the beads.

Two similar bells have been found in Iceland in the graves at Vatnsdalur (Kt-54) and Brú (Kt-35). These are uncommon in Scandinavia and may be originated in the British Isles (Eldjárn 1967; Eldjárn 2000: 387-389). A weaving sword of whalebone, some unidentified iron fragments and a bone comb were found together, but their placement is not specified. Other items found were some iron shears, a small bronze pincer and a knife.

Bones from a horse and dog were found about 3.5 m east of the human grave, along with some human bones it seemed, although this is slightly unclear. Eldjárn believed the human bones to be a misunderstanding and that a horse and dog had been buried along with the deceased in a separate grave (Eldjárn 2000: 125-127; Vigfússon 1881: 57-64). Osteological analysis indicated that the interred was female, whose age could not be inferred (Gestsdóttir 1998).

KT-65, SMYRLABERG

An eroding grave was excavated at the farm Smyrlaberg in East-Húnavatnssýsla, North Iceland in 1954. The SE part of the grave was intact but the other had been disturbed through the erosion. The deceased had obviously been buried in a wooden coffin which side- and footboards could be seen as black lines in the soil. The skeleton was lying on the left

side with the head in the SE end. A knife was found by the person's waist. Other items were six iron nails, probably from the coffin (Eldjárn 2000: 127-129). Osteological analysis indicated that the interred was male and over 46 years old (Gestsdóttir 1998).

KT-66, TINDAR

During road constructions in 1937 two graves were discovered 1 km north of the farm Tindar, midway between Tindar and the farm Kagaðarhóll in East-Húnavatnssýsla, North Iceland. The graves appeared as low, close lying heaps but had been somewhat disturbed by the construction work. Under the heaps were two shallow, round depressions. In the smaller grave was the skeleton of one individual, probably resting with the head in NNW, but the bones were decayed and not intact. In the grave was an unusual spearhead which in appearance resembles a sword blade and is also decorated with a unique bronze socket around the halyard. An undecorated ringed pin of bronze and a broken fish hook of iron were also found with the interred. In the other grave, separated from the foot end of the human grave by a small barrier, was an "old" horse which had obviously been put to death by a blow on the brow (Eldjárn 2000: 129-130). Osteological analysis did not reveal age or sex of the interred (Gestsdóttir 1998).

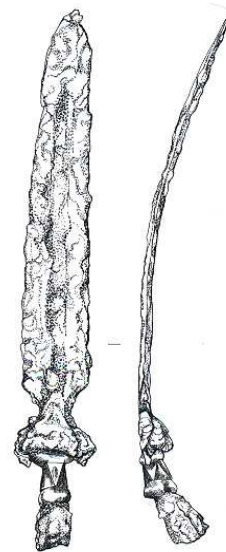


Fig. 7: Spear from Tindar (Kt-66) (Hayeur Smith in Eldjárn 2000: 343).

KT-87:1-10, YTRA-GARÐSHORN

In 1954, 1956 and 1958 a burial ground was excavated about 300 m east of the farmhouses at Ytra-Garðshorn in Eyjafjarðarsýsla, North Iceland. The graves were gradually exposed through field levelling. Ytra-Garðshorn is a later settlement but is on the estate of the settlement farm Grund. In all ten graves were excavated, but apart from one (Kt-87:3) they were very badly preserved and had obviously been plundered at some point in time. In seven of the graves one person and one horse were buried, while one grave contained two horses and one individual. In two instances horse and human were buried in one undivided grave, and in four cases the two were separated only by a small barrier. Interestingly, in five of the

seven plundered graves containing horse and human the horse grave was left intact (Eldjárn 1966: 33-50; Eldjárn 2000: 153-162).

Kt-87:3 was covered with a layer of stones and seemed mostly intact. In it were buried one individual and a horse, covered with a gravelly fill with traces of charcoal. The person was lying on the back with the head in the SW end. The horse lay on its right side completely up against the person's feet with its head in the NE end and feet clenched under the belly. A few nails and two buckles were found by the horse. Two glass beads, one green and one yellow, were found by the person's neck and a knife by the waistline. A strike-a-light, pieces of iron shears, a few nails, an iron ring and other unidentifiable iron fragments with traces of wood (possibly from a small chest) lay by the persons feet. Finally a small oval stone was found in the grave but where is not specified (Eldjárn 1966: 38-40; Eldjárn 2000: 157-158). Osteological analysis indicated that the interred was female and 36-45 years old (Gestsdóttir 1998).

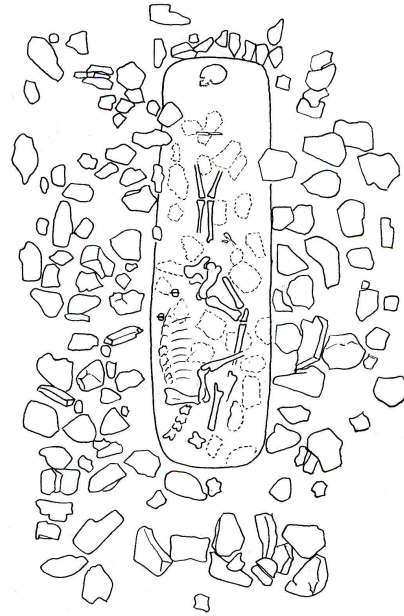


Fig.8: Grave 3 at Ytra-Garðshorn (*Kt-87*) (Eldjárn 1966: 37).

KT-89:1-14, BRIMNES (DALVÍK)

During field levelling in 1908 a burial ground was discovered at the farm Brimnes, by the village Dalvík in Eyjafjörður, North Iceland. The graves lay spread in N-S direction along the shore line close to the landmarks between Brimnes and Böggvisstaðir. It is not unlikely that the burial ground belonged to the settlement farm Upsir which the land originally belonged to. Thirteen graves were recorded and excavated the following year, which makes this the largest known burial ground in Iceland. Apart from graves 12 and 13 which were small but clear mounds, the graves seemed to have been very low, if not flat. Some of the graves had been slightly disturbed by the levelling work but none badly (Bruun and Jónsson 1910; Eldjárn 2000: 163-170).

Furthest to the north were three closely arranged graves, *Kt-89:1-3*, covered with one coherent layer of water worn stones. *Kt-89:1* contained an intact human skeleton "sitting" in the north end of the grave, facing northeast towards the fjord mouth. By the person's feet

was a dog skeleton. Eight glass beads and two amber beads, one round and one quadrangular, were found in the soil around the person and dog. Among the beads was also a small, round and bronze-coated iron drop with hole through and a glass bead attached to it. The metal drop was probably carried on a chain with the beads but may originally have been a weight. Some traces of wood and fragments of iron were also in the grave (Bruun and Jónsson 1910: 68-70). Bruun believed this was a woman's grave but osteological analysis indicated that the interred was probably male and over 46 years old (Gestsdóttir 1998).

Kt-89:2 was just NE of grave 1. It contained the skeletons of one individual and a horse. The human lay on the back with the head in the SW end. In the north end of the grave, and partly on the person's feet was a horse skeleton resting on the right side. The horse had been beheaded and the head placed on its torso. The same had been done with the horses in all the other graves as well. By the person's right hip lay an oblong whetstone with rounded edges and hole in one end. On the left side of the person was a knife with a wooden shaft along with eight lead weights of various shapes. Under the horse skeleton lay a spear head in four pieces. Some lumps and fragments of iron were also found by the horse, probably remains of a saddle (Bruun and Jónsson 1910: 70-73). Osteological analysis indicated that the interred was male and over 46 years old (Gestsdóttir 1998).

Kt-89:3 was just south of grave 2. It contained a human skeleton in what seemed to be a "sitting" position in the grave's SW end. Traces of wood were in the soil over the body, indicating that it had been covered with a wooden board of some kind. A large spear head lay in the foot end of the grave, and traces of a wooden shaft could be seen in the soil. Three lead weights of various shapes were found in the NE end with some fragments of iron and one iron nail (Bruun and Jónsson 1910: 73-76). Osteological analysis indicated that the interred was male and 26-35 years old (Gestsdóttir 1998).

About 10 m south of grave 3 was another closely arranged group of burials, *Kt-89:4-11*, covered with a coherent layer of stones. *Kt-89:4* contained the remains of a boat, 7 m long and 1.5 m wide. The boat's form could be seen in the soil, and by the 52 rivets and 70 iron fragments preserved. The boat's structure resembled the Norwegian Nordlands-boat and analysis of wood remains showed that the material was oak. The boat, or at least the material, was therefore not Icelandic and most likely Norwegian. Stones had been massed in the bottom of the boat which contained the skeletons of one person, a dog and horse. The person seemed to have been "sitting" in the stern in the SW end of the grave, facing NE. By the person's feet lay the skeleton of a dog and a beheaded horse in the prow. An iron buckle

was found among the horse bones (Bruun and Jónsson 1910: 76-80). The interred is said to be young but osteological analysis could not reveal sex or age (Gestsdóttir 1998).

Kt-89:5 was 3 m south of grave 4 and included two graves separated by 0.5 m. The northern of the two contained a beheaded horse skeleton. Two iron buckles, one nail and fragments of iron, probably saddle remains, were found with the horse. The southern grave contained a human skeleton lying on the back with the head in the SW end. By the person's left hip was a worn knife with a wooden shaft. Widthways under the cranium (or chin) was a decorated oval brooch with traces of gilding. Attached to it were textile fragments and fragments of enlaced bands. In the northern end of the grave was a broken cauldron made from a light grey, soft stone, and finally some unidentified iron fragments (Bruun and Jónsson 1910: 80-82). Osteological analysis indicated that the interred was probably female and 36-45 years old (Gestsdóttir 1998).

Kt-89:6 was about 7 m SW of grave 5 and was divided in two by a small barrier. The northern grave contained the remains of a beheaded horse lying on its right side. The southern grave contained a human skeleton. Its position is not specified but it is likely that it was lying with the head in the SW end as in the other graves. No grave goods were in this grave (Bruun and Jónsson 1910: 82-83). Osteological analysis indicated that the interred was female and over 46 years old (Gestsdóttir 1998).

Kt-89:7 was south of grave 6 and had been partly excavated during the field levelling in 1908 but covered up again. It contained a human skeleton in what seemed to be a "sitting" position with a dog resting between its feet. Flat stones were arranged edgewise around the N and NE parts of the grave (Bruun and Jónsson 1910: 83). Osteological analysis indicated that the interred was probably male whose age could not be identified (Gestsdóttir 1998).

Kt-89:8-11 were all south of grave 7. Graves 8, 10 and 11 contained poor remains of human skeletons whose sex or age could not be defined. Apart from traces of wood, iron and charcoal there were no grave goods in these graves (Bruun and Jónsson 1910: 83; Gestsdóttir 1998). Grave 9, however, contained the remains of a beheaded horse which Bruun and Jónsson believed belonged to human grave 10, which was a few metres further south (Bruun and Jónsson 1910: 83).

The two southernmost graves were on a small ridge about 50 m SW of grave 10. Both were clearly visible as small mounds of stone and turf. *Kt-89:12* contained the skeletons of one individual, a dog and a horse. The human skeleton had been laid on the back in the southern part of the grave with the head in the south end. Beside the skeleton was a whetstone and in two places fragments of iron, which in one case were probably

remains of a knife. Parts of a cauldron similar to the one in grave 5 were found, but their placement is not specified. Nineteen gaming pieces of whalebone lay bundled together in a lump of soil by the person's feet. In the northern end of the grave, by the person's feet was a poorly preserved dog skeleton (possibly just the skull) and about 0.8 m north of the human grave was a horse skeleton in a shallow grave (or on the original surface). The horse was beheaded and lying on the left side. A piece of a bridle bit was found among its bones (Bruun and Jónsson 1910: 84-88).

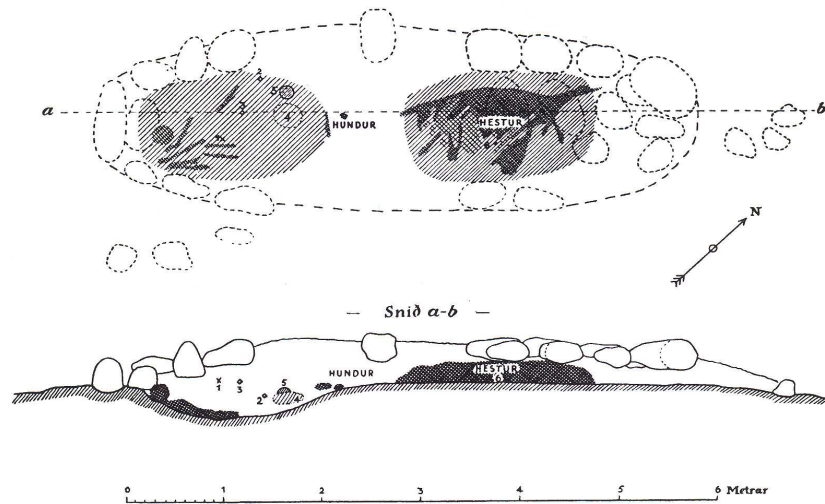


Fig.9: Grave 12 at Brimnes (Kt-89) (Eldjárn 2000: 167).

Osteological analysis indicated that the interred was probably female and 18-25 years old (Gestsdóttir 1998).

Kt-89:13 was west of grave 12 and of similar character. The southern part of the grave contained the remains of a human skeleton with the head in the south end. Five glass beads were found by the person's neck, one white and round with a ruffled finish, two blue, one green and one yellow. A corroded iron fragment, possibly a knife, a small piece of bone with hole in it (possibly a button), and some shell fragments were also found in the grave. To the north of the human grave was a horse skeleton lying on the original surface. The horse was beheaded as in all the other graves but unlike them was lying with its forepart towards the human grave (Bruun and Jónsson 1910: 88-89). Osteological analysis indicated that the interred was 26-35 years old but sex could not be defined (Gestsdóttir 1998).

During house constructions in 1942 the fourteenth grave was discovered at Brimnes, but it was poorly excavated by laymen. What is known is that it contained a human skeleton, a horse and one corroded iron buckle (Eldjárn 2000: 170).

KT-98:1-4, SÍLASTAÐIR

During cultivation work in 1947 a burial ground was discovered at Sílastaðir in Eyjafjarðarsýsla, North Iceland. The locality is about 300 m north of Sílastaðir, on a ridge outside the home field and close to the landmarks with Garðshorn. Four more or less intact and well preserved graves, arranged NE-SW, were found and excavated. When the farm Sílastaðir was settled is unknown (Eldjárn 1948: 45-53).

Kt-98:1 had been most disturbed by the cultivation work. It was on top of the ridge and contained a human skeleton and a horse. The person was lying on the back or slightly on the right side, with the head in the west end and feet somewhat flexed. The horse was buried in the foot end of the same grave close to the person's feet. It lay on one side with its head towards the human. The grave was richly furnished with grave goods of which some had been moved from their original placement: a sword, an axe, a broken axe (smaller than the other), a spearhead, a broken knife, a "shoddy" whetstone, an iron buckle and a piece of grey flint. By the waistline was another iron (belt-) buckle and a broken shield boss was lying on the person's right shoulder. Fragments of bark were also found, possibly the remains of some sort of container. Finally, traces of wood indicated that wooden boards had been placed over and possibly under the body (Eldjárn 1954: 55-57; Eldjárn 2000: 177-179). Osteological analysis indicated that the interred was male and over 46 years old (Gestsdóttir 1998).

Kt-98:2 was 2.5 m south of grave 1. It contained a human skeleton lying on the right side with the head in the SW end and feet flexed. Traces of wood indicated that boards had been used as in grave 1. A halyard was lying by the person's head and a corresponding spearhead by the feet. A knife with a wooden shaft and remains of a leather sheath was found by the left hipbone together with a small whetstone with hole in one end. In the same place was also a bundle of small items which probably had been in the person's pouch: a piece of red jasper, a strike-a-light, two silver coin fragments, a small iron point, a piece of silver thread and fragments of an organic material. A black glass bead decorated with blue and white dots was found by the deceased's neck and finally a penannular brooch beside the left femur (Eldjárn 1954: 57-60; Eldjárn 2000: 179-180). The brooch is unusual as it is made of iron and Hayeur Smith

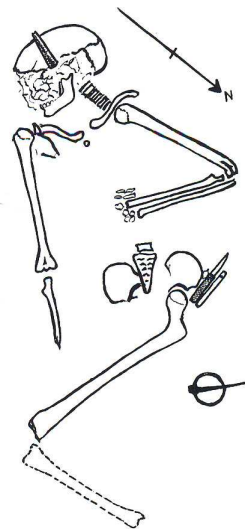


Fig.10: Grave 2 at Sílastaðir (*Kt-98*) (Eldjárn 2000: 179).

(2004: 101-104) has suggested that it may be home made. Supporting this is the possibility that some of the items found in the grave, particularly the iron point, may be indicators of jewellery making. Osteological analysis indicated that the interred was male and over 46 years old (Gestsdóttir 1998).

Kt-98:3 was 4.5 m SW of grave 2. Unlike the other graves it was covered with a layer of stones. It contained the remains of a human skeleton lying with the head in the SW end. Five glass beads and one hazel stone bead were found by the person's neck. Under the skull was an iron nail and an iron object, possibly some sort of hasp. Some nails, an iron leaf with a keyhole and some traces of wood (the remains of a small chest) were found close to the deceased's waist together with a knife and three small quartz stones (Eldjárn 1954: 60-61; Eldjárn 2000: 180-181). Osteological analysis indicated that the interred was probably female and 36-45 years old (Gestsdóttir 1998).

Kt-98:4 was located slightly lower than the other three, on the slope below the ridge about 6 m NE of grave 1. It contained the remains of one individual and a horse. The human was lying on the right side with the head in the SW end. The horse lay by the person's feet, on its right side with the head in the NE end and feet clenched under the belly. On the person's right was a well preserved sword with remains of a sheath and an axe with traces of textile lay by the left shoulder. A broken shield boss was found just below the skull and a knife by the waistline. To the left of the interred was a bundle of small items probably from the person's pouch: two lead weights, an iron fragment and an attached piece of jasper, a small piece of red jasper and a transparent stone. A spearhead had been shoved down in the soil between the person and horse with the point up. A bridle bit was found in the horse's mouth and by its back were five nails, one rivet and a buckle (Eldjárn 1954: 61-66; Eldjárn 2000: 181-184). Osteological analysis indicated that the interred was male and 36-45 years old (Gestsdóttir 1998).

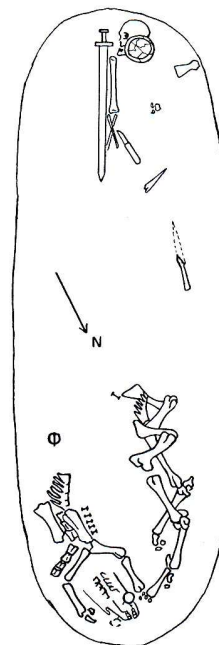


Fig.11: Grave 4 at *Sílastaðir* (*Kt-98*) (Eldjárn 2000: 181).

In a popular article on the *Sílastaðir* graves Kristján Eldjárn underlined what he defined as the “unsophisticated and homely character of the graves and grave goods”. Although the men were well equipped with weapons, everything was made from plane iron,

no decorations or precious metals and, apart from the swords, much of it probably homemade (Eldjárn 1948).

KT-122, GRÁSÍÐA

During cultivation work in 1941 a grave was discovered about 50 m SW of the old home filed wall at the farm Grásiða in North-Þingeyjarsýsla, North Iceland. The grave contained a well preserved skeleton, lying on the back with the head in the south end and feet crossed. Wooden boards seemed to have been arranged edgewise alongside the interred. A spearhead was found to the right of the person's feet and a knife with an iron ring on the shaft by the right hipbone (Eldjárn 1948: 63-70; Eldjárn 2000: 208-210). Osteological analysis indicated that the interred was male and 18-25 years old (Gestsdóttir 1998).

KT-130:1-2, REYKJASEL

On the estate of Vaðbrekka is a place named "Reykjasel" where, according to Hrafnkelssaga, there was a farm. Here, two eroding graves were excavated in 1901 and 1918. Vaðbrekka is in Hrafnkelsdalur valley in North-Múlasýsla, East Iceland.

Kt-130:1 was on a small cape by the river Jökulsá. It contained a human skeleton lying with the head in the south end. A horse was buried by the foot end of the grave. The description is somewhat unclear but it seems the two graves were only separated by a small barrier and that the horse grave (at least) was covered with stones. 35 beads were found in the human grave, one of rock crystal, the others of glass, mostly blue or green. One oval brooch with considerable pieces of textile was found and had most likely been worn by the waist. Analysis of the textile (wool) fragments showed that it was imported luxury material, possibly from the Near East (Hoffmann 1966). A knife was also found in the grave as well as a buckle and some iron fragments, which probably came from the horse grave (Bruun 1903: 17-19; Bruun 1928: 56-59; Eldjárn 2000: 217-218; Steffensen 1967: 45). Osteological analysis indicated that the interred was female and 36-45 years old (Gestsdóttir 1998).

Kt-130:2 was about 120 m north of grave 1 and further away from the river. The grave was badly eroded and apart from being covered with stones its morphology was unclear. It contained the skeleton of one individual, whose bones are not preserved. In all, 34 beads were found in the grave, of which 15 were of amber, 14 with a silver shine, 4 of stone and one of lead. Other items found were a knife blade, a whetstone with hole in one end, a spearhead and a small iron ring, possibly from the knife shaft (Eldjárn 2000: 218; Gestsdóttir 1998).

KT-131, HRÓLFSSTAÐIR

A bulldozer revealed a grave at Hrólfsstaðir in Jökuldalur valley, North-Múlasýsla, East Iceland in 1996. The grave was close to the old landmarks between Hrólfsstaðir and Fossvellir, and about 100 m from the early settlement farm Slútagerði. The grave was also close to the old communication routes through the valley (Kristinsdóttir 1998: 67-68). The grave contained a human skeleton, not completely intact and its posture was unclear. Grave goods were found intact in the southern part of the grave bundled together in a lump of soil, probably the remains of a pouch. In it was a decorated comb in a holster with hole in one end. The comb seemed to have been broken at some point and then fixed. In the same place was a well preserved and unusually long knife (16 cm) which seemed unused. The shaft is of wood and bone, which makes it unique among grave found knives in Iceland. Some traces in the soil indicated that the knife had been in a holster. The grave fill contained traces of charcoal (Kristinsdóttir 1998: 61-66). Osteological analysis indicated that the interred was male and either 22-32 years old (Eva Kolonowski in Kristinsdóttir 1998: 67) or 36-45 years old (Gestsdóttir 1998).

KT-134, STRAUMUR

An eroding grave was excavated at the farm Straumur in North-Múlasýsla, East Iceland, in 1952. The grave was south of the farm on the banks of the river Lagarfljót. It was more or less intact and contained a fairly well preserved skeleton, lying on the right side, slightly flexed, with the head in the south end and the feet crossed. Considerable fragments and traces of wood were in the soil and at least 30 rivets were irregularly spread out in the grave. It seemed unlikely that a whole boat had been buried there but that a shell-plating had been used under or over the body. A small knife was found by the person's feet and an unusually small axe, the blade 11.3 cm long and the edge only 5 cm, was lying by the skull. Other objects found were one weight of lead and two small, round stones. In three places around the grave irregular piles of human bones were found, presumably from three individuals; a middle-aged female, a middle-aged male and a female in the thirties. Together with some horse bone fragments this indicated that there was an eroded burial ground of at least 4-5 graves in the area (Eldjárn 2000: 221-223). Osteological analysis indicated that the interred was a 7-12 years old child, whose sex could not be identified (Gestsdóttir 1998).

KT-142, KETILSSTAÐIR

A grave was discovered during road constructions in 1938, north of the farm Ketilsstaðir in Hjaltastaðarþingá, North-Múlasýsla, East Iceland. Litlu-Ketilsstaðir is a deserted farm north of Ketilsstaðir and the grave was found about 300 m north of it. No signs of a mound were

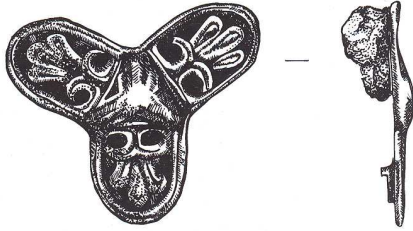


Fig.12: Trefoil brooch from Ketilsstaðir (Kt-142) (Hayeur Smith in Eldjárn 2000: 363).

visible and no stones were in the grave. It contained a poorly preserved skeleton lying on the left side, slightly flexed. Two oval brooches of bronze and a trefoil brooch of bronze were found on the person's chest. The oval brooches are of the type Rygh 655 which is relatively uncommon and is believed to reflect high social status (Eldjárn 2000: 360). The trefoil brooch is decorated with acanthus motifs and

may be of Frankish origin (Hayeur Smith 2004: 49). In all 42 beads were found on and around the person's chest and neck. One of the beads was of amber the others of glass, in various colours and sizes. Other objects were found around the waistline; a spindle whorl of soap stone, pieces of a bone comb, two whetstones with holes near one end, iron shears and a small, light blue and transparent stalagmite stone (ca. 5 cm) (Eldjárn 2000: 228-230). Osteological analysis did not reveal the individual's sex or age (Gestsdóttir 1998).

KT-144, EYRARTEIGUR (ÞÓRISÁ)

An eroding grave was discovered in 1995 on the banks of Þórisá river at the farm Eyrarteigur in South-Múlasýsla, East Iceland. A 0.5 m high mound covered two graves separated by a 0.3 m barrier. The northern grave contained an apparently young horse resting on one side with its curved back towards the human grave. Two iron buckles were found among the horse bones. The southern grave contained a fairly well preserved human skeleton. It was lying on the back with the head in the south end and feet flexed. The grave is said to be lined with horse skin, which if correct is unique for Icelandic graves. A sword was lying on the skeleton, as held in the right hand and pointing down. It is of a type most common in the Baltic region. A shield boss with fragments of wood lay on the left hip and under the sword. An axe lay by the person's right shoulder and two whetstones by the right hip. By the right arm was a ringed pin of bronze, of Scottish-Celtic origin. Two amber beads were found by the skull or neck. A belt buckle and strap end of bronze, decorated in Borre style, lay by the waistline. Also by the waist was a lump of soil containing four lead weights,

a small piece of flint and a piece of a silver coin (minted in the period 955-975), probably the remains of a pouch. A smutty soap stone cauldron lay near the foot end. Other items were a spear head and the remains of another, a small tin ring, a small agate stone and an iron fragment with a bronze nail (Eldjárn 2000: 231-232; Holt 2000: 90; Kristjánsdóttir 1996, 1998). Osteological analysis indicated that the interred was male and 30-40 years old (Kolonowsky 1996 in Kristjánsdóttir 1998: 2).

KT-145, VAÐ

An eroded and badly preserved grave (Kt-145:1) was discovered and excavated (by laymen) in 1894 at the farm Vað in South-Múlasýsla, East Iceland. In 1986 another grave (Kt-145:2) was discovered in the same area,

about 200 m NNW of the farm, just outside the home field, by the old communication routes through the Skriðdalur valley. Just under the surface was an irregular oblong layer of stones covering a grave. It contained a relatively well preserved human skeleton lying on

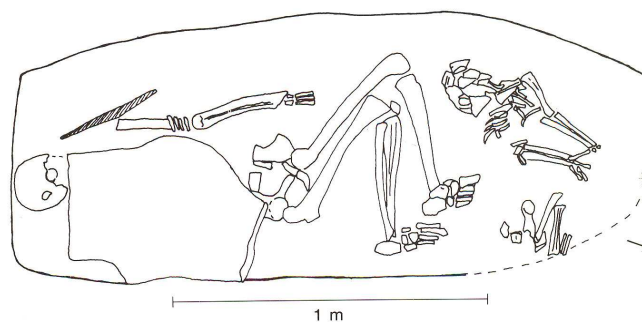


Fig.13: Grave at Vað (Kt-145:2) (Kristinsdóttir 1988: 93).

the left side with the head in the south end and feet flexed. The upper part of the body was covered by a colourful rhyolite slab. Another similar slab had obviously covered the lower part as well but was now shattered. A whetstone was found lying in front of the skull, and seemed unused. Some traces of wood and a nail possibly indicated that the grave was furnished with wooden boards. A dog skeleton lay crosswise in the grave's foot end. Analysis of the skeleton indicated that the animal had been old when killed by a blow on the head (Kristinsdóttir 1988: 89-95). Osteological analysis indicated that the interred was male and 36-45 years old (Gestsdóttir 1998).

KT-151, ÁLAUGAREY

A grave was discovered during road constructions in 1934 in Álaugarey, a small and uninhabited island in the land of Hafnarnes in Hornafjörður, SE-Iceland. A low heap of soil covered the grave which was close to the shore on the northern tip of the island and had been disturbed considerably. It contained a human skeleton which seemed to have been

lying with the head in the east end. Grave goods were not intact but were as follows; an iron spit, two oval brooches of bronze, an arm ring of lignite or jet, a bone comb, iron shears, a knife, two iron rings (possibly of the shears), some iron fragments and fragments of textile (Eldjárn 2000: 240-241; Þórðarson 1936b: 32-34). The lignite arm ring is the only one of its kind found in Iceland and is most probably originated in the British Isles (Eldjárn 2000: 390; Hayeur Smith 2004: 45). Osteological analysis indicated that the interred was female, 36-45 years old (Gestsdóttir 1998).



Fig.14: Arm ring from Álaugarey (Kt-151) (Eldjárn 2000: 390).

KT-155, HRÍFUNES

A burial ground with five graves was discovered in the period 1958-1982 at the farm Hrífunes in Vestur-Skaftafellssýsla, East of Mýrdalsjökull in South Iceland. The farm is by the river Hólmsá and the graves were exposed one by one on the gradually eroding banks of the river.

Kt-155:1 was excavated 1958. An unusual oblong stone setting of small water worn stones was arranged around it. In the west end a 0.5 m high stone slab was placed edgewise in the arranged setting. Inside the stone setting was an oval grave containing the remains of a horse resting on one

side. A bridle bit was found among its bones as well as an iron buckle. Eldjárn declared that the horse must have accompanied a buried man or woman, although no

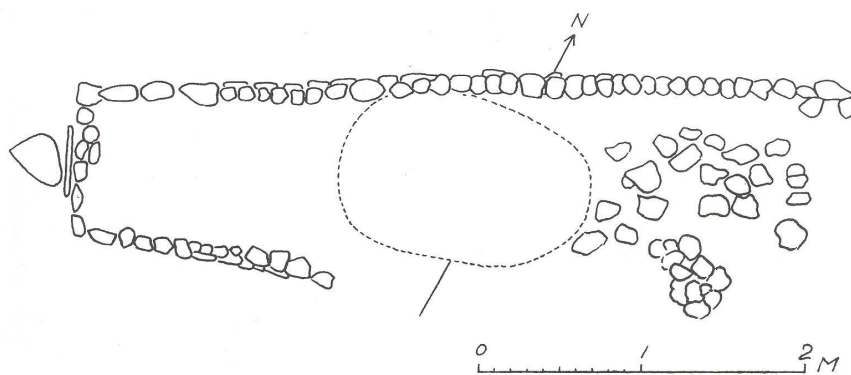


Fig.15: Horse grave at Hrífunes (Kt-155:1) (Eldjárn 2000: 245).

graves were found in its vicinity (Eldjárn 1966: 59-62).

Kt-155:2 was discovered 1978, about 30-40 m west of the horse grave. It had been almost completely washed away by the river and the only thing recovered were pieces of a young child's cranium, most likely in its first year (Eldjárn 1984b: 6-7).

Kt-155:3 was discovered in 1981, about 50 m west of grave 1 and 10-20 m west of grave 2. The grave had a core of large boulders and contained a poorly preserved human skeleton, not intact. Whether grave goods were intact was hard to tell, but they were found near mid grave and most of them bundled together in a lump of soil, possibly the remains of a pouch. These items were a strike-a-light, five small pieces of red jasper, a small oval basalt stone which Eldjárn interpreted as a possible amulet, a lead weight, and a small unidentified lead plate. Other things found in the grave may originally have been in the pouch but moved as the burial may have been plundered. These were four pieces of lead (possibly weights), a small unidentified lead plate, an iron fragment and a rivet (Eldjárn 1984b: 12-18). Osteological analysis did not reveal sex or age of the interred (Gestsdóttir 1998).

Two additional graves were discovered in the same area in 1982, but their exact location in relation to the previously found graves is not specified. *Kt-155:4* had a stone core and contained a horse skeleton. The horse had been beheaded and was laid almost on its back with the head behind the neck. A bridle bit was found in its mouth and some deformed rusted iron lumps, most probably remains of a saddle, were also in the grave. Magnússon declared that the horse must have accompanied a man or a woman buried close by, although no graves were found in its vicinity (Magnússon 1984: 22-27).

Kt-155:5 was about 40 m SSW of grave 4. A double layer of stones covered the grave, the lower consisting of robust lava slabs and the upper of water worn stones from the river. In the grave was a poorly preserved skeleton of one individual lying on the left side with the head in the north end and feet flexed. Eleven glass beads were found by the person's neck. Nine were blue and two were heavily oxidized and turned grey. A knife was also found by the person's waist (Gestsson 1984: 28-30). Osteological analysis indicated that the interred was probably female and 36-45 years old (Gestsdóttir 1998).

SUMMARY NOTES

The most striking feature of this material, as of the whole corpus, is the abundance of horses and the various, but still regular, ways of their deposition. In some instances the proximity or even physical relation between horse and person is such that the two cannot possibly be disentangled and viewed separately. The same can be said of dogs, which almost invariably

lie by the person's feet, or even under and between the person's feet. In other instances the horse seems to be in no observable relation to a human grave and yet, instead of considering these graves as those of any other individual, these animals are always treated as belonging to a (known or unknown) human grave in their vicinity.

The careful arrangement of all the constituents in the grave collective is also noteworthy. This does not only demonstrate the close and entangled relations between the items and the deceased but also the significance this display may have had for those constructing the grave. It seems obvious that the act of burial was not trivial nor the deposition of things and animals an incidental practice. It is my impression that when presented in this way, on its own terms and without comparison to other areas or traditions, the material is not poor, simple or homogenous, but on the contrary. There is a considerable variation within the corpus, as well as there are clear recurring traits which deserve a closer look.

7. RE-ANIMATING MORTUARY REMAINS IN A BROADER CONTEXT

When the material from the Icelandic Viking Age graves is (re)considered on its own terms and without, hopefully, too much prescribed values or hierarchies of significance, it becomes clear that the material itself refutes assertions of homogeneity, poorness or simplicity. When our focus is on the variation and qualities within this corpus, the graves actually appear as very complex and their interpretive potential suddenly becomes enormous. Moreover, if we just allow the material to *act* upon us, we also have to take seriously the way it challenges our conventional, modern way of thinking. Conceived from the mortuary remains the taken for granted spilt image of the world as composed of the discrete realms of nature and culture, object and subject, animality and humanity, becomes rather blurred. In the following discussion I will accept this challenge and attempt to proceed to an alternative view of the burials and their significance. Hence, instead of splitting up the different constituents and force them into their “proper” ontological settlements, or into a hierarchy of value and significance, I will employ a more symmetrical attitude of reasoning, a “semiotic insight” (Law 1999: 4), and consequently acknowledge their transgression and enmeshed relations. This, I believe, will lead to both a more challenging and more rewarding interpretation of the burials and their material culture.

In this sense it is important that we do not think of the graves as closed time capsules, but in a much broader context – as dynamic and relational collectives composed of different parts which prior to, during and after their gathering and concealing are always *in* the world as animate and relational entities. Before moving to the material at hand let us thus start with a more general but critical consideration of the ritual itself, the act of burial, and how it has been perceived and defined within scholarly research.

RITUAL PRACTICES – DISPOSING OF THE DEAD

Death is a universal phenomenon and different forms of ritual practises surrounding the disposal of dead bodies exist and have existed in more or less all societies. The nature of “ritual” has been defined in various differing ways, such as mere function, as an ideologically grounded and sacred act, as prescribed practice or as negotiated process (Schechner 1988). Turner (1967: 19) defined ritual as “...prescribed formal behaviour for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical

beings or powers.” This definition is based on, and underlines, a division between a sacred sphere, where the ritual resides, and a profane sphere of society, within which everyday practices fall. Today however, it is widely recognized that in many non-western and non-capitalist societies there exists no formal distinction between the sacred and the profane, or between what is considered ritual and what is secular. What we like to define as ritual practice can therefore not be extracted from the broader social context but must be understood in relation to its other domains. Recent theoretical notions have hence emphasized the ritual more as a process than a restricted category of practice with prescribed functions and objectives. In tandem with this Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994) have defined ritual as a certain quality which in principle can be ascribed to any form of practice. The ritual is then no longer a category of practices but a way of implementing practice, which furthermore is constantly open to redefinition and change. Instead of conceiving of ritual as a passive and repetitive pattern it is considered dynamic and variable as a result of the different social aspects and experiences the actors bring to it (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994: 80). Considering this, the way the Icelandic Viking Age graves have been treated seems rather restrictive. It is as if “the Viking Age” included one prescribed ritual performance concerning the disposal of the dead, and that any deviation from this therefore has to be regarded as some sort of incapacity to follow the “right” recipe, rather than being recognized as a significant trait in it self.

In an archaeological context it is the physical residues of the ritual that are employed to inform of the practice and material culture is generally believed to be an important part of it. According to Turner (1967: 19) “[t]he symbol is the smallest unit of ritual which still retains the specific properties of ritual behaviour: it is the ultimate unit of a specific structure in a ritual context.” He defines a symbol as a thing which is generally recognized as typifying, recalling or representing something else “...by possession of analogous qualities or by association in fact or thought” (Turner 1967: 19). Although more recent studies have emphasized the symbol’s ambiguous and contested meaning, it is mainly *as symbols* that the material culture of graves has been considered. So, the material culture is important in the ritual to make present that which isn’t physically there – as a “stand in” for some other essence and largely without any significance in itself beyond representation. I think, as for the matter of Icelandic graves and grave goods, this is a far too constraining and narrow position.

In order to underline the significant roles of various objects in the early Icelandic society, let us look at the gift bestowal frequently mentioned in the Sagas of Icelanders. I

believe invoking this central theme in the Sagas, with a focus on the object, can serve as ballast for a rethinking of the meaning, nature and role of early Icelandic material culture and of people's relations to it – and hence, of how things *came to be* goods in the graves of the dead.

OBJECTS IN ACTION IN EARLY ICELANDIC SOCIETY

In the written sources we read about the society established in the earliest phase of the Icelandic settlement. As discussed earlier (see chapter 2) this was a headless society where formal governance was based on a system of annual meetings and the political leadership was in the hands of chieftains. People were tied together through relationships of various kind, for example kin, marriages, oaths and friendship. Of these relationships friendship in particular was of central importance (Sigurðsson 1992: 205). It was a formalized relationship and often used to strengthen other bonds as between a chieftain and his followers or between relatives. Although it is mostly mentioned in connection with free farmers and chieftains, friendship between women, men and women and involving children also appears. Gift exchange and feasts were the formal ways of forming and maintaining friendship (Sigurðsson 1995: 325-328). These bonds between people were of immense social significance in a society devoid of a common executive power, where one's ability to act was based on assembled support from others.

The verses of *Hávamál* as well as the Sagas suggest that friendship and gift exchange were integral components of the social structure, where the passing of a gift did not mark the end of interaction but the creation of a relationship between those involved. However, to most scholars dealing with gift exchange the driving force and determining factor in the system are the social relations between persons and their stabilizing effect (see e.g. Mauss 1990 [1925]), while the significance of the objects in circulation is underestimated (Samson 1991: 92). The same holds for Russian historian Aron Gurevich (1968, 1992) who has studied gift exchange in Scandinavian societies in particular. He proclaims that "...it was, indeed, through these actions [the exchange of objects and women] that the socio-psychological unity of social groups was established" (Gurevich 1992: 189). However, he states, "...the exchange of objects was frequently irrational, if regarded from the point of view of their material value. What mattered was not the transferred object itself, but the persons who owned the object and the fact that they had chosen to transfer it" (Gurevich 1992: 179).

Obviously, the decision and intention to transfer an object resided in people. Yet, it nevertheless involved the *movement* of an object. If the formal practice of establishing a relationship or friendship between two persons would have been possible *without* the material component of gift exchange, it would probably have been done. Thus, the object was not just an incidental substitute, a “stand-in”, which represented “social” relations and transactions, but was in itself of central importance in the establishment and maintenance of the relationship – without it the relation was unthinkable. Through the act of bestowing, the donor deliberately involved the object and delegated to it the task and responsibility of reinforcing, through its “steely quality”, the relation (Latour 2005: 68). A friendship, or any other relation, was therefore not formed between two parts in a vacuum but through collective interactions between entities of things and people. The objects were not abstracted, incidental things but constantly engaged, concrete manifestations, and thus fundamental parts of these associations. Without them the structures would vanish or fail, or to repeat the words of Latour; “Society is not what holds us together, it is what is held together” (Latour 1986: 276).

This is well represented in the term “*nautr*” which was often applied to weapons or other objects bestowed. As an example a sword given by a certain Ólafur could be named “*sverðið Ólafsnautr*” meaning “the sword that Ólafur gave”. However, the term *nautr* has two other meanings. First, it can mean “*gefandi*” or “giver”; secondly, and more importantly, it can mean “*félagi, einkum í samsetningum*” or “partner, mainly in combinations/associations” (Böðvarsson 1990). The object, in this example a sword, is obviously part of the collective association. It is partner of both the donor and receiver and materially what ties them together. If we bear in mind the dispersed settlements of early Iceland and the often long distances between people the role of the object exchanged becomes even more apparent. Not the least in relation to the bond between a chieftain and his followers which was one of the most important. Unlike most historically known chieftaincies the Icelandic chieftaincy was not based on geographical units and farmers were free to choose which chieftain to follow. The result was that chieftains were not necessarily surrounded by their followers and could easily lose them to other chieftains in their closer vicinity. The direct “face-to-face” interaction between parts did most likely not occur regularly which makes the gift appear as even more important.

The transfer of objects is apparent in many contexts but also seems strongly connected to the rituals surrounding the transitional moments (“life-crisis”) in a person’s life – what Arnold van Gennep (1960 [1909]) called “the rites of passage”. These are sacred

arenas, in relation to for example birth, marriage or death, where a person's identity and relations to other persons are transformed. Some rites of passage, like mortuary rites, will also assemble the community in concern and reinforce or alter relations within it. This was the case in Viking Age Iceland where the majority of graves can be related to a specific farm and, according to the written sources, the burial was usually handled by the deceased's closest relatives. The tradition was to hold a feast (*erfi*) in honour of the deceased in relation to his/her burial to which a great number of people were often invited. In *Laxdæla saga* a two weeks long feast was held in relation to Höskuldur's burial to which 900 people attended. On departure the important guests were then sent away with gifts (Kålund 1870: 377).

On a person's death the social relations and institutions that person was part of were left unbalanced. It was therefore important that the survivors gathered around the deceased's body to reconsider, reconstruct and reinforce these relations, for example through the formal way of transferring objects. Thus, the burial was not necessarily a sacred gathering as we would define it, but often a highly political matter. Decisions had to be made concerning the fate of the powerful material objects (often of strategic political significance) in the deceased's possession. Who were to take her/his place in these relations by being bestowed this ring, sword, brooch, or spear? Or, alternatively, which objects/animals were to follow the deceased to the other side? That the *erfi* could take up to two weeks is understandable as there was hardly consensus on how to act. That was for example the case at Gunnar's burial in *Njáls saga* where his mother Rannveig and his son Högni disagreed on whether Gunnar's halberd was to accompany him in the grave or not. Rannveig wanted to behold it for Gunnar's revenge, while Högni thought his father should have it by his side in *Valhöll* (Böðvarsson 1971). Those familiar with *Njáls saga* know the significant role of this weapon as a "biographical object" (Morin 1969) and although disagreeing both Högni and Rannveig underline the same thing: that Gunnar and his halberd *are one*. Without the other they are incomplete and therefore the weapon should accompany Gunnar in the grave. At the same time, as part of Gunnar the halberd is also the ultimate weapon for his revenge.

Considering the gift exchange is one way of underlining the significant role of objects in Viking Age Iceland as well as their transitional status in between social beings and mere inanimate things. An object's value was not only of economic or symbolic character but arose from the actual interactions it confronted and was part of. As such, the value of the gift was as much its materiality, the fact that it was there and was seen, and moreover that it would last as a material reminder of the relation and its debt. Through their

circulation the objects could accumulate long and complex biographies, and at the same time be important biographical objects in the lives of their human partners. They were parts of persons, or even persons themselves, and were the centre of attention during the burial and *erfi*.

THE VISUAL *RE-MEMBERING* OF THE DEAD

My grandmother once told me that she actually avoided visiting my grandfather's grave because she felt she could not remember him there, as she on the other hand was capable of at home, among the things he left behind. Her words kept coming to my mind while considering these graves and their material culture. What distinguishes a Viking Age burial from a Christian one is not merely the use of grave goods but more importantly the visual demonstration of those objects and animals in relation to the dead body. During a Christian (Lutheran) burial we do not usually see the dead, and that admittedly affects our experience of the whole ceremony. The reason my grandmother can not remember my grandfather at his grave is maybe because he actually wasn't *re-membered* there in the same way as for example the young boy in the grave at Hemla (Kt-5:1) or the woman at Kornsó (Kt-63). As claimed by Strathern (1981: 219) funerals often remember the dead by bringing together the parts they demonstrated in life and thereby reconfiguring them as whole persons.

The example from Gunnar's burial in *Njáls saga* demonstrates just this, where Gunnar was considered incomplete without his halberd, because the weapon was and contained a biographical part of who he was. This is also apparent in several examples where people wish to be buried with certain artefacts or animals. As argued for earlier in the thesis (cf. chapter 4) the ambiguous presence of the dead body is important in this relation and must not be overlooked. Although the dead do not bury themselves their transitional being is what drives the action and ties together those fulfilling it. In the case of Gunnar, it is therefore his physical remains, his body and his weapon, that silently insist on being reunited and buried side by side. In relation to this it is also tempting to suggest that the fact that the corpse could not be seen in the coffin burials at Smyrlaberg (Kt-65) and Hemla (Kt-5:2) was one of the reasons why only one single knife and no goods at all, respectively, were deposited with those interred.

In addition, the reuniting of a distributed whole through the deposition of artefacts and animals with the dead also created a new context – a new collective. Although all components may have been parts of the same whole the entities may also have been

entangled in their own separate relations. Thus, to the place of deposition each of them may have brought its own life history, "...a series of networks of significance, involving places, the personal histories of people, substances, skills and symbolic references" (Thomas 1996: 159). This could further have affected which parts could be deposited together and which had to be passed on. Furthermore, the gathering and confrontations of the different parts and their active role in the ritual process would have added to their separate and collective biographies and altered their identities.

As discussed in chapter 4 we can obviously never be certain whether the things in a grave relate to the interred, or in what way. However, as Thomas (1996: 169) has argued "[t]he physical proximity of things forges a relationship between them" and especially so, he claims, when the gathering is achieved within some sort of a performative practice. Importantly however, the whole dimension of these relationships, as for example between the elements of a burial, would not have been available to everyone present. Conditioned by the personal knowledge and life histories of the participants, as well as the objects exhibited, the range of relations evoked was almost infinite, and would at the same time have involved a certain degree of secrecy. It was as impossible for those participating as it is to us to identify the whole scope of identities and relations entangled, while the material actually at hand does give us reasons to infer.

The construction of a grave was therefore not about capturing a moment in time, or demonstrating a neat and symmetrical image of the deceased. Just as our material being the grave is a whirlpool of elements from different times and places entangled together in webs of interactions that reach beyond distinctions between past and present, life and death (Witmore 2005; Latour 1993: 72-76). The closest example is to think of the different origins of the elements in a grave. In the "rich" grave at Ketilsstaðir (Kt-142) the deceased was accompanied by things such as an uncommon type of oval brooches of Scandinavian origin, a trefoil brooch of Frankish origin, an amber bead of Baltic origin, two whetstones and a spindle-whorl most likely of Norwegian origin and a small stalagmite stone which presumably was Icelandic. Each would have travelled through the hands of many, a jeweller, a trader, a buyer, a receiver and so on, before being deposited in the grave in Fljótsdalur. And with each lap of their journey their appearance may have changed and their identities altered. Thus, as argued by Holtorf (2002: 55), to understand these ancient artefacts is not just to assume *what they are* but also to try to comprehend the networks and relations which these objects granted with and gained their meaning from.

Let us just imagine the life history of one of these objects: Originally the trefoil brooch, now stored in a box in the National Museum in Reykjavík, may have been a piece of raw copper kicked around on the floor in a Frankish workshop. On a cold winter morning it was noticed, picked up, melted and mixed with an old and worn tin ring and moulded by the jeweller herself. Through her elaborate workmanship it soon transformed into a beautiful piece of art which the following spring accompanied her to the market, now as a commodity. A foreign traveller fell for its acanthus motifs and bought it for his daughter awaiting his return on an island far north. On his way over the sea the traveller kept the little brooch in his pouch along with the three small stones he had collected by the riverside in Fljótisdalur on his day of departure. On arrival the brooch was no longer a commodity but an inalienable object, a memento of foreign places and a safe return as well as a gift manifesting a cherished relation. Years went by and further added to the brooch's biography while at the same time it contained in itself memories of several pasts of whom many may have been evoked among those present on the day of its burial. During road constructions in 1938 the brooch revealed itself again, was recovered, conserved, measured and analysed and finally gained its "right" place in the neat typological collection of the National Museum. For the first time in its life it became "ÞJMS 12436: *A trefoil brooch dated to the 10th century*" – and just that.

One could argue that through the visual staging of the burial the deceased person, object and animal were offered a place in eternity. Through *re-membering* them in the survivors' presence the later concealed grave became a place of remembrance for this person, animals and things as well as the various relationships and complex networks they were parts of. In relation to this it is interesting to recall the stanza from *Hávamál* discussed in the introduction:

*Deyr fé,
deyja frændr,
deyr sjalfr it sama,
en orðstírr
deyr aldregi,
hveim er sér góðan getr.*

(*Hávamál* 76 in Jónsson 1924)

The verse begins with the inevitable fact "*deyr fé, deyja frændr*" and it is the term "*fé*" that I find interesting. In modern Icelandic it signifies either capital (money) or livestock while originally it also included valuables in other form, as for example elaborate things (Fritzner

1867; Heggstad 1930). So, *fé* dies and friends die while “*orðstírr*”, or reputation, never dies. This means that objects could have been considered *mortal* beings (and hence animate). As animals and people they could gain immortal reputation through their lifelong service and loyalty. In fact, in the Sagas we hear of the names given to weapons, as *Kvernbit*, *Tyrving* and *Grásiða* (Gansum and Hansen 2002: 16-17), which alone bestows them with an identity. Furthermore these objects are often described as personifying some of their owners’ characteristics and qualities or even to contain a part of the person’s who employed them (Gurevich 1992: 180), and hence had a personality. Objects like the elaborate sword from Kaldárhöfði (Kt-37), the unusual spear from Tindar (Kt-66), the oval and trefoil brooches from Ketilsstaðir (Kt-142), the tongue shaped brooches and the red jasper bead from Kornsa (Kt-63) and the lignite arm ring from Álaugarey (Kt-151) are of such character or rarity that their identity, even their name, and their reputation may have been known by many. The fact that the corpus comprises very few such elaborate things can only strengthen such an argument. The presence of such renowned and powerful artefacts, would have affected the burial ceremony in various ways, not least considering whether they were to be buried or passed on.

However, it is hard to imagine that the presence of such elaborate things or their performative significance in the open grave would have been of a symbolical nature only. Although gender, status or power may have been signaled through their placement on or by the deceased’s body, their presence was not symbolical but material. And it was in fact through their materiality that their value was gained. The immediate significance of the object or animal was therefore not related to some external essence but to its literal presence – the fact that *just this* sword, horse or brooch was there, was seen and was recognized. Rather than being a metaphor for something absent I believe it was the object itself and its life history of gathered relations that was of significance, and brought meaning to the collective it became part of.

One element which strengthens this argument is the so called “*haugbrot*” or the plundering of graves. This was a well known phenomenon in the Viking world and is mentioned in many of the written sources. Viking Age Iceland seems to be no exception and a large proportion of the graves indicate just this. Bjørn Myhre (1994), among others, has questioned whether this activity can in all instances be explained by reference to material profit and has instead suggested that *haugbrot* may have been systematic and socially accepted in relation to, for example, the transmission and establishment of power. That in order to legitimize new or continuing authority certain artefacts were acquired and employed

in order to gain historical confirmation and a chain of relations that reached beyond the present – even beyond the world of the living. The fact that plundered graves are not emptied of artefacts also supports the idea that those plundering were seeking specific significant things, of which existence they may have known. This is, for example, apparent in the case of the burial ground at Ytra-Garðshorn (Kt-87) where all graves but one had been plundered at some point in time. Obviously we do not know the original amount of grave goods in the graves, however, most of them had not been emptied. Even more striking was that in five of seven plundered graves containing a horse and human, the horse's part of the grave was left completely intact. Thus, it seems clear that the intention was not to destroy the graves, but rather to systematically get hold of specific artefacts of significance.

If we accept that graves may often have been systematically broken (*brot*) into with this intention it is also obvious that the value of the object desired was not merely symbolical. If a sword or an oval brooch had merely been a symbol of power then *any* sword or brooch could have been used to signalize and legitimize authority – because it would not have been the object itself but its recognition as a symbol that was of significance. When an artefact is retrieved from a grave something different is clearly going on. It was obviously not the symbolical value of *any* sword that was of importance, but the actual significance of *a specific sword* that was desired – a specific sword that was recognized not merely as a symbol but as an individual in itself, which through a lifetime of relations had gained a unique status among all swords. Through its re-employment this artefact became a member of a new relation to which it brought a vast network of alliances that crosscut the borders of past and present, life and death. Through those alliances the sword did not just signalize power or authority, but rather *brought* power and authority, and it did not just signalize a historical confirmation but brought with it stability and legitimization. It was therefore the artefact as an individual and powerful partner in the association at hand that was of importance and not its categorization as “a sword” or its estimated commercial value – and hence its place could not be filled just with any other sword.

Haugbrot also points towards another important characteristic of things – their immortality. Having just said, with reference to *Hávamál*, that things may have been considered *mortal* beings, this may sound ambiguous or even contradictory. However, rather than seeing this as incompatible properties, it pinpoints the controversial, or rather transitional nature of things. So, while things may have a life and a biography that includes “death” and burial, they do not cease to exist but remain in their materiality for times to come. And it is in this element of “stubbornness”, of *relative* immortality, that some of their

strength truly lies. While much else is transient these material manifestations are persistent and are able to bring stability to ever new presents because they store in themselves the power of past relations, institutions, associations and networks gained through their active interactions with us truly mortal beings.

ANCHORS IN PEOPLE'S LIFE AND DEATH

So far in this discussion I have focused more or less on the public significance of things on a macro-social level, with reference to the more elaborate and exclusive objects of the corpus. Furthermore, these are things that through their employment and active part in interactions have gained a unique and valued status among objects and can therefore be conceived of as actors themselves and bearers of biographies. A far larger proportion of the grave goods is however of a more simple and inconspicuous character. Thus, in the following discussion I want to reorient my focus from the official and exclusive actors to a more localized and personal scale and the everyday material actors within it. It must be marked that when I distinguish between public and private scales I do not wish to create any “great divide” between categories of things but only see those as abstract but convenient reference points when discussing multi-scalar agencies of things. If I borrow the words of Latour then the truth is that “...there have never been [-] anything but elements that elude the system...” (Latour 1993: 75) and this is no exception. While the things discussed so far may have been active on a more formal and official level, they could at the same time serve as important “autobiographical tools” in the personal lives of their partners. Just as the identity of an object can be altered between contexts or through time so can also the agency of an object be influential in different ways and on different levels.

As argued for earlier (cf. chapter 4) things not only bring stability to society or other large scale social relations but also to our local and personal lives. In Viking Age Iceland I think this impact of the material world would have been more conscious to people than it is in the Western world today. The closeness and constant interactions with nature, animals and everyday things was essential in the construction of identity and these elements therefore came to contain the key parts of personal self discovery and definition – “...a way of knowing oneself through things” (Hoskins 1998: 198).

If we recall Violette Morin's (1969) definition of biographical objects, they are the things with whom we share our lives, which grow old and fade alongside us and reflect our own life and age. Through our intimate relations with these objects they become the

everyday anchors of our transient existence by absorbing and holding on to the passing moments of our lives and hence make sure that we do not lose sight of who we are and where we come from. It is reasonable to suggest that in a newly established society, as the Icelandic settlement was, the significance of such personal anchors would have been particularly apparent. In a matter of only sixty years the whole island was settled by people from various parts of Norway and other regions of Scandinavia as well as the British Isles. In the turmoil of social construction within this multicultural flow of land claimers – on a foreign island that ruptured and exploded in flames and boiling water – small and mundane things may actually have become the strongholds in people's lives.

In his article “Mementoes as Transitional Objects in Human Displacement” David Parkin (1999) discusses the significance of things in cases of human displacement and in relation to refugees in particular. He has registered that under conditions of flight or immediate departure people do not just grab what they absolutely need for subsistence “...but also, if they can, articles of sentimental value which both inscribe and are inscribed by their own memories of self and personhood” (Parkin 1999: 304). So, when faced with total dispossession people hold on to their precluded identity and cultural knowledge by “...merging it in the materiality of concrete objects...” from where it may be retrieved when the circumstances allow (Parkin 1999: 318). I will not proclaim that the settlers of Iceland were refugees, although written sources would in some instances allow it. Nevertheless, I believe Parkin's ideas around human displacement to be a relevant perspective when discussing the earliest settlement of Iceland. Until recently the material culture of graves in Iceland has only been used to infer the settlers' origin and time of arrival and the recurrent conclusion has been that they arrived at the close of the 9th century, predominantly from Norway. If we stretch this a bit further, and move away from conceptions of material culture as static capsules of one particular time and place, we can see these objects as material mementoes brought from one place to another in order to contain and stabilize both individual and collective identity.

In her doctoral thesis on jewellery, gender and identity in Viking Age Iceland Hayeur Smith (2004) suggests that objects of Scandinavian origin may have become more valuable than insular items because of their relation to “the land of origin”. I agree with Hayeur Smith although I am critical to declarations of *a land* of origin. In my opinion objects with histories, irrespective of their origin, would rather have become sentimentally valuable on a local level as mementoes of *a place* left behind, personal identity, and relations. I believe the object's visible origin rather became an important aspect on a more

official level, where the collective identity of a group had to be materially manifested and stabilized in confrontations with other groups. This because there was not just one place of origin but many. However, what the material culture of the graves often indicates is not a wish to visually demonstrate *a particular origin* but rather a hybrid material being in a whirlpool of origins. These collectives of things of Norwegian, Scandinavian, insular, local or other origin cannot be reduced to the simple and suitable conclusion that the society was “predominantly Norwegian”. Irrespective of ratios they rather show that it actually was a hybrid conglomeration of all.

So far I have emphasized the demonstrative power of the burial on different levels and the significance of the elements *seen*, separately as well as in relation to each other. However, not everything was visible during the ceremony. The contents of pouches or small bags carried in the belt, documented in several instances represent such a case. Another example is the contents of small wooden chests documented in a few graves, albeit in both instances the visibility of the container may have evoked thoughts among those present and furthered the degree of secrecy. The content of pouches is usually a collective of a few small items, often everyday things like strike-a-lights with pieces of flint or jasper, combs, weights, spindle whorls, knives or shears, but also items of a less obvious function as small stones of unusual colour or form, conches, broken beads or pieces of coins. In his description of the Selfoss grave (Kt-26:1) Eldjárn declared that the various small items found in the person’s pouch, a few dark pebbles, a transparent stone, a conch, and two more unusual stones, were nothing but worthless reflections of eccentricity and superstition (Eldjárn 1966: 10). In his doctoral thesis (Eldjárn 1956), as well as in its republication (Eldjárn 2000), these items are completely ignored. However, my own study of the corpus revealed that such items are actually among the most commonly found grave goods. They are documented in 21 graves, but are most likely underrepresented as they can easily be overlooked or ignored during excavations.

It is true that the worth and utility of these small items may be less apparent than for example that of an exclusive sword, a brooch or a cauldron. I would nevertheless argue that their value was significant although in a different way and on a different level. During the burial these items were not meant for display and so, their identities or meanings were not really open to considerations or negotiation. The reason may have been that their life histories were known and entangled with the biography and identity of one person only, whom they now accompanied in death as they had through life. Maybe these invisible small items as contrasted with those displayed in the grave refer to different sides of being a

person and constructing an identity in Viking Age Iceland. On one side you have the public person and identity which bases itself on alliances and relations and is therefore, as argued by Strathern (1988) and Gell (1998), “distributed” into, or “extended” to, mobile and *immortal* material actors, often of exclusive and recognizable character and whose united display during the funeral was a socially vital act. On the other hand you have the local and private identity, which, although based on interactions and relations with different elements, was not public or diffused and therefore did not have the same need for visible *remembering* or recognition.

What we know of people’s beliefs and Nordic mythology through written sources indicates that death was not considered a final end but rather the beginning of a journey into a new existence, and grave goods are often perceived of as symbolic expressions of this. But if we take seriously the belief in death as transition or displacement, could we then maybe apply Parkin’s discussion of human displacement also with regard to this final journey? I would like to suggest that also here the mundane artefacts of everyday life, and the small personal items carried in ones belt, served as transitional objects merging mementoes of personal identity, relations and belonging. That through the transitional and often precarious voyage between worlds their materiality would hold on to those memories and on safe arrival allow for their re-articulation. Only in two instances are artefacts said to seem unused, the whetstone from Vað (Kt-145) and the knife from Hrólfsstaðir (Kt-131). More often things are described as “old and worn” or otherwise bear signs of long use, as for example the fixed comb from Hrólfsstaðir (Kt-131), the whetstone and knife from Stóri-Klofi (Kt-18:1), the belt-buckle from Traðarholt (Kt-25:3), the smutty soap stone cauldron from Eyrarteigur (Kt-144) and the modified weight-pearl from Brimnes (Kt-89:1). These items bear the visual imprints of their long life in people’s service, which gives us reason to believe that their story or identity is not told by our classification and recognition of them as “a comb”, “a knife” or “a pebble”. The same is to say about artefacts as the spear and axe from Kaldárhöfði (Kt-37) and the axe from Straumur (Kt-134) which through their unusual smallness also bear a physically recognizable relation to the young persons they accompany. Rather, it is only when we acknowledge the person-thing relation displayed as real and valid that we can start to infer their entangled life histories and how they in tandem composed the identity of both.

LIMINAL BEINGS IN LIFE AND DEATH

The remaining part of this discussion I want to devote mostly to the horses, which are the most striking feature of the Icelandic graves and distinguish them from burial customs in other parts of the Viking world. This most evident characteristic has not been given much thought by scholars but more often explained away as an incidental and meaningless trait reflecting the general poorness and simplicity of the corpus. In an article on the Icelandic horse in 1981 Eldjárn proclaimed that the abundance of horses in Icelandic graves could most likely be explained by the large quantity of horses from early on in the settlement, which had made it economically favourable to deposit them in the graves with the dead (Eldjárn 1981: 4). More recently, a similar opinion has been expressed by Vésteinsson (2000: 170).

Horses appear in all types of graves in Iceland. While rich graves often contain a horse they appear irrespective of “wealth” and there are instances where the horse is the only grave goods. Horses are likewise found in graves of both men and women and within all age groups (except 0-2 years of whom we only have two burials). Generally horses in graves have often been related to warfare and having said that they appear irrespective of age or gender there is still a noticeable correlation between weaponry and horses. Six graves out of the whole corpus contain full panoply of which five also contained a horse (Kt-40, 98:1+4, 117, 144,), while the sixth contained a boat (Kt-37). Other well armed graves, as those at Hemla (Kt-5:1) and Galtalækur (Kt-17) also contained horses, while an exception from this is for example the grave at Öndverðarnes (Kt-47). The fact that horses are present in most “rich” as well as well armed graves may indicate that there was a stronger correlation between higher status and possession of horses, while still exhibiting a relatively “egalitarian” pattern of accompaniment.

Generally the presence of horses as well as boats in graves is often interpreted as the symbolical expressions or metaphor for the conception of death as a journey between the world of the living and the world of the dead. As referred to earlier in the chapter Turner’s (1967: 19) definition of a symbol was something that could typify, recall or represent something else “...by possession of analogous qualities or by association in fact or thought”. As the only vehicle of transport in Viking Age Iceland, apart from the boat, it is not hard to imagine that the horse was the ultimate symbol for the passage between life and death. Nonetheless, as with the objects deposited in Icelandic graves I believe reducing the abundance of horses to a mere symbolical significance would be as restrictive as claiming that their deposition was simply economically favourable.

Kristin Oma (2000, 2001, 2004) has studied the various manifestations of the horse in the Nordic Iron Age as expressed through graves and offerings, arts and ornamentation as well as written sources. Despite her general perception that horses deposited or sacrificed in graves and other contexts can hardly be seen as “anything but symbols” (Oma 2001: 40) many of her observations are very interesting and useful. Studying the different source material Oma recognized a clear pattern apparent through the whole period where the horse was seen in constant movement between contrasting spheres as those of night and day, gods (*æsir*) and giants (*jötnar*) and, not the least, between life and death (Oma 2004: 74). The horse, moreover, often appeared as an essential element in ritual performances where the clear objective was to crosscut boundaries between these worlds (Oma 2001: 45). With reference to van Gennep (1960) Oma (2000: 86-88; 2004: 75) has suggested that the horse in these contexts may be thought of as the “guard” or “sovereign” over the liminal passages – the no-man’s-lands between distinct domains – and as the essential means for crosscutting these often transcendental and precarious borders. *Edda* contains many tales of such liminal zones in form of unknown areas beyond the cultivated lands, often referred to as *Myrskógur* or dark forests. When passing through these interspaces the horse is often the key factor in bringing its rider safely from one world to another. Yet an example of the horse’s transcendental power is in the liminal state between life and death where the horse could bring the dead from their graves and the living into the world of the dead (Oma 2001: 43-44). Through these examples Oma infers that the horse symbolized a possibility of interspatial and cosmological movement and hence was a significant element in ritual practice, and not least in relation to burials.

Kristina Jennbert (2002) has also studied the essential part various kinds of animals, and particularly horses, played within pre-Christian mythology. According to her (2002: 118) the written sources often indicate that the boundaries between animals and humans may have been more ambiguous than is traditionally held in the Western world today. This because animals often appear in contexts of transcendental nature where the borders between the human and the beastly are blurred or even crossed. Thus, the emphasis on the horse as a liminal being may be originated in the actual conception of horses as such transitional beings in life – not beast, not human, but somewhere in between. A similarly useful observation has also been made by anthropologist Viveiros de Castro (1998) although in a different social context. In his research on perspectivism among Amerindians in the Amazonas he has showed how these people’s conception of the original state of the cosmos is one where culture and nature are parts of the same sociocosmic field within which humans

and animals operate undifferentiated. Moreover, in this state humanity or subjectivity do not refer to a category of beings but rather to a *condition of being* and hence, he states, “[i]t is not that animals are subjects because they are humans in disguise, but rather they are human because they are potential subjects” (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 477).

If we keep in mind the above mentioned remarks while looking at the way horses are deposited in Icelandic graves I believe we may see indications of something more than just economical or symbolical references. To review it briefly, horses are most often buried with a human, either in the foot end of the same grave, often very close to the person’s feet, or in a grave separated from the foot end of the human grave by a small barrier. In other instances horses are buried in completely detached graves but on burial grounds with other human graves. Thus, in short, horses are deposited *alongside* humans, *among* humans and *as* humans, and therefore I argue; horses do not just symbolize a transitional state – but rather *they are* of a liminal nature. They can be thought of as parts of persons or persons in themselves and subjects of the same social cosmos as humans (cf. Ingold 2000: 47-50).

As other animals and things horses were brought to the new settlement from the various places of origin. Strong and able animals had probably been carefully selected from the flock and prepared for the long and harsh voyage, some because of their promising character while other had already earned themselves a good reputation. As with things brought from places left behind the animals would also have absorbed and held on to memories from these pasts as well as they literally contained in themselves the genetic and characteristic traits of their ancestors. It seems likely that those horses which made it to the new land and struggled through the first winter would have become highly valued and respected friends as well as a significant part of their human partner’s biography and identity.

When considering the graves at, for example, Traðarholt (Kt-25:2-4), Ytra-Garðshorn (Kt-87:3), Brimnes (Kt-89:2 and 4) and Silastaðir (Kt-98:1 and 4) where horse and human rest in one undivided grave and very close to each other, or even physically entangled as at Brimnes (Kt-89:2) where the horse is lying partly on the man’s feet, it is hard to ignore the relation between the two. The same is to say about those instances where a dog is buried with a person, most often by its feet as in graves 1, 4 and 12 at Brimnes (Kt-89) and at Vað (Kt-145), or even between the person’s feet as in grave 7 at Brimnes. In these instances the performative power of the entangled collective indicates that there was something more than mere coincidence or simply practical reasons that lay behind. I argue that as with Gunnar and his halberd the person and the animal *are one*. That without the

other they would have been considered incomplete and therefore were *re-membered* in this intimate way. Again we must keep in mind the ambiguous and demanding presence of the dead body and how it could insist on being reunited with its dispersed parts. It follows that as with elaborate things deposited in the graves I believe the animals, both horses and dogs, were not just *any* horse or dog but often renowned beings, known by name and reputation and recognized in the open grave. Their long and complex life histories would have been closely related to the biography of the person they accompanied in death but could also involve other relations whom at the burial ceremony were evoked and negotiated.

In the whole corpus there are at least 11 exclusive horse graves and five of them are among my selected graves; Hemla (Kt-5:1), Kornsa (Kt-63), Brimnes (Kt-89:9) and Hrifunes (Kt-155:1 and 4). All are found on burial grounds, sometimes rather close to a human grave as at Hemla, Kornsa and Brimnes, while in other instances in no relation to a human grave as is the case at Hrifunes. At Hemla as well as in both graves at Hrifunes the horses were also accompanied with their own grave goods, saddles and/or bridles. In all instances (apart from Kornsa which was too eroded to tell) the horse had not just been “dumped” but carefully placed in the grave, in the traditional way. Grave 1 at Hrifunes was also encircled by an oblong stone setting that is unusually elaborate, even for a human grave. I find it hard to explain the horse in these instances as a mere symbol, and it is even harder to explain its deposition as an economically favourable act. Clearly it would have been practical to get rid of a dead horse but if that alone was the impetus it would hardly have been done so carefully and elaborately, not to mention the deposition of saddles and other “valuable” equipment. Instead I argue that these horses were buried *as* humans because they were considered as fellow social beings – not as humans in disguise but as different but still equally potential subjects of a less compartmentalized cosmos than we are used to today.

Western thought and reasoning resides on a given dichotomy between the human and the animal (as between culture and nature) where “...*personhood as a state of being is not open to non-human animal kinds*” (Ingold 2000: 48). However, as argued by Ingold (2000), there are other ways of reasoning where “human” is just one of the many external forms of “personhood”. Rather than seeing the world as divided into different domains, as between animality and humanity, all beings are seen as parts of an inclusive “cosmic economy of sharing” where personhood is not the given trademark of being human but *a potential* to become a man, a horse or any other form of animate being.

As I have discussed with reference to *Hávamál* earlier animals could gain a reputation that was immortal like that of a human being. They might for example be

renowned for their loyalty and friendship, for their hard work, for their endurance and speed or as talented fighters. In all instances however, the reputation of a horse would also affect that of its owner or partner because the two were literally entangled. The most apparent example is probably to find in the traditional horse fighting (*hestavíg*, *hestapíng* and *hestaat*) described in many of the Sagas. In his research on feud in the Icelandic Sagas Jesse Byock (1982: 243-244) mentions horse fighting as one of the sources of conflict. Thus, one can argue that during a horse fight a man's honour and reputation was extended to, or equated with that of the horse and would hence be enhanced or lessened with the horse's success. Considering this it is not hard to imagine that the death of such a close friend, who through his deeds had enhanced the fame and reputation of his owner, was similar to the loss of any other close relative and hence called for a similar burial and *re-membering*.

To further underline the significance of the horse (and indeed that of other animals and things) on a macro-level as well as to show how it could become *part of* a person's being let us consider the term "settler". Earlier in the thesis I referred to Latour's example of the citizen (actor) and the gun (actant) and how the criminal act only became possible through their folding qualities (cf. chapter 4). If we extend this line of reasoning to what it implies to be a settler we soon come to realize that rather than referring to a single subject, "a settler" includes an assembly of forces, of which the boat on sea and the horse on land are maybe the most apparent. It is not the rational person alone but the merging qualities of all parts that *make* the settler and *enable* a successful settlement. Because, as argued earlier, being and actor (or settler) is really not something one *is* but something one constantly *becomes* through associations with other actors or actants (boat, sea, wind, horse, land, and so on). Thus, to argue that horses (or any other animal or thing) were nothing but important practical devices in Viking Age Iceland, as workers around the farm and vehicles for transport and communication (which they clearly were), is to overlook that through this practical significance they were integral and indispensable components of social networks and people's being, both practically and socially, and on a large scale as well as on local level. To settle this new land involved the mobilization of a brigade of actors and although humans themselves may be regarded the *prime movers*, "settlers" could never have come into being without extending their social relations to non-humans with whom they swapped properties and formed collectives (cf. Latour 1999: 198; Olsen 2003: 88). Thus it was only through cooperation and delegation that the land was reached and claimed, forests cleared, houses built, fences raised and so on. Neither could a political system have been built, a

social order be established, without such collaboration, cohabitations, and the unique qualities and competences that things and animals brought to the collective.

I have already discussed how the exchange of things manifested social relations and brought stability to society on a larger scale. The horse was clearly vital in that relation as it was the vehicle that actually enabled social interactions over long distances, in spite of mountains and heavy streams. Without the horse (as well as other non-human actants) social order or political relations would have been unthinkable among the dispersed settlements of the country. If we also think of the unusual spatio-political structure of the chieftaincy established the horse's significance becomes even more apparent. To recall, each chieftaincy wasn't a geographically restricted entity but a network of relations and alliances established over long distances but nevertheless relying on interaction and gift exchange. Hence, it can be argued that the confines of a chieftain's jurisdiction were not set by himself but by his horse. As far as his horse could carry him so far could also his authority be extended. The same is to say of the farmers' freedom to choose a chieftain to follow – their ability to build alliances were restricted to the areas their horses could outreach. Thus, a chieftain wasn't an institution of one man thirsty for power. The chieftain and his horse *were one*, because without the other the institution was incomplete – or rather non-existent.

Hence, the material culture – scarce, simple or whatever – that we are stuck up with is not a mere consequence of people's actions in the past but was actually constructively involved in those interactions. Moreover, people were very much aware of this involvement and consciously delegated tasks and responsibility to these material actors. It was through these collective associations of people, things, animals and so on, that their reality was constructed, because it was through the mediation of things and animals that social relations, and “society”, were held together. To them there was, as there still is – despite modernity's claim to the contrary – only one world, one where social entities *cannot* be divorced from materiality.

8. CONCLUSION

So the task of the archaeologist becomes a twofold one: to attempt to identify through critique the modern understandings within which the evidence is now embedded, and to 're-animate' it through interpretation. Interpretation is an attempt to re-work past relationships, by putting agency back into the material fragments of the past (Thomas 2005: 15).

What I hope to have underlined through this discussion is that declarations about early Icelanders being “the poor cousins” are both pointless and of no relevance to us as archaeologists. Such notions are grounded not only in the tenacious disbelief in archaeology’s potential on the Saga scene but also, more generally, in a sceptical attitude towards the interpretive potential and social importance of material culture. It is a curious fact however – and somewhat of an irony – that the very same written sources that are used to legitimize this textual hegemony, constantly inform us about the significant role material culture played in the early Icelandic society. Where social relations, associations and institutions were formed, manifested and stabilized by embedding and merging them in the materiality of things.

“Modern” thought has the tendency to tidily organize our chaotic being into sealed ontological compartments, “a hierarchy of opposites”, like those of mind and matter, or culture and nature. In this neatly organized scheme we have the world of intentional and thinking subjects on one side and a naturally given object-world of things and animals on the other (Latour 1993). The former is the primordial in this dualistic relation whereas the latter has no meaningful existence in itself but awaits in silence its symbolic or metaphoric incarnation (Ingold 2000). Within this same tradition modern archaeology has come to see its task as one of “purification” – to clean up the mess of past generations, split the mixtures and hybrid relations so that they can be firmly situated within their “proper” realm. And that is how the past is often displayed; as systematically organized in comprehensive and easily digested compartments behind polished glass.

It is my belief, as I have argued for, that people in Viking Age Iceland did not approach their environment in this segregating way but rather that they perceived of their situation as one of being constantly immersed *in the world*, where they dwelled alongside and towards other beings in practical as well as intimate interactions. They inhabited only one world shared between humans and non-humans whom they recognized as truly different but still equally potential social entities. In this cohabitation people consciously enlisted these fellow beings by delegating tasks to them, swapping properties with them and

extending themselves into them. Hence, to our amazement, they were able, without contradiction, to ascribe to other beings, as things and animals, attributes like vitality, personhood and identity, whom we would rather reserve for humans only. And furthermore, because of this the relationships people had with things and animals were not shameful, unacceptable, fetishistic or wrong but on level with, and not less real or intimate than those between “real” people.

This became very clear when, for a moment, I managed to push aside my conventional segregating way of thinking and instead allowed the material at hand to *act* upon me in its own challenging way. Then I was able to see its rich potential and to understand that objects were not just buried *with* persons but *alongside* persons, on level with them and as parts of them. And that horses were buried *alongside*, *among* and *as* human beings, not because they “belonged to” persons but because they were on level with them, parts of them, and equally potential social subjects in a shared world. The careful arrangement of all the constituents and their visibly assembled display also enlightened the significance of their presence for those burying. It seemed obvious that the deposition wasn’t a trivial and economically favourable act, and neither just of symbolic significance. Rather, it was an act of *re-membrance*, where a distributed whole was manifestly united and thereby also the networks, associations and relationships the different constituents were parts of, and which had to be reconstructed or reinforced in this situation of crisis.

I would argue that the tenacious insistence that Icelandic Viking Age graves are homogenous, simple and poor, is a consequence of failing to see this immediately apparent relational complexity of the entangled collective, because one has approached the material with a “modern reasoning” and thus been too eager to think: “How can I sort this mess out?” However, as I have argued, the significance – the richness – of a burial does not emerge from some vague immaterial essence or from distinct and isolated sets of things, animals and bodies, but from their collective and entangled material presence. Not one of these elements was incidental or trivial and not one dropped from the sky at that very moment. Each had earned its place in the collective through a lifetime of relations. Hence, it was through the *re-membling* of the different constituents, that the collective gained its unique significance.

As pointed out by Parker Pearson (2003: 86) funerals are dynamic and contested events where social roles and structures of power can be reinforced, manipulated and altered. Thus, the act of deposition and the grave itself may not be thought of as direct representations of a perceived social reality but must be considered as constantly open to negotiation, conflict and misrepresentation. However, what I have tried to underline in this

thesis is that the manipulation does not go one way only – from living subjects onto inert objects. The deceased, or the animals and things deposited, are not like clay moulded in the hands of the living. The manipulation or “translation” must rather be thought of as symmetrical (Latour 1999), interactive, and hence even more complex. This is not the least apparent in the case of a Viking Age burial where the visible and demanding presences of the deceased, as well as other parts of the collective, become mediums for communication and manipulation *between* the dead and the living. Claims, requests, or restrictions concerning the practice and its completion could therefore just as well come from these actors as from those burying. In fact, it was the dead person or animal that in the first place impelled the act and assembled those fulfilling it. A grave we excavate today is therefore not just the inert physical *remains* of a ritual act performed at a certain moment in Viking Age Iceland – it rather *was* and *is* a significant part of that act as well as of an infinite web of relations that goes far beyond its moment of construction and its physical boundaries. Thus, in order to understand these monuments we must do as claimed by Julian Thomas in the citation above: We must conceive of them as collective relational entities, composed of various material actors and actants and from that conception try to re-work the networks they compose and are composed by.

To apprehend the world does not involve that one creates it or portrays it and thus endows it with a comprehensive meaning. It means that one is *in* the world, one is “thrown” into it from the very beginning, engages and interacts with it and comes to know it as one comes to know oneself (Heidegger 1962). And similarly, I believe, the way to understand the past, the graves, and their material culture is not through sorting out the mess, removing non-humans from humans and stripping clothes from bodies in search for some ideal “order” or meaningful essences behind. Instead we must attempt to engage with the graves as they appear – as entangled collectives, “simple”, “poor” or whatever, that often transgress our conventional ideas of the world – and then try to re-work the biography of each part and the relations between them.

Instead of looking *through* the material culture and into society or other essences I have therefore attempted to look *at* the material itself as an animate and significant constituent of the collective, the ritual act, as well as of social relations, associations and networks on a much broader spectrum, crosscutting the traditional distinctions between past and present, and life and death. We are mistaken, as Julian Thomas (2005: 16) points out, if we think “...that simply because we can see and touch a thing we can grasp it in its entirety”. Rather, it is because of their visual and physical properties that these things and

animals are so much more than just that. To identify a bronze brooch as a trefoil brooch dated to the tenth century is therefore, at the very best, to vaguely touch upon *what it is*. Rather, to understand a thing from the past, we need to *re-member* it as enmeshed in an infinite web of relationships involving other things, places and people. Thus, to understand an archaeological artefact, a pebble in a grave, we can not just assume anything about what it is – we need to understand how it came to be just that – *the pebble in the grave*.

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APPENDIX

TABLE OF THE SELECTED GRAVES

Abbreviations:

Biological sex: M=Male, M?=Probably male, F=Female, F?=Probably female, Ind.=indefinable

Orientation and size: l=long, d=deep, diam= diameter

Excavated by:

D.B.=Daniel Bruun

F.J.=Finnur Jónsson

G.G.=Gísli Gestsson

G.K.=Guðrún Kristinsdóttir

G.L.=Guðrún Larsen

G.Z.=Guðný Zoëga

K.E.=Kristján Eldjárn

Laym.=Laymen

L.B.=Lárus Blöndal

M.P.=Matthías Þórðarson

S.K.=Steinunn Kristjánsdóttir

S.V.=Sigurður Vigfússon

S.P.=Sigurður Þórarinnsson

Þ.G.=Þorkell Grímsson

Þ.M.=Þór Magnússon

<i>Grave number and name of farm/locality</i>	<i>Biol. sex</i>	<i>Age of interred</i>	<i>Dist. from farm F(ar) or N(ear)</i>	<i>Oriental-ation Size</i>	<i>Horse</i>	<i>Bridles/Saddle-Remains</i>	<i>Dog</i>	<i>Weapons</i>	<i>Jewellery, Clothing details</i>	<i>Tools/ everyday things</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>Exc. by</i>
Kt-5:1 Hemla	Ind.	13-17	F	S-N	1 in footend sep. by barrier 1 detached grave	Found with both horses		Spear, axe, shield	1 glass bead	Comb, knife, weight, whetstone, 4 pieces jasper		M.P.
Kt-5:2 Hemla	Ind.	Ind.	F	W-E							Coffin	M.P.
Kt-15 Mörk	Ind.	Ind.	F	W-E	1 in footend sep. by barrier	Bridle bit				Weaving instrument	1 Pebble	M.P.
Kt-17 Galtalækur	Bones not pres.	"Old"	F	N-S 1.5 m l. 0.65 m d.	1 in footend of same grave	Bridle bit, buckle, iron fragments		Spear, shield, axe		2 whetstones, 2 flint pieces, 4 weights, knife, vices, 4 hooks	Charcoal	M.P.
Kt-18:1 Stóri-Klofi	M?	Ind.	F?	W-E 1.5x0.5 m	1 detached grave					Knife, whetstone, jasper, strike-a-light		M.P.
Kt-21 Karlsnes	M	36-45	F	NW-SE 2x0.75 m				Spear	1 glass bead 1 amber bead 1 stone bead	Knife, 2 weights	Transparent stone	M.P.
Kt-25:1 Traðarholt	Ind.	Ind.	F	W-E 5.3 diam.				Sword?	13 glass beads			S.V.
Kt-25:2 Traðarholt	Ind.	Ind.	F	NW-SE 6.25 diam.	1 in footend of same grave	Bridle bit						S.V.
Kt-25:3 Traðarholt	Ind.	Ind.	F	S-N	1 in footend of same grave	Bridle bit, buckle	1 (placement unknown)	Shield	Bornze buckle, iron buckle	Knife		S.V.
Kt-25:4 Traðarholt	Ind.	Ind.	F	W-E	1 in footend of same grave							S.V.
Kt-26:1 Selfoss	F?	Ind.	F?	SW-NE							Pebbles, 1 transp. stone, 1 conch, 2 stones, iron fragments	K.E.
Kt-26:2 Selfoss	F?	36-45	F?	SW-NE					11 glass beads, 1 amber bead	Knife, sickle, iron spit, iron key	Remains of a small wooden chest, textile	G.G.
Kt-37 Kaldárhöfði	Ind. Ind.	Ind. child	F	W-E 1 m high				Sword, 6 arrow heads, 2 spears, 2 axes, 2 shields	Bronze buckle, bronze strap end, silver wire	2 knives, 2 jasper pieces, 2 hooks, sinker	80-90 rivets from a boat. Iron and textile fragments	K.E.

Grave number and name of farm/locality	Biol. sex	Age of interred	Dist. from farm F(ar) or N(ear)	Orient-ation Size	Horse	Bridles/Saddle-Remains	Dog	Weapons	Jewellery, Clothing details	Tools/ everyday things	Other	Exc. by
Kt-47 Öndverðarnes	Ind.	18-25	F	NE-SW				Sword, spear, shield	Bone pin	Knife	Iron fragments	P.G.
Kt-63 Kornsa	F	Ind.	?	NW-SE 1.25 m d.	1 detached grave		1 in horse grave		33 beads, silver pin, 2 tongue brooches, bronze bell	Cauldron, scale pan, weaving sword, comb, shears, bronze pincer, knife	Iron fragments	L.B.
Kt-65 Smyrlaberg	M	46+	F	SE-NW 2x0.8 m 0.7 m d.						Knife, nails (from coffin)	Coffin	K.E.
Kt-66 Tindar			F	NNW-SSE	1 in footend sep. by barrier "Old"			Spear	Ringed pin of bronze	Fish hook		M.P.
Kt-87:3 Ytra-Garðshorn	F	36-45	F	SW-NE 3.6x1 m 0.65 m d.	1 in footend of same grave	2 buckles and a few nails			2 glass beads	Knife, strike-a-light, shears, nails, iron ring, (chest?)	Charcoal in fill, small oval stone	K.E.
Kt-89:1 Brimnes	M?	46+	F	NE-SW 1.36x0.7m 0.45 m d.			1 by person's feet		8 glass beads, 2 amber beads, 1 metal drop			D.B. F.J.
Kt-89:2 Brimnes	M	46+	F	SW-NE 3.5x1.35m 0.45 m d.	1 in footend of same grave Beheaded	Iron fragments		Spear		8 weights, knife, whetstone		D.B. F.J.
Kt-89:3 Brimnes	M	26-35	F	SW-NE 1.6x0.9 m 0.5 m d.				Spear		3 weights, nail, iron fragments	Covered by wooden board?	D.B. F.J.
Kt-89:4 Brimnes	Ind.	"young" Ind.	F	SW-NE 0.5 m d.	1 in footend of same grave Beheaded	Buckle	1 by person's feet			52 rivets and iron fragments from boat		D.B. F.J.
Kt-89:5 Brimnes	F?	36-45	F	SW-NE 4x1 m 0.5 m d.	1 in footend sep. by barrier Beheaded	2 buckles, nail, iron fragments			1 oval brooch, textile	Knife, cauldron		D.B. F.J.
Kt-89:6 Brimnes	F	46+	F	SW-NE 5x1 m 0.4 m d.	1 in footend sep. by barrier Beheaded							D.B. F.J.
Kt-89:7 Brimnes	M?	Ind.	F	SW-NE? 1.6x0.8 m			1 between person's feet					D.B. F.J.
Kt-89:8 Brimnes	Ind.	Ind.	F	SE-NW 1.9x1 m							Traces of wood	D.B. F.J.

<i>Grave number and name of farm/locality</i>	<i>Biol. sex</i>	<i>Age of interred</i>	<i>Dist. from farm F(ar) or N(ear)</i>	<i>Orient-ation Size</i>	<i>Horse</i>	<i>Bridles/ Saddle-Remains</i>	<i>Dog</i>	<i>Weapons</i>	<i>Jewellery, Clothing details</i>	<i>Tools/ everyday things</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>Exc. by</i>
Kt-89:9 Brimnes			F	? 2x1.2 m 0.5 m d.	1 horse grave, beheaded							D.B. F.J.
Kt-89:10 Brimnes	Ind.	Ind.	F	S-N 2.3x1.2 m 0.5 m d.								D.B. F.J.
Kt-89:11 Brimnes	Ind.	Ind.	F	? 1.8x0.9 m 0.4 m d.						Fragments of iron	Charcoal in fill	D.B. F.J.
Kt-89:12 Brimnes	F?	18-25	F	SW-NE 6x2 m 0.45 m d.	1 in footend sep. by barrier Beheaded	Bridle bit	1 by person's feet			Whetstone, knife?, cauldron	19 gaming pieces	D.B. F.J.
Kt-89:13 Brimnes	Ind.	26-35	F	SW-NE 7.5x2 m	1 in footend sep. by barrier Beheaded				5 glass beads, bone button?	Knife?	Shell fragments	D.B. F.J.
Kt-98:1 Sílastaðir	M	46+	F	W-E	1 in footend of same grave			Sword, 2 axes, spear, shield	2 buckles	Knife, whetstone, flint	Traces of wood and bark	K.E.
Kt-98:2 Sílastaðir	M	46+	F	SSW-NNE				Spear	Penannular brooch, 1 glass bead	Iron point, jasper, strike-a-light, whetstone, knife	Traces of wood, 2 silver coin fragments, silver thread, org. material	K.E.
Kt-98:3 Sílastaðir	F?	36-45	F	SW-NE 1.8x1 m 0.5 m d.					5 glass beads, 1 stone bead	Nail, hasp, knife	Remains of a chest, 3 small quartz stones	K.E.
Kt-98:4 Sílastaðir	M	36-45	F	SW-NE 3.7x1 m 0.7 m d.	1 in footend of same grave	Bridle bit, 5 nails, 1 rivet, 1 buckle		Spear, sword, axe, shield		Knife, 2 weights, 2 jasper pieces	Transparent stone	K.E.
Kt-122 Grásiða	M	18-25	N	S-N 1 m d.				Spear		Knife	Wooden boards	K.E.
Kt-130:1 Reykjasel	F	36-45	F	S-N	1 in footend sep. by barrier	Buckle			34 glass beads, 1 rock crystal bead, 1 oval brooch	Knife		D.B.
Kt-130:2 Reykjasel	Bones not pres.		F	?				Spear	15 amber beads, 14 glass beads, 4 stone beads, 1 lead bead	Knife, whetstone, iron ring		?
Kt-131 Hrólfsstaðir	M	36-45	F	NNE-SSW 1.55x0.6m						Comb, knife	Charcoal in fill	G.K.

Grave number and name of farm/locality	Biol. sex	Age of interred	Dist. from farm F(ar) or N(ear)	Orient-ation Size	Horse	Bridles/ Saddle-Remains	Dog	Weapons	Jewellery, Clothing details	Tools/ everyday things	Other	Exc. by
Kt-134 Straumur	Ind.	7-12	F	S-N 1.5x0.4 m	Eroded horse bones, not intact close by			Small axe		Small knife, 1 weight, 30 rivets (shell-plating)	2 small round stones	K.E.
Kt-142 Ketilsstaðir	Ind.	Ind.	F	? 0.4 m d.					2 oval brooches, 1 trefoil brooch, 41 glass beads, 1 amber bead	Spindle whorl, comb, 2 whetstones, shears	1 small light-blue stalagmite stone	M.P.
Kt-144 Eyrarteigur	M	30-40	F	S-N 3x1 m 0.4 m d.	1 in footend sep. by barrier "young"	2 buckles		Sword, shield, axe, 2 spears	Ringed bronze pin, 2 amber beads, buckle and strap end of bronze, tin ring	2 whetstones, 4 weights, flint piece, cauldron	Horse skin?, piece of a silver coin, small agate stone	S.K. G.K. G.Z.
Kt-145:2 Vað	M	36-45	N	S-N 0.5 m d.			1 by person's feet, "old"			Whetstone, nail	Traces of wood, rhyolite slabs	G.K.
Kt-151 Álaugarey	F	36-45	F	E-W 0.35 m d.					2 oval brooches, arm ring of lignite	Iron spit, comb, shears, knife, iron rings		M.P.
Kt-155:1 Hrifunes			?	WSW-ENE 4.75x1.25	1 horse grave	Bridle bit, 1 buckle						K.E. G.G.
Kt-155:2 Hrifunes	Ind.	0-2	?	?								Laym
Kt-155:3 Hrifunes	Ind.	Ind.	?	E-W 1.7x0.75m						5 jasper pieces, strike-a-light, 5 weights, 1 rivet, 2 lead plates	Oval basalt stone,	K.E. G.L. S.P.
Kt-155:4 Hrifunes			?	? 2.2x1.1 m	1 horse grave beheaded	Bridle bit, iron fragments						P.M. G.G. S.P. G.L.
Kt-155:5 Hrifunes	F?	36-45	?	N-S 1.4x0.8 m 0.95 m d.					11 glass beads	Knife		P.M. G.G. S.P. G.L.

