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## No Man's Land or Neutral Ground: Perceived Gendered Differences in Ideologies of War

### **Abstract**

This article approaches gender in the Viking Age as a fluid social category, to be understood through an intersectional lens alongside other cultural variables. Using material from the Vestfold region, the article argues that the perceived genders encountered in mortuary remains from the area display a significant amount of social similarities. It therefore proposes to explore the expression of social roles across, rather than within gendered lines. The approach challenges the traditional tendency of dividing gendered archaeological remains based on a few, select categories singled out from the grave goods. It suggests that a more open approach would avoid overlooking real and tangible levels of shared expressions between graves assigned different gender in many mortuary contexts.

The article challenges the idea of a Viking Age instigated by male violence and the inter-linked belief that women are naturally less inclined to violence and more disposed to be nurturing and caring. These concepts are examined as modern constructs and as such they are not applicable to the past without scrutiny. I argue that the idea of a Viking Age warrior ideology, which leaves no room for women, is culturally ingrained and needs to be questioned in light of both archaeological material and written sources. By critically examining the ideas mentioned above, wider discussions can be created, where gender does not necessarily play a limiting role in the enactment of certain social ideologies. Hence, this article does not seek to detail the specifics of female involvement in war, but rather to explore the cultural contexts that have influenced perceptions of such participation.

### **Introduction**

The discourse of war and violence has historically been heavily biased towards men, with women featuring as victims in narratives defined by male aggression. Using Jean Elshtain's argument that Western tradition has fostered a strong cultural belief in women's natural affinity to peace, and men's to war and violence (1995 [1987]: 2), the article seeks to investigate whether this holds true in archaeological interpretations of gendered ways of being. Contextualised through the understanding that knowledge is inevitably shaped by the cul-

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tural frameworks within which it is produced (Haraway 2013 [1988]), it is here argued that this cultural belief has coloured the historical discourse and continues to frame enquires. Such beliefs have influenced and continue to affect archaeological studies of war and violence, as well as the historical discourse. In this tradition, men wage war, whilst women experience its consequences. However, the impact of these beliefs goes even further, and shapes interpretations of archaeological material overall, casting perceived male and female social expressions into different moulds, when in fact they may be comparable.

Elshtain focuses on two dominant narratives of women and war. The first, is of the women who cheer the war effort on from the side lines, and is closely associated with ideas of civic duty and sacrifice for the greater good (comparable to the Old Norse role of the female *whetter*, as discussed in detail in Friðriksdóttir 2013). The second, is of women striving for peace, where the nurturing nature of women is foregrounded. Elshtain relates this to the cultural association of women with motherhood (Elshtain 1995 [1987]). Here, I argue that this has a wider cultural application in the persistent social promotion of women as primary carers in the modern West (Joel, Bermanb, Tavorc et al. 2015; Fine 2016; Rippon 2016), which consequently impacts knowledge production about gender in the past.

This article explores the study of Viking Age women and war on several levels. Firstly, I anchor the focus of the article on the ideological investment in war, through a brief glance at gender in the Viking Age discourse of war and violence. Secondly, to examine the possibility of approaching Viking Age society as less governed by binary gendered ideals and more by fluid social obligations, through mortuary material from the Vestfold area in Norway. Thirdly, through the prevailing idea that associates male gender with weapons (e.g. Harrison 2015), not in its overarching legitimacy, but rather by considering whether the pursuit of war is subject to a gendered divide in terms of moral and ideological investment. Fourthly, through the use of mortuary remains, for a discussion regarding similarities between perceived gendered graves. Aided by these levels, I want to explore whether high ranking Viking men and women first and foremost were social agents contributing into the same overarching ideological frameworks in society, rather than representatives of separate social spheres with little or no overlap, which would be the binary gendered perspective.

### **Background: women and war in Viking Age archaeology**

Women and war as a topic in Viking Age research has seen an upsurge in scholarly attention in recent years. This is primarily due to the publication of the aDNA results of what was shown to be a female body buried with a full set of weapons at Birka in Sweden, in the burial known as Bj.581 (Hedenstierna-Jonson, Kjellström, Zachrisson et al. 2017). This publication reignited the debate on the potential for female involvement in war, which has flared up from time to time throughout Viking Age scholarship (see e.g. Mørck 1901; Jesch 2015). Much has been written about the results (e.g. Gardęła 2018; Moen 2019 a, 2019 b, Friðriksdóttir 2020) and the study itself (Jesch 2017 a, 2017 b; Price, Hedenstierna-Jonson, Zachrisson et al. 2019; and a series of blog posts on the subject by Williams 2017).

Women and violence are connected in written material, as well as in the archaeological record (as discussed in e.g. Clover 1993; Hedenstierna-Jonson, Kjellström, Zachrisson et al. 2017; Gardęła 2018; Price 2019; Price, Hedenstierna-Jonson, Zachrisson et al. 2019). However, violence can appear in many guises, from violent intent to outright acts of inter-

personal violence. Written sources have for instance given us the stereotype of the female inciter or *whetter* (Jochens 1995: 17–25; Friðriksdóttir 2013), who spurs male family members to violent acts of revenge in order to uphold the family honour. This can be associated to ideas of women supporting the war effort, when ‘playing cheerleaders’ to male aggressors and providing moral justification and essential licencing to enact violence. However, written sources also describe women who take up arms themselves to uphold their honour, for instance Auðr in *Laxdæla saga* (Larsen 1989) and Freydis in *Grænlendinga saga* (Jørgensen and Hagland 2014), as well as women leading troops and engaging in acts of violence (Clover 1993: 366; Andrén 2008; Price 2019: 74).

In addition to the spectacular Bj.581 burial (Hedenstierna-Jonson, Kjellström, Zachrisson et al. 2017; Price, Hedenstierna-Jonson, Zachrisson et al. 2019), there are other known examples of women buried with weapons, though they are unusual. The so called shield-maiden from the Nordre Kjølén burial (Mørck 1901) contains a (probable) female body with several weapons (see Fig. 1), as does a burial from Aunvollen in Trøndelag (Stenvik 1981; Stenvik 2005). In England, Mound 50 at Heath Wood contained a female burial with a sword (Richards 2004), whilst Leeming Lane in Yorkshire has records of a female grave with a spear (Redmond 2007: 95). Leszek Gardela (2018) has recently summarised many of the known female weapons burials, whilst Lund and Moen (2020) have discussed selected burials containing arrowheads in Norway and Sweden. Most significant for this context, however, is the obvious lack of discussion regarding the presence of weapons in female graves. Such were the cases with the ‘Gausel Queen’, whose extensive grave goods included a shield (Børsheim 2001), or the weapons known from female graves in Kaupang, and both these cases will be discussed below. The most common type of weapon found in female burials in Norway is the axe (see Gardela 2018: 398), although it can also be regarded as a tool rather than a weapon. Referring back to Nicolay Nicolaysen’s 19<sup>th</sup>-century interpretations of them as such (Myhre 2015: 52), the tendency to call them tools in female graves and weapons in male ones, even though they are often the same typology, has persisted. Part of the reasons behind this may be that it removes the necessity for discussing women as enactors of violence, a concept which remains contentious in the general discourse. There is a possibility that this was partly done to evade discussions regarding women enacting violence, which is a concept that still remains contentious in the general discourse (as evidenced by the discussion in Friðriksdóttir 2020: 56–64).

However, whether women were using weapons is not the main focus for this article. Instead, it is to examine the underlying ideologies of Viking Age society that are evidenced in mortuary remains, and how this can be understood in a wider context of an ideology of war and violence, as stated in the introduction.

### **Gendered spheres of action**

A dominant traditional way of envisaging gender in the Viking Age is through a binary division into male and female spheres of being and acting (Jesch 1991; Jochens 1995; Solberg 2003; Callmer 2008; Sigurðsson 2008). According to this model, the divide between men and women was so absolute as to manifest in different physical spheres, where women were in charge of the world *innan*stokks (Norwegian: inside the threshold, or indoors) and men *útan*stokks (Norwegian: outside the threshold, meaning the entire outside world). This

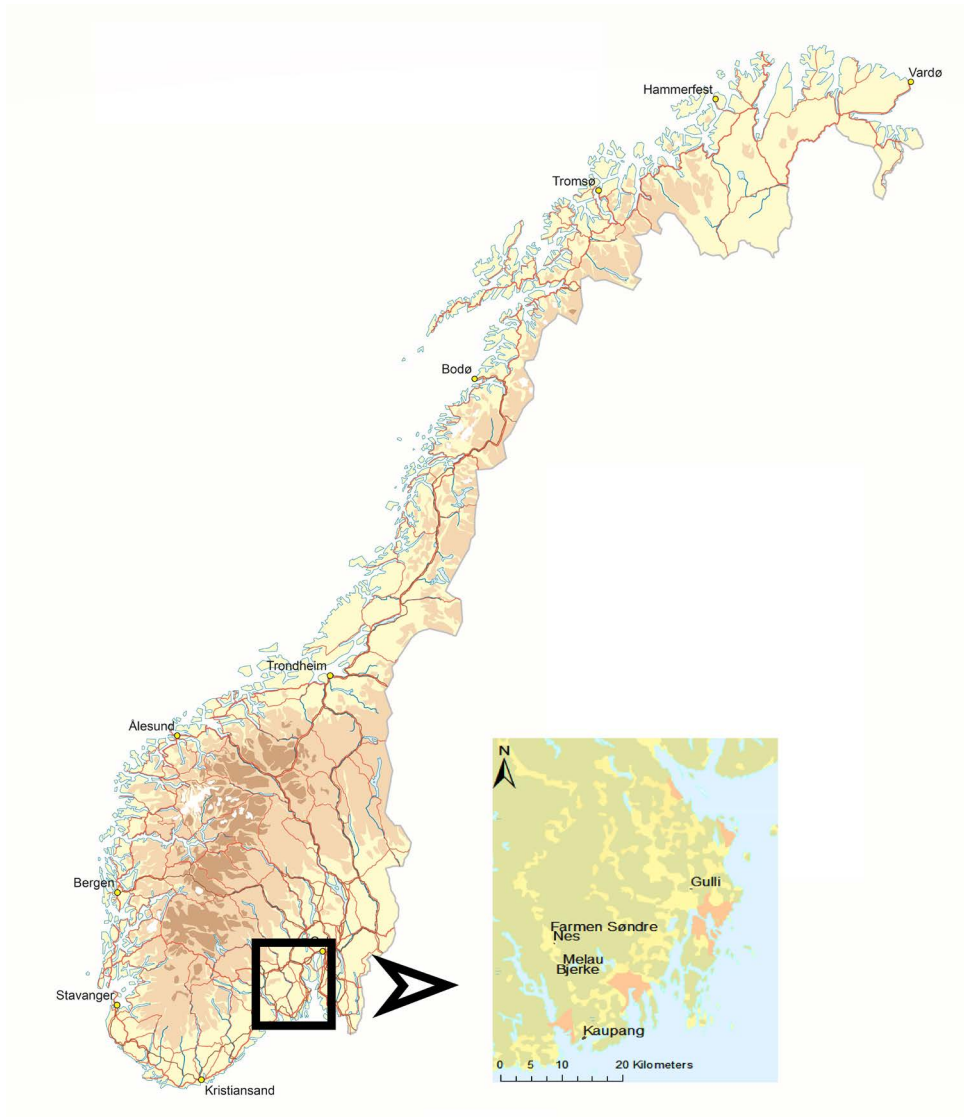


Figure 1. Map showing Norway with Vestfold by the marked rectangle, also with a Vestfold insert marking the sites discussed in cut out. Map: Marianne Moen.

divide, which still influences many accounts, has dominated much of the discourse on gendered division of labour, as well as ways of being and social agency, even though it can be challenged on many levels (Stalsberg 1991; Pedersen 2008; Kershaw 2013; Pantman 2014; Moen 2019 a). It is worth noting that this divide derives from medieval laws, and so far it finds no support in systematic studies of archaeological remains, making its applicability to the Viking Age debatable (Arwill-Nordbladh 1998; Sigurðardóttir 2002: 284; Croix 2012). Indeed, as Elisabeth Arwill-Nordbladh (1998) has demonstrated, such assumptions mostly

derive from 19<sup>th</sup>-century ideologies and Victorian stereotypes, and as Sarah Croix (2012) has further shown it is not generally supported by the archaeological record. Thus, it is known that these assumptions were founded in a view of natural gendered differences, which placed women by the hearth and home, where the passive nature of women versus the active nature of men was promoted as a matter of course. Similarly, it can be argued that this view of gendered domains and differences has retained its influence over the discourse of war and violence. This will be further discussed below.

In contrast to the traditional binary view of gender in the Viking Age, an alternative approach has gained traction in recent years that characterises gender as fluid, or as variants on a continuum, rather than absolute opposed categories (Clover 1993; Danielsson 2007; Hedeager 2011; Moen 2019 a). It does not deny that gender played a vital role in the Viking Age world but rather that the way gender is composed is vastly more complex than a simple male/female dichotomy. It also suggests that there was room to navigate between these known categories. This stance is the foundation for the subsequent methodology and material sections.

### **Methodology: deconstructing male and female**

For the purposes of archaeological interpretation of mortuary remains and grave goods, a certain simplification and classification is arguably necessary when attempting to order large amounts of data into recognisable patterns. Archaeological interpretation thereby relies on certain overarching classifications, which shape understandings into manageable categories. Such classifications build on previous scholarship, and through this will to a certain extent promote accepted knowledges of what a find category can signify, which can lead to eventual misconceptions. A prime example is Viking Age keys, which traditionally have been assumed to symbolise the female role as lady of the house (Gräslund 2001; Kristoffersen 1999; Svanberg 2003: 21), reinforcing assumptions that keys are primarily found in female gendered burials. An analysis has, however, established that keys are as frequent in male gendered graves as they are in female ones (Pantman 2014). This demonstrates the risk of misrepresentations when relying on traditional ‘accepted’ interpretations. Presumptions of appropriate gendered behaviour often influence interpretations of conduct and occupation. Another example is the assertion that scales in female Viking Age graves do not signify involvement in trade, whilst at the same time asserting that they do in male graves (Christiansen 2002: 21). In this case the interpretations are not based on the material, since they actually contain the same types of objects, but on perceived gendered differences, which suggest that women would not naturally engage in the active and public world of trade.

The danger of essentialising social roles on the basis of grave goods impacts more than just gender. Commonly used to determine social level and status, potential occupation and wealth (Solberg 2003; Price 2008; Moen 2019 a) there is a long-standing precedence to construct ideas of identity and social structures from graves. This is notwithstanding insightful and crucial work that has challenged what we believe burials symbolise (Härke 1997 and 2014; Williams 2006). Accordingly, although caveats are made that grave goods can be gifts; that they can symbolise an ideal rather than a real situation; and that they can in fact be standardised expressions rather than reflections of individual lives, or bribes used to stop

the dead returning (Fahlander and Østigård 2008: 7; Kristoffersen and Østigård 2008: 128–37). Hence it is fair to say that overall grave goods still provide much of the foundations for interpretations of identity, both individual and collective. The question of whose identity researchers are ultimately constructing through such interpretations remains relevant, especially in light of feminist critique of how representations of past identities are heavily reliant on familiar gendered stereotypes (Conkey and Spector 1984; Wylie 1991; Arwill-Nordbladh 1998). Recognising that archaeology comes with a need for ordering the material record into patterns so as to reach meaningful interpretations, and recognising moreover that established interpretations are solidly constructed knowledge claims, there is nevertheless a need to keep investigating the foundations upon which new enquiries are built.

Here a note is required on the categories of sex and gender that are often used to arrange the way in which knowledge is produced. Drawing on Thomas Laqueur's analysis of the modern Western two-sex model as a recent historical construct (Laqueur 1990), where the fragility of scientific knowledge is highlighted, especially with regards to human bodies and behaviour. By charting how sex was previously understood as variations on a single body type Laqueur deftly demonstrates how far from a universal truth sex-based differences in temper and behaviour are. According to his overview of the history of sex, women were perceived as inverted men, their mirror images as it were, up until 1800, when the idea of two separate sexes occurred (Laqueur 1990: 4–5). This also introduced the characteristics that men and women are meant to embody in today's society, reconstructed to fit with a new ideal where women were sexually passive and timid, which was directly opposed to older ideas on the subject (Laqueur 1990: 3). When combined with Judith Butler's scholarship on the cultural construction of sex, Laqueur's ideas can be used to critique the belief that sex determines gender, in turn determining behaviour and characteristics (Connell 1987: 64; Butler 1993: 3; Jordanova 1993: 479; Joel, Bermanb, Tavorc et al. 2015). This is not to deny the facticity of human bodies as male or female reproductively, but rather to question the idea that this also determines personality, potential and characteristics. Thus, by understanding gender as culturally contingent, it can be argued that when mortuary contexts are divided along binary gendered lines, they are divided according to traditional modern sensibilities and understandings. Hence, there is a risk of overlooking components of social identity to the detriment of nuanced interpretations of how social identities were composed and signalled. Instead, these could be better understood by using intersectional frameworks of composite identities (Crenshaw 2011 [1989]; Davis 2008; Villa 2011; Vivar et al. 2011). The concept of intersectionality refers to the intersecting lines of exclusion/inclusion experienced by individuals – though in widely differing degrees – according to such factors as ethnicity, gender, age, creed, social status.

Applying an intersectional perspective to Viking Age grave goods means following intertwining lines of created and signalled identities. Instead of dividing burials along an either/or binary divide of male or female according to perceived gendered categories, this would instead consider what the grave goods represent without strict gendered connotations. In this case the combination of objects could instead be used to describe the intersectionality between varied aspects of a social persona. Hence, my approach considers the shared platforms of male, female and those without a clearly assigned gender, to reach a perspective that uses similarities between social spheres hitherto often treated as strictly divided (as mentioned above). Once revealed these similarities can be used in discussions



pertaining to Viking Age social order, expressions of social belonging, and configurations of identity. It can certainly promote investigations of whether the narratives of gendered differences are based on ideas and values in the eye of the beholder or in the archaeological material itself (Moen 2019 a). Below it will be used to promote a debate on how researchers envisage a martial society, in terms of who were complicit in its maintenance and reproduction.

### **Determining sex and gender in burials**

Until recently, gender could only be assessed either by osteological sexing, when suitable skeletal material was present, or by archaeological gendering based on grave goods. Neither method is infallible for a number of reasons. Archaeological gendering is based on an idealised version of social status where gender only forms one part, yet is often allowed to overshadow other social signifiers (Weglian 2001). Moreover, there is a tendency to assign gendered ways of being based on stereotyped interpretations: jewellery becomes frivolous in female graves, whilst it is a signifier of high social status in male graves (as discussed with regards to imports in Aannestad 2015). Osteological sexing, on the other hand, whilst certainly more reliable than archaeological gendering, is not infallible either, with a bias towards sexing ambiguous burials as male (as discussed in Arnold 2006: 144). This means that any of these results are open to interpretation, revealing questions regarding subjectivity due to expectations and previous experience (Holck 1996: 44). Finally, there is a tendency to favour grave goods over osteological material in cases where they do not match (as discussed in Gilchrist 1999: 69). This was demonstrated in the Birka burial Bj.581, which was osteologically defined as a female as early as the 1970s, yet remained male in common parlance until 2017 (Hedenstierna-Jonson, Kjellström, Zachrisson et al. 2017: 857).

With recent scientific advances aDNA analysis is also an option when preservation allows, although it is costly. Ideally, the material could be subjected to osteological, aDNA and archaeological assessments. Together, these methods would allow for more in-depth discussions of perceived sex and gender and examinations of whether or not the two conform to expected and projected patterns. However, such ideal scenarios are unusual and unfortunately Norway is known for having relatively little preserved skeletal material (Shetelig 1912; Stylegar 2010). Whilst conventional wisdom states that the control data used for gendering Viking Age burials are reliable, there is in fact very little supporting material and no collated database exists through which to ascertain this.

The Norwegian material also reveals a rather absurd catch-22, as it determines graves as male based on weapons, whilst also relying on the general conviction that weapons are found only with males (as established in e.g. Shetelig 1912; Petersen 1919 and discussed in Stylegar 2010; Moen 2019 a). In a review of control data that is commonly used, further issues become obvious. The most commonly cited study is a collation of skeletal material from Denmark where the correlations between female skeletal remains and jewellery and textile working tools, as well as between male remains and weapons, are indeed confirmed (Sellevold, Lund Hansen and Balslev Jørgensen 1984). However, the sample is decidedly small, out of 320 skeletons less than 10% are associated with gendered artefacts (Sellevold Lund Hansen and Balslev Jørgensen 1984: 34–141). In Sweden further material can be found, which also tends to support these general alignments, although with several excep-

tions (Gräslund 1980; Svanberg 2003) In both Sweden and Denmark, a significant number of graves cannot be assigned gendered status. Moreover, the control data do not allow for regional variation; thus, in Denmark axes are mostly found in male graves (though there are known exceptions)<sup>1</sup>, whilst in Norway they are not uncommon in female graves (as discussed in Gardela 2020; catalogued in Stylegar 2007).

A relevant concern is what to do with conflicting assemblages. One example is when weapons are found with textile-working tools. It raises the question of which find category should be considered as the strongest gender indicator, if indeed, they are gender indicators at all. Does it indicate a man with textile tools, or a woman with weapons? Both possibilities present problems within the traditional narrowly gendered framework, structured on binary categories, used for the Viking Age. I contend however, that gender is of secondary importance and that the wrong questions are asked. A framework that allows for flexible gendered roles may provide a more satisfactory interpretation of such seemingly transgressive burials. Together with burials that do not clearly fit into either gendered category, flexible roles would challenge traditional modern narrow gender definitions and expose how constrained researchers may be by a binary system in their interpretations of social identities.

### **The material**

The statistical material used in this article is drawn from the author's PhD thesis (Moen 2019 a). This was gathered from selected burial sites in the modern-day county of Vestfold, including the Kaupang cemeteries (Blindheim and Heyerdahl-Larsen 1995; Stylegar 2007), Gulli (Gjerpe 2005), Nes, Nordre Farmen, Bjerke, and Melau near the river Numedalslågen (Nicolaysen 1884, 1886, 1887, 1888, 1894) (see Fig. 1. for a map of the selected sites).



*Figure 2. The Iron Age cemetery at Hedrum Prestegård in Vestfold. The image illustrates how external shape and placement in the cemetery does not reveal social differences. Photo: Marianne Moen.*



Female	Male	Indeterminate	Total
73 (33%)	92 (42%)	53 (24%)	218

Table 1. Overview of material categorised according to gender (Moen 2019 a: 150).

The material comprised 218 burials, with gendered representation as per the table below, based on traditional gendered categories.<sup>2</sup> Gender was in this case assigned on the basis of grave goods as the presence of gendered and non-gendered objects was perceived as valuable for a discussion regarding similarities and differences (Moen 2019 a).

An examination of the grave goods in these selected burials arguably shows both gendered differences and significant similarities. A trend is visible wherein oval brooches and textile working tools tend not to be found together with weapons in quantity (Moen 2019 a). However, it is also equally evident that by looking beyond these find categories, a wealth of shared artefacts is revealed that defies perceived genders. As table 2, below, clearly shows, weapons tend to be found in male gendered graves, although they also occur in female burials (Moen 2019 a). Equally, although the occurrence of jewellery (here listed under the category personal adornment) is more pronounced in female gendered graves, it is also found in 40% of the male gendered graves, which is hardly a negligible proportion.

However, interesting patterns also emerge in an examination of the categories that are considered less gendered. Indicators of domestic wealth, including: e.g. cooking equipment, domestic animals, chests and keys; anything in short, which indicates responsibility for household matters. A breakdown of the artefact types in this category shows further interesting trends.

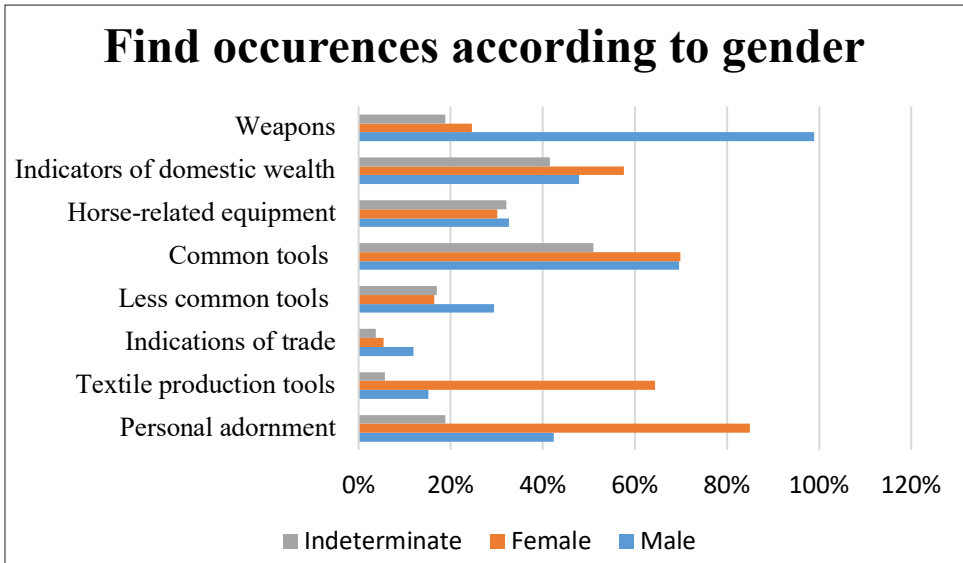


Table 2. Grave goods according to gender (Moen 2019 a: 262).

## Indicators of domestic wealth

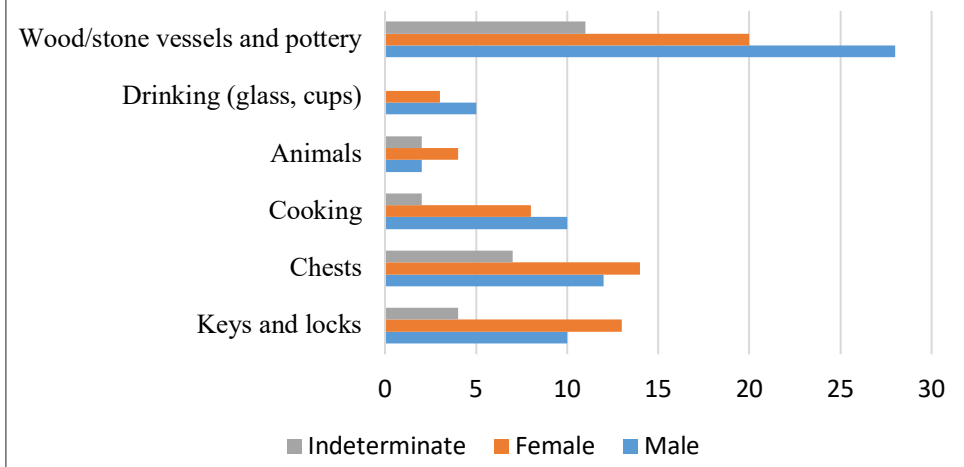


Table 3. Indicators of domestic wealth further divided to show the level of shared categories across gendered lines (Moen 2019 a: 261).

It could be argued that the traditional modern gendered divide imagined when discussing mortuary remains from the Viking Age, is in part an artificial analytical construct. Imposed by traditional modern values, it ignores the presence of jewellery in male gendered graves. At the same time it discounts the presence of horses and tools, as well as their potentially wider meaning, in female gendered graves. Arguably, this can be traced to the culturally ingrained belief that sex corresponds to natural gendered behavioural patterns, an idea which is both contested and controversial (Fausto-Sterling 1993; Joel, Bermanb, Tavorc et al. 2015) and will be discussed further below.

Furthermore, the presence of a significant proportion of burials that cannot be assigned a gender (Table 1) deserves further note. The potential implications are vast indeed, notwithstanding the possible explanations of unequal preservation or wealth. If gendered graves are used for interpretations of gender roles, the graves that do not display a clear gender affiliation must also be allowed to be equally representative. Researchers cannot allow them to be discounted because of what they lack, as it is modern perceptions that interpret them as incomplete in comparison with other burials. It is revealing that almost a quarter of graves in the selected material<sup>3</sup> do not comply with the traditional male/female divide expected in Viking Age mortuary material. This suggests a need to look outside these narrow categories when imagining Viking Age society. Either the manner in which gender was communicated went beyond a customary divide of brooches and swords, or perhaps it was not always as supremely important as is commonly assumed to have been. Both of these possibilities have significant implications for how gender constellations in the Viking Age are envisaged and discussed.



Figure 3. The weapons found in the Nordre Kjølén grave (C22541) © 2020 Kulturhistorisk museum, University of Oslo. CC BY-SA 4.0

Externally, perceived male and female graves were found in the same type of structures, with comparable sizes and locations (Moen 2019 a)<sup>4</sup> (see Fig. 3. for an illustration of a Viking Age cemetery). How bodies were treated is also comparable across perceived genders, with gendered graves dominating inhumations and male and female burials in equal numbers. Generally, cremations display fewer gender indicators and the majority of graves that could not be assigned a gender were found in this group. Whether this is due to natural causes affecting preservation or damage incurred during the cremation process, or whether it can be attributed to more profound reasons for the choice of ritual – perhaps dependent of social role/status – remains unanswered at this stage.

This admittedly limited sample of burials can thus be argued to support a degree of similarities, which directly challenge gender as an ideological divide manifested in all practical concerns and daily life.

### **Summary of the material: similarities over differences**

The absence of weapons in the previous discussion may strike some as conspicuous in an article ostensibly focused on gender and war. However, as mentioned in the introduction, this article is more concerned with the cultural framework that influences the rhetoric and discourse of war and gender. Certainly (as shown in Table 2), the material confirms that weapons did occur in female gendered graves. However, with the important caveat that the display differs from that of male graves, since they are almost exclusively found in single numbers. Male gendered burials often contain multiple weapons (Nicolaysen 1884, 1886, 1887, 1888, 1894; Gjerpe 2005; Stylegar 2007; Moen 2019 a ). Nonetheless, the frequency is interesting: with 14 of 73 female graves (19%) containing axes, five female burials at Kaupang containing arrowheads (Ka. 253, Ka. 254, Ka. 280, Ka. 303, Ka. 22), two female burials containing spearheads and at least one a shield boss (Ka. 282, Ka. 296 and Ka. 253) (Stylegar 2007).

Perhaps more significant however, is that archaeology has shown how women and men were buried with the same types of artefacts, or with what can ultimately be described as similar social indicators, e.g. tools of trade, farming and domestic management (as seen in Table 2). In summary, it can be argued that the archaeological material strongly supports the argument that men and women acted together as social agents to uphold social codes. Moreover, if it is accepted that war was a basic social code in Viking Age society, it would not be too much of a stretch to suggest that both women and men were ideologically invested in it.

### **Discussion: War as overarching ideology**

The stated purpose of this article is not to prove that women participated in acts of war, but rather to discuss the likelihood of a shared social investment in an ideology of war. Although the known examples of women buried with weapons are few, their mere existence suggests that researchers ought to consider that women could and did own – and very likely used – weapons at times (see Harrison 2015 for a discussion of interpreting weapons in graves). Moreover, it also strengthens arguments for their investment in the underlying ideologies that supported such cultural norms.

By envisaging a society where gender did not always represent a fundamental divide, neither in ways of being nor in the ideologies to which a person subscribed. Perceived social roles and responsibilities can instead be shared across, rather than be divided by gender. The material discussed above can be contextualised into such a framework to reveal a level of shared concerns, as much as divided spheres. Through further analyses of the presumed underlying ideology of war – arguably permeating both life and death – it is possible to suggest that a gendered divide regarding who were invested in acts of war may be a modern imposition on the material.

Whilst violence, war and weapons are pervasive accoutrements to Viking Age society they are neither gender-exclusive, nor do they exclude parallel functions and experiences for those who did carry them. Whilst carrying a weapon may indeed denote social status, it need not limit one's social status to this singular, martial function.

### **Desiring peace or aspiring to war**

Neil Price highlighted a crucial, yet often under-communicated aspect of Viking beliefs when he pointed out that a society where not even the afterlife was eternal, but in fact predetermined to end in violence and annihilation (Price 2019: 23–5), is fundamentally different from the Christian doctrine which underpins historical Western ideologies. This forces a return to the situated nature of all knowledge production and the need to acknowledge how current ways of being influence ways of thinking about the past. In the modern west, most people are preconditioned to perceive peace as an ideal, or as the ultimate goal and reward. Archaeology and anthropology, however, provide examples of alternative perspectives, where war may even have been desirable. Therefore it is worthwhile to query what the conditions are that create the supposition that an ideology of war is less rewarding than one of peace.

It also leads on to the question of what creates a belief that such an ideology would fall more naturally to men than to women. This is after all an implicit assumption of many dis-

cussions regarding male aggression as a driving force of social momentum (Barrett 2008; Raffield, Price and Collard 2016). By placing aggression as an a priori male trait, such accounts rely on Darwinist beliefs where male aggression ultimately drives human progress (Darwin 1981 [1871]). Biological-determinism theories of this ilk tend to justify male dominance over women as natural, due to men's supposedly higher levels of aggression, yet the scientific support remains scanty and contestable (Connell 1987: 69; Fine 2016). The assumed links between violence, aggression and men can and should therefore be examined in the light of cultural assumptions and expectations.

Since interpreting the past must always be done in the present, the feasibility of achieving a view uninfluenced by current thought patterns and ideologies may indeed be called into doubt. However, if enquiries are based on the understanding that all knowledge claims are 'situated' (Haraway 2013 [1988]), at the very least credible interpretations may be created and defended. One aspect of modern Western gendered ideology that may feasibly have a bearing on discussions of past war and violence, is the ingrained cultural belief in women as carers in their capacity as mothers (Elshtain 1995 [1987]), which has had a profound impact on perceived female roles, opportunities and social mobility (see e.g. Conkey and Spector 1984; Wylie 1991).

References to the role of women as carers link back to Darwinist ideas and models such as 'Man the Hunter' (Darwin 1981 [1871]; Lee and DeVore 1968) where women are cast as natural carers and men as natural doers. Herein lies the divide in gendered language, assignment of roles and social importance in interpretations of prehistory, which continues to make women passive and men active (Dempsey 2019; Moen 2019 b). Its influence is also felt in the ongoing cultural promotion of women's 'meek' softer nature contrasted to men's aggressiveness (Fine 2016). Seen together, these arguments suggest that beliefs regarding women as naturally less inclined to violence and more inclined to nurturing are modern concepts. Hence they cannot be immediately applied to what little is known of female ideals in the Viking Age (Clover 1993; Mundal 2014; Orning 2017). For instance, when examining what may be labelled as the most intimate form of terminal violence, that of infanticide, there is little to suggest that the gendered behaviour of the Viking world would have conformed to modern expectations (Scott 2001; Näsström 2002; Eriksen 2017). Whilst some sources seem to suggest that male heads of households were the ones who ordered infanticide, others clearly indicate women as the instigators (Wicker 1998, 2012). Worth mentioning, although the issue is contentious, is that when early Christians legislated against infanticide their laws suggest that the mothers were the primary instigators (Mundal 1987). Norse mythology also provides glimpses of female figures that are far from soft and nurturing in their personas (Solli 2004; Larrington 2014; Friðriksdóttir 2020). These arguments combined with the archaeological material above support ideas of social fluidity and shared ideologies.

Though a Viking Age female ideal may be hard to establish, there is little to suggest that it had anything in common with later soft, feminine ideals (e.g. discussed by Clover 1993; Arwill-Nordbladh 1998; Moen 2019 a). This emphasises the problems inherent in applying modern ways of thought to the past, in this case by presupposing the presence of a natural, female way of being. This idea, when examined closely, cannot be anything but contentious. The assumption that women would be inherently less invested in ideologies of war than men may have more to do with a modern traditionally gendered discourse than with material remains.





*Figure 4. The so called 'Hårby Valkyrie', a Viking Age figurine depicting a woman bearing arms, which is often discussed in connection with mythological women and war. Photo: Asger Kjærgaard, Odense Bys Museer. Reproduced with kind permission.*

### **Concluding remarks: gendered differences or social similarities**

A final point is that in order to pose meaningful questions about social identity in the Viking Age, modern prejudices need to be abandoned. These include fixed beliefs that gender is biologically determined as binary (either/or) male or female. Instead, this article argues for an approach which considers fluidity in traits, desires and motivations, which are shared between men and women. Furthermore, it disputes the modern western belief that the ideology of war is something undesirable, especially for women.

If researchers are to truly approach the question of what an ideology of war may have looked like, they first need to decide how they define social ideologies. In suggesting – as this article does – that it permeates the fabric of society, it would be naïve to think that only one half of the population was invested in it. An explanation that omits women is based on modern prejudices and beliefs in a female distaste for violence and war. It is not based on written sources and archaeological material, which clearly indicate that women also invested in the ideologies of violence.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Such as at Bogøvej, Langeland (Pedersen 2011: 49).
- <sup>2</sup> Meaning that weapons equated with male expressions and that oval brooches as well as textile-working tools equated with female expressions.
- <sup>3</sup> It is worth mentioning that this is representative of the percentages of gendered graves elsewhere as well, with a large percentage of ungendered graves being common in most Viking Age cemeteries (Svanberg 2003; Harrison and Ó Floinn 2014).
- <sup>4</sup> There is one significant exception to this, namely the long mounds, which rarely if ever contain male graves in Norway (Tsigaridas 1998). One potent exception to this rule, however, is the famous Gjermundbu burial, where the only known Viking helmet was found. The grave is archaeologically gendered as male, but is placed under a long mound (Grieg 1947).

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