



**HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS**

**Hugvísindasvið**

## **A grave revisited**

*On grave robbery in Viking Age Iceland*

**Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs**

**Erna Þórarinsdóttir**

**September 2008**

**Háskóli Íslands**

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**Fornleifafræði**

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## **Abstract**

A relatively large part of the graves from the Viking period in Iceland have been robbed or disturbed in some way. Until present day, this fact has not caught the interest of archaeologists working in Iceland and has therefore remained unstudied. Grave goods are the basis of research materials representing material culture from the Viking Age. It is possible that incomplete grave furniture gives the wrong picture of what objects people had in their possession during the Viking Age. It is essential that the implications of this should be taken into account in archaeological studies. This paper argues as well the necessity that reasons behind grave robbery be studied, since 1/6 of the graves found so far from the Viking Period, have been robbed.

## Introduction

### *Aim*

Archaeology deals with the interaction between humans, artifacts and space. Archaeologists wonder why some sites are chosen for utilization while others are left unused and which sites are chosen to return to. The archaeologist's task is to explore this interaction that is continually reflected through both material and immaterial components. Grave robbery is one such matter that has caught the interest of archaeologists as it concerns people's perception of their surroundings. It is the sites people choose to return to that are the focus of this paper, specifically the burial sites as locations people choose to revisit for various different reasons.

The aim of this thesis is to explore possible reasons for grave robbery during Viking times in Iceland. It is questionable whether there is a pattern behind the opening of graves. Are they broken into for social or religious reasons or perhaps for simpler reasons of plunder? Robbery has been documented in many of the burials excavated in Iceland. This could have serious consequences. If male graves, for example, were more frequently broken into than female graves, the statistics of what is recovered by today might actually under-represent the male grave furniture.

Another conclusion drawn from this is that weapons might have been among the favored targets of the grave-robbers. The reasons for that may be various, such as to legitimate power and authority. If this proves to be the case there were probably more weapons around in Iceland in pre-Christian times than what is indicated by the grave-goods found until now. However, there may be other plausible reasons for grave robbery, such as reburying the dead elsewhere or that their presence is seen as a threat in some way.

The first chapter of this thesis covers how archaeologists interpret burial sites. The second chapter covers all documented pagan graves in Iceland that have signs of

having been robbed. In the third chapter connections with grave robbing in other Nordic countries will be discussed, and the possible explanations for grave robbery explored. Finally a chapter with discussion and conclusions will follow.

### ***Method***

As basis for this work Kristján Eldjárn's book, *Kuml og haugfé úr heiðnum sið á Íslandi* is used. His detailed descriptions, discussions and interpretations of pagan burials found around the country give plentiful material to base this thesis on. The book covers graves found until 1999. Graves found from 2000 until present time will be discussed briefly in a separate section.

# **1 Archaeological interpretation of burial**

This chapter is about key approaches archaeologists have used to study and interpret burials. Key approaches that will be discussed are identity (in this paper gender, status and ethnicity or kinship), beliefs about death, cosmology and territory. Some examples of the above topics will be given based on studies done by archaeologists in different parts of the world. At last studies of Icelandic pagan graves will be examined as well.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, antiquarians opened graves and barrows for their treasures, whereas in times of modern archaeology the focus has been on the mortuary domain because cemeteries are more recognizable than settlements, and therefore a more accessible source of information. It was not so long ago that archaeologists started focusing their attention on the communities doing the burying instead of mainly looking at artifacts accompanying the burials (Stoodley, 1999). Recently the focus has shifted, from the more solid, easily interpretable evidence of artifacts to the less tangible evidence for burial customs and traditions, i.e. their materiality, more carefully hidden within the mortuary remains of societies. The idea of a material lifeworld that we conceive and construct but yet shapes our human experience in praxis is a provocative one (Meskell, 2005). According to Miller (2005) materiality can at its most obvious and mundane mean artifacts. But such a definition quickly pales when the larger scope of materiality is considered, the ephemeral, the imaginary, the biological, and the theoretical, in other words all that would have been external to the simple definition of an artifact. It can be said that the concept of material culture includes the results or leftovers of intentional and unintentional human action (Fahlander and Oestigaard, 2008).

It could be said that the New Archaeology chased away the inhibitions emphasized by cultural-history approaches to interpretation. The New Archaeology rejected older modes of reasoning, which were rooted in need for empiricist caution when inferences were made from archaeological remains about the symbolic, ritual and



social aspects of human behavior. With it, the New Archaeology brought possibilities for investigation of the upper rungs of the ladder of infer. If the right hypothesis could be formulated then propositions about ritual and social organization could be tested (Parker Pearson, 1999; Stoodley, 1999). This opened the arena of study drastically and increased the possibilities of forming new theories and testing them. However, it also increased the danger of infer and speculation to the extreme. Developments in the 1980's were in contrast with theoretical positions of the New Archaeology, drawing the attention to the fact that ritual does not offer a simple or direct reflection of society. Burials do not directly mirror life; they result from ritual behavior and may therefore be indirect reflections of society. It is crucial to take into consideration that burial customs might have been a reflection of what the living wanted the outside world to see (Stoodley, 1999) and not actually a true reflection of what that society was. It stands to reason, that mortuary rituals are problematic archaeological materials to study. A balance between reason and creative thinking is difficult to find and where that balance lies is open to interpretation. This is very pertinent in the study of grave sites, since archaeologists tend to subject their own views and ideas on the materials they study. It is a frustrating thought that one will never know the truth. Nevertheless it does not make seeking the truth any less worth while. Perhaps it simply means that the answers to our questions should be viewed as one step in the ladder, not the top one.

### *Identity*

Identity is a difficult concept to define. Perhaps because it is assumed to be self-explanatory, and because it has been used with ambiguity, teamed with both individual- and group identity. According to Díaz-Andreu and Lucy (2005) identity could be understood as the "...individuals' identification with broader groups on the basis of differences socially sanctioned as significant. Identity is linked to the sense of belonging. It is through identity that we perceive ourselves and how others see us...".

## *Identity - Status*

Funerary archaeologists have always sought to establish a distinction between status (standing, position or rank) achieved in life and ascribed status. Within archaeology the term *ascribed status* has been used to describe societies in which high status is hereditary (i.e. hierarchical ordering of status by birth). On the other hand there are societies in which high status is achieved, that is, broadly egalitarian (Parker Pearson, 1999; Stoodley, 1999).

According to Parker Pearson (1999) status is "... based on a specific style of life, maintained and expressed through shared living and eating arrangements, privileged access to power, wealth and scarce resources, and the maintenance of intra-group marriage alliances and other customary conventions ...". Another way to define rank or status is Tainter's model in which the rank of the deceased is mirrored in the measurable communal effort and energy expenditure invested in the funerary rites for that person (Babić, 2005).

The analysis of social differences has been a primary concern of funerary archaeology for the last few decades. Parker Pearson (1999), with his discussion of the stratification of societies has offered the following concepts to make the distinction clearer: Societies are either vertically differentiated or horizontally differentiated. The Icelandic society during settlement times is an example of a vertically differentiated society. In such a society there is differential individual access to wealth and status (Hayeur-Smith, 2004), there is a vertical stratification between chief, vassal and slave. Another example of this type is the king, commoner and slave type of social organization (Parker Pearson, 1999). In horizontally differentiated societies people are divided into social groups of relatively similar status (Hayeur-Smith, 2004) and in a sense Iceland during the Viking Age could be considered horizontally differentiated as well, since there were several competing chiefs, all of similar status that were not ruled by any king. It seems that the lines are not as clear cut as Parker Pearson thinks they are. Rather than being either or, societies seem to be both

vertically and horizontally differentiated, at least Iceland was at its time of settlement.

Several archaeologists have recently attempted to study status through burial. In a study from 1977, Peebles and Kus used interpretation of the aspects of the social persona represented in funerary contexts as a basis for distinguishing social inequalities characteristic of ranked societies. According to their scheme the social persona can be divided into two parts, the subordinate and the super-ordinate. Subordinate aspects are age, sex and achievement while alive. Super-ordinate dimensions are indicated by high energy expenditure, grave goods or other symbolism which cannot be attributed to age, sex or achieved status. This is to say that social differences at the super-ordinate level might indicate inequality. According to this theory, any society in which burials include both subordinate and super-ordinate social personae can be interpreted as a ranked society (Parker Pearson, 1999).

O'Shea studied burial practices in the North American Great Plains during the historical period. He was particularly interested in developing a methodology for archaeology which took into account the filtering processes that intervene between the amount and type of information that can be observed in a living society and that which is left for archaeological recovery. Based on his studies on ethno historic data, O'Shea noted that a vertical social position was symbolized by the degree of elaboration in grave construction and by the types and quantities of grave goods. The horizontal social positions, such as membership of a clan, moiety or a sodality, were expressed through channels of neutral value. Based on this, horizontal dimensions were marked by perishable material culture including coiffure, clothing and totemic grave goods, while vertical status distinctions were marked by non-perishable artifacts (Parker Pearson, 1999).

Zvelebil employed a similar dimensional approach while working with O'Shea on a Mesolithic cemetery in Karelia. They found out that there were several differences in grave goods association other than age and sex. For instance, the number of grave goods in the grave tended to go hand in hand with the presence of tooth pendants. Bear was placed with the wealthiest, who were mostly adult men. Elk and beaver were placed mostly with mature men and women of all ages. At last there were burials with no pendants, containing mostly old men. These differences were interpreted as markers of physical prowess perhaps linked to food procurement (Parker Pearson, 1999).

### *Identity - Gender*

"Gender can be defined as an individual's self-identification and the identification of others to a specific gender category on grounds of their culturally perceived sexual difference. Sex on the other hand refers to the physical and genetic elements of the body that are related to reproduction" (Díaz-Andreu, 2005). Still sex and gender are conflicting concepts that often make the study of burial data either confusing or unclear. This is true especially when addressing graves that were excavated up until the early 20th century in Iceland. During this time, techniques and excavation methods were far from rigorous (Hayeur-Smith, 2004). Often they were conducted by amateur historians, who focused more on the artifacts than the context, which in many cases resulted in poor excavation techniques and lacking documentation. Ideas of sex and gender were drastically different from what they are today, and by modern standards, perspectives tended to conform to stagnant ideas of male and female roles. This could have caused grave materials to have been wrongly interpreted which might continue to have repercussions even today.

Parker Pearson (1999) speaks of the difficulties caused by our preconception of predetermined categories of males and females. This makes it difficult for us to understand sex and gender outside our own cultural milieu. Therefore archaeologists must beware of the dichotomy between natural, biological sex and constructed,

cultural gender. A considerable complexity and fluidity of sexual identities should be expected (Yates, 1993) if archaeological remains are to be interpreted accurately. And even should such complexity and fluidity be taken into account, interpretation will still remain just that, an interpretation and not a fact.

Hayeur-Smith (2004) brings up valid questions when she asks how archaeologists evaluate the differences between male and female graves. Should that be done on the basis of biological differences and sexing? Or on the basis of grave goods that are no longer a reflection of actual biological sex but rather how a given society chooses to identify one of its members, as socially male or socially female? Another important factor relates to when ambiguous graves are analyzed: should priority be given to the assumed sex of the dead, or to the artifacts found with the remains? Is it gender roles that are being looked at, or really just associations between sex and certain artifacts? The danger of relying on grave goods to gender graves is that any argument becomes circular as well as reinforcing one's own prejudices (G.M. Lucas verbal source, 24. October 2007). This might possibly be a large problem within archaeological research in Iceland, since many of the skeletons found from the Viking Age have been sexed according to grave goods in the graves (see Eldjárn, 2000). It is also a fact that identification of male or female characteristics from skeletal remains is not easy and sometimes impossible. The sexing of a child's skeleton is even more difficult. This, as has been said before makes sexing and gender identification a difficult task, one that should be approached with methods more scientific than those of the past.

According to Sørensen (Parker Pearson, 1999) one of the most useful archaeological sources for pursuing gender archaeology is burial activities. Parker Pearson goes on to say that "... it is very clear that funerary archaeology is a crucial element of any research into past gender categorizations ...". It is, however, fully apparent that the conclusions we may draw, based on our observations of the non-perishable material culture from funerary settings is at best only a partial view of the full costume worn in death and does not do any kind of justice to the settings and customs surrounding

funerary ceremonies. At most, we can make educated guesses, or plausible hypotheses. Parker Pearson speaks on this note when he says:

As others studying the anthropology of emotion and the archaeology of compassion have noted, the evidence is often ambiguous. This is not simply a problem of lack of evidence but of reading and understanding the complexity of contrasting emotions and the interplay of inner feelings manipulated and orchestrated through the expectations of the ritual routine (Parker Pearson, 1999:104).

Parker Pearson goes on to say that considering the problems of methodology, where osteological analysis is not always isolated from prior inferences about gender made on the basis of artifact assemblages, there are many potential flaws, biases and problems in the study of gender from funerary contexts (Parker Pearson, 1999). Interpretation of gender is fraught with difficulty.

### *Identity - Kinship*

Attempts to use mortuary remains to draw conclusions about kinship and other related aspects of social organization have remained unsuccessful. Descent, residence and notions such as matriarchy have eluded search and have been demonstrated to be complex and problematic entities. There are two areas however, where at least a basic understanding of such elements of social organization is reachable. One is in those instances where stratigraphic sequences of burials allow for certain conclusions about kinship. The other is through the use of human biological data, in relation to funerary analysis of archaeological context and association (Parker Pearson, 1999).

By studying sequences of burial it is possible to make inferences about social precedence and succession from the vertical ordering of the dead. An example of this is the large Viking Age grave mounds of Western Norway. They contain large numbers of bodies. Dommasnes has shown that even though more women's graves are found in the larger mounds than men's, all the female graves, with only one exception, are secondary burials. For all sizes of mounds, secondary burials are twice as common for women as for men. Based on this, Dommasnes concludes that the relative lack of women's primary burials may be due to their social standing within

their families. The mounds were often built close to the farmhouses, and “... as such interpreted as family tombs constructed over the founding father of each farm” (Parker Pearson, 1999).

There are three major biological techniques available to archaeologists studying kinship. The first is the analysis of the form and shape of bones and teeth. The second, the identification of blood groups from ancient human remains, palaeoserology, is possible from blood cells surviving in bone as well as in preserved soft tissue. Thirdly, mitochondrial DNA is useful for the study of ancient remains. It allows for the easy identification of differences between individuals unless they are closely related. Its preservation also seems to not be dependent on the age of the remains but on factors of historical preservation (Parker Pearson, 1999). Interesting results were obtained from a small fifth century AD cemetery near Mözs in Hungary. Blood- and collagen-typing linked twenty-five of the twenty-eight skeletons, leading to the identification of three generations of four families. Blood groups were used to construct probabilities of relationships according to constraints of their inheritance. Three of the four families were considered to have intermarried in the second generation. Children were buried closer to their mothers than their fathers, indicating a strongly matrifocal family structure (Parker Pearson, 1999).

As discussed above opportunities in research bring along issues of interpretation which will be complex and often problematic. But perhaps with improved technology, the possibilities for more accurate research will become greater as well. This must be said with a note of reservation however, since increased technology comes with increased costs, limiting the scope of potential research.

### *Beliefs about death and cosmology*

The dead are everywhere, inhabiting our memories and affecting our world and future decisions. Probably the only fact that everyone can unanimously agree on regarding the subject of beliefs about death and cosmology is that it is a very

intangible subject to touch upon archaeologically. Ancient religious beliefs and behavior are more or less only available to us from literary and historical sources. Therefore, they are not so ancient after all, since such sources date back much less far than the beliefs and behaviors they speak of. Fragmentation and uncertainty are a common denominator of archaeologies of religion. Few but Parker Pearson (see for example 1999) and Fahlander (2008) have attempted to write copiously about the subject. Widespread skepticism on whether ancient belief-systems can at all be studied has not helped the matter (Edwards, 2005). However there are some scholars who have touched upon the subject. Among them is Hayeur-Smith (2004) who notes in her doctoral thesis that the rituals involved in the burial practice, the daily religious behavior and beliefs, are not usually apparent in the archaeological record. Härke (1997) discusses this as well when he mentions that "... ritual occurs before, during and after cremation or burial and frequently much of this ritual cannot be seen through the archaeological data". Parker Pearson (1999) disagrees when he says that the archaeology of death can potentially give us a phenomenological perspective on changes in human conditions since the times of the earliest hominids. He goes on to say that we can attempt to follow the development of various ideas of mortality and the transcendence of death, by not only focusing on abstract notions of ecological adaptation, the evolution of social complexity or the rise of civilization.

It is clear that we can and have to heavily rely on the archaeological understanding of funerary-related material culture to study and interpret past beliefs and rituals. The graves, monuments and material associations which link the treatment of the dead to other aspects of social life, ought to be used to piece together an alternative side of the human story. Luckily, for the last five thousand years we have been aided by texts and historical sources (Parker Pearson, 1999).

It is through looking at the early treatment of the dead that archaeologists have tried to shed light on the origins of symbolism, ritual and religion. Some have considered the placement of grave goods as proof for the concept of an afterlife and even the



concept of the soul. These questions are problematic, and their answers can be tainted by the researcher's cultural and religious background. It might be more fruitful to explore how much the treatment of the dead is responsible for new concepts of the self and the social, through the development of a sophisticated awareness of the nature of death and hence of human existence. Parker Pearson (1999) says that "... funerary rites are basic to our understanding of our own final destinies and their actions import their own meanings into existence, so that death reveals the meaning of life rather than religion giving meaning to death". This is an interesting statement, and is perhaps not so bold if looked at from a different perspective. To say that funerary rites are basic to our understanding of our final destinies is to put things very strongly. The experiences people have throughout their life and the stories they are told by others contribute to what they think about death and how they and their collective society feel the dead should be treated. These experiences are then the foundation of the funerary rites within each society. Our destinies are revealed to us little by little, throughout our lives if we are lucky, or perhaps never at all. Perhaps the rituals of a funeral are a result of people's conclusions about life and death, and not basic to their understanding of their destiny. It may be that religion or ritual is exactly a means to understand death. It is a way to make it less mysterious and easier to face and also a way to make departure of a loved one less painful.

### *Territory*

Where to put the remains of the dead is generally not a matter of functional expediency. The place of the dead in any society will have significant and powerful connotations within people's perceived social geographies. The dead may still be active members of the society – they can inhabit the world as spirits or ancestors – and the abodes of the dead may not always correspond to the places where their physical remains lie. Indeed, mortal remains may indicate liminal spaces between the world of the living and the spirit world (Parker Pearson, 1999:141).

At the same time, the fixing of the dead in the land is a social and political act which ensures access and rights over natural resources. Placing the dead is one of the most

visible activities through which human societies map out and express their relationships to ancestors, land and the living (Parker Pearson, 1999).

Through ethnographic accounts of the Temuan of Malaysia, Saxe formulated his Hypothesis 8: “Formal disposal areas for the dead are used to affirm corporate group rights over crucial but restricted resources” (Parker Pearson, 1999). Later Charles reformulated Hypothesis 8:

Social groups residing in environments in which the natural or culturally modified resource distribution supports a sedentary or restricted mobility mode of subsistence may employ formal disposal areas for the dead to symbolize corporate membership, rights, and inheritance, whereas social groups reliant on a more mobile means of subsistence will not (Parker Pearson, 1999:137).

He suggests that sedentary agriculturalists are likely to symbolize their rights to territory by establishing a cemetery on or within its boundaries. In line with this argument, monumental funerary constructions were defined as territorial claims of a community over resources (Babić, 2005).

It is also possible that our ancestors may have discovered during the Viking Age, that when defending territorial claims or legitimizing rights to land or other resources, heirlooms, placed in graves and later retrieved, as tangible links to their ancestors, were their most powerful weapons of all (Lillios, 1999). More on studies of territory will be discussed in the chapter on Icelandic studies below.

### *Icelandic studies of pagan graves*

A pagan grave is usually a shallow pit, into which the corpse is laid on its back with its knees drawn up. The corpse's belongings, or grave goods, are placed next to it and it is then covered with soil and often stones as well (Eldjárn, 2000; Solberg, 2000; Kristjánsdóttir, 2004; Wolf, 2004).

Icelandic pagan graves are unobtrusive in the landscape (Kristjánsdóttir, 2004) and are therefore difficult to find. Erosion over centuries has worn down mounds that

were never especially large to begin with. The custom of placing graves under mounds seems to have been practiced in Iceland in pagan times. It is therefore possible that graves were more visible for a few generations after burial. Accounts in literature from the middle ages tell of mounds in such a way to make one think they were seen by the writers (Eldjárn, 2000). Intentional grave robbery is more likely to have happened while the graves were still visible and more easily accessible to those who wanted to break in, whereas disturbances of sites later on might have happened when they became visible because of erosion, other natural forces or because of coincidence.

Graves that are rich in grave goods appear to have not been very common in Viking Age Iceland. The few objects placed with corpses were, however, of good quality, indicating that the small number placed in graves was not caused by poverty but reluctance to let go of precious items (Eldjárn, 2000). It must have been difficult for people to give up valuable and even useful items only to see them buried under rocks and ground, and Eldjárn (2000) believes this reluctance much have been common all over Scandinavia. There is reason to believe that the idea of breaking into the grave to reclaim a perfectly good sword or knife, or a beautiful piece of jewellery would have been a tempting thought to those who watched those items disappear under ground. Perhaps they believed that after a certain amount of time had passed, the dead person had no need for the items any longer and that they were safe to be reclaimed by the living.

Eldjárn's breakthrough work, *Kuml og haugfé*, which was published in 1956 was the first detailed study of Icelandic pagan burials and grave goods. On its own, his work is a great endeavor and remarkable for its time, although a little lacking in theory and perhaps more on the practical side. It is not meant as an interpretative text but more as an overview of grave sites in Iceland and their grave goods found to date. The book consists mostly of lists and data, the text is short and to the point. His work was mainly focused on the analysis of artifact typology, and organizing information

from past excavations within one work (Friðriksson, 2004). A lot of the excavations Eldjárn describes in his thesis were done by other researchers: Sometimes by inexperienced excavators, and sometimes not by archaeologists at all, but locals and laymen. A lot of information has been lost, and as has been mentioned before, approaches were often lacking on the methodological and theoretical sides. Of greatest importance was to save the remains, as fast as possible, from the elements, some undergoing construction (Gestsdóttir, 2004) or ignorant people. Context was therefore often lost, and some of the smaller artifacts no doubt as well. Disturbance of burials by human hands can cause mixing of skeletal and artifactual material. There is a high risk such disturbances went un-noticed or unrecorded in older excavations, giving present day archaeologists false information about excavation context (Stoodley, 1999). It is possible that some graves excavated in Iceland and thought to be poor in grave goods, were actually robbed graves but this fact had escaped the excavators.

Friðriksson has continued the work of excavating and studying pagan graves in Iceland. One of the approaches he has focused on is the topography of graves in the landscape. An example of this is his article *The topography of Iron Age burials in Iceland*, published in 2004. He notes that even if there was no particular focus on the topographical aspect of pagan burial finds, there is still sufficient information in the majority of previous reports on the location finds to allow the site to be identified (Friðriksson, 2004). This aspect of burial archaeology is connected to Parker Pearson's discussion on formal disposal areas and cemeteries to establish territorial boundaries (Parker Pearson, 1999). Friðriksson divided burial locations into two groups. One consists of burials located near farms and a short distance from the fence walls surrounding the farmhouse. The other type is burials located far away from the farms, and often on or near the boundaries between farms (Friðriksson, 2004). It is difficult to draw conclusions from the material available and further research is necessary. However, the questions this material gives way to are very interesting ones: What first comes to mind is that the burials along boundary lines were set there

to establish division of land owned by different farmers and that when these were fully established later on, burials were placed closer to the farms. But this is not the case, since the graves which can be dated toward the end of the pagan period in Iceland, are mostly situated near boundaries. Perhaps the tensions and pressure rising from less and less available land created the need to establish firmer boundaries as time passed. It is also possible that the answers to these questions are entirely different, and that the burial practices were changing for other reasons (Friðriksson, 2004). Parker Pearson (1999) talks about founding and abandonment of cemeteries and how difficult it is to recognize the exact time point and reason for why burial customs change. Social hierarchy, social changes and coincidence can play a large role in where people are buried. People do not always die at home and perhaps the ones living at the farm were buried near it, and if someone happened to die on a farm who was not a member of the family, he was buried on the boundaries.

Gender in funerary archaeology is another subject that has caught the attention of archaeologists in Iceland. An example of the interpretation of gender roles can be observed through the contents of an Icelandic grave from the Viking period. A grave in Öndverðarnes contained the remains of an individual whose gender was identified as male. The grave goods were of the typical range of more affluent male grave goods found in Iceland, such as a sword, spear head, shield boss, knife and a bone pin. Originally, Stefánsson conducted the sexing in 1956 and concluded that this was the skeleton of a 14 year old boy. This was a misidentification due to some abnormalities of the skeleton and it was later re-identified by Gestsdóttir as an individual between the years 18 and 20. Gestsdóttir's examination revealed abnormal features: extreme height as well as absent epiphyseal fusion indicating that this person had suffered from hypogonadism, reduced or absent testosterone. This meant, according to Gestsdóttir, that the individual had either been subjected to castration, or had suffered from Klinefelter's syndrome<sup>1</sup>. Due to his condition this person will have displayed several female characteristics: delicate bone structure,

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<sup>1</sup> Males born with an extra X chromosome.

lack of pubic and facial hair and development of female breasts (Gestsdóttir, 1998; Hayeur-Smith, 2004). Such a case gives way to speculation about a whole range of social interpretations. How was this person regarded during life? Was he socially considered a female or male? Was his status something other than that of a female or male? Was he an outcast or fully accepted by his society or perhaps even revered by his people? His grave goods testify to what is most masculine: weaponry and other items associated with warfare. But the rest is left to the interpretation of the researcher. Is it possible to ascertain whether the grave goods were put there because this individual was regarded as male by his family and friends, or were they placed in his grave to make sure that in his afterlife he would be as masculine as possible because he was never masculine while he lived?

Perhaps a common marker for Icelandic studies is that little has been done on the imaginative side. Archaeologists working in Iceland tend to stay close to science and avoid much speculation. This does not have to be detrimental to the field, but it does mean that work done in the past does not bring much new and exciting in way of theory. Archaeologists in Scandinavia have reached further in exploring reasons for grave robbery than Icelandic archaeologists have. A possible explanation for this is the fact that the field of archaeology is quite young in Iceland, and perhaps less developed than in the countries surrounding it. There has been a lot of catching up to do, but hopefully that is in the past, with exciting new things ahead. However, excavations of funerary contexts are complex and intricate procedures. Their analysis calls for special methods and, in particular, modes of reasoning in order to cope with the constraints and especially, possibilities of complex burial data (Fahlander and Oestigaard, 2008). This perhaps has been a problem in Iceland, and such fear of interpretation is restrictive. Sometimes our definitions restrain us from approaching our data in a less strict manner (Fahlander and Oestigaard, 2008) and this prevents us from discovering things we otherwise might come across.

In chapter three reasons for grave robbery will be discussed and an attempt will be made to throw further light on why grave robbery was as common in Iceland as it seems to have been. The next chapter will list all pagan graves found in Iceland until year 1999 that appear to have been robbed.

## 2 Robbed graves in pagan Iceland

According to the editor of the second edition of *Kuml og haugfé*, 316 graves had been found when the book was published the second time (Eldjárn, 2000). Out of these 316 graves, approximately 50 (this number is on the lower side) appear to have been broken into at some point. Burial sites were more numerous than this of course, but many have disappeared due to erosion and other types of disturbance (Friðriksson, 2004). Some graves also remain to be found, others never will be found. The fact that nearly 1/6 of all discovered pagan gravesites in the country have been disturbed is dismissed by Friðriksson (2004) as coincidental or as people's attempts to discover valuable or useful objects.

In order to examine different types of burials that appear to have been robbed or disturbed, the graves have to be separated into groups. Eldjárn (2000), in his doctoral thesis, organized his data in a clockwise fashion around the country, giving an individual number to each location (see figure 1 below), usually naming the site with the name of the farm it was found on, or using a landmark near the site as the site name. The numbering he used and the names of each site will be referred to when describing the location of each grave, and the data will be separated into three groups. In group one, graves will be placed in which a male appears to have been buried. Group two contains graves with female skeletons. The definitions of groups one and two are based on Eldjárn's evaluation of the skeletons or his evaluation of the information he had of the skeletons based on research other than his own. Group three contains skeletons whose sex has not been defined, and will be called 'Other'. Graves with no bones will be placed in this group as well. It is possible that the bones have been removed, or that they are so decomposed that they have disappeared. Sometimes it is impossible to tell the difference and therefore all graves without bones, that Eldjárn did not think were obviously robbed, will be omitted from this paper.



Graves that appear intact until they were opened by accident with any type of heavy machinery will not be included in any of the groups. The circumstances of each site will be described as Eldjárn described them. Details for each site vary, with area descriptions at some sites more thorough than at other sites. This does not pose a problem, because it is the details within each grave that will be examined, more than the details of the surrounding area. Only graves which appear to have been robbed will be dealt with, all other graves are not a part of this research.

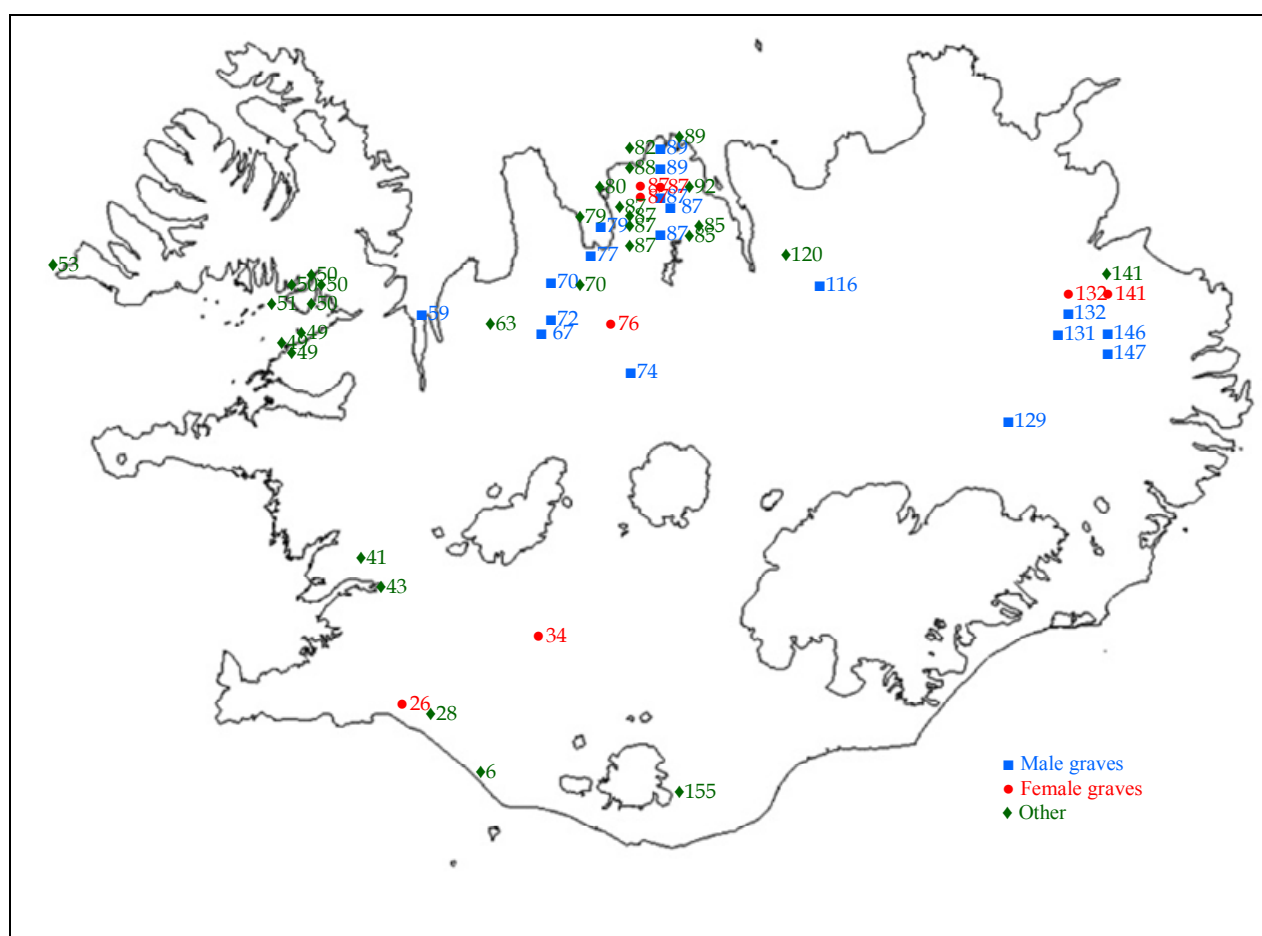


Figure 1. The distribution of robbed pagan graves in Iceland.

### *Group one. Male graves*

**Gröf á Vatnsnesi** (number 59 in Eldjárn's analysis of pagan graves in Iceland): Bones were excavated in 1935 by Þórðarson. They had been found in a little hill, and were all scattered except for the legs that were positioned SE to NW. It was difficult to tell how the corpse was placed in the grave, since the bones had clearly been irregularly

rearranged. The bones are most likely from a middle aged man. The grave was narrow and stones inside it probably surrounded it when it was made. Twelve rusty nails were found in the grave and nothing else.

**Stafn** (number 67 in Eldjárn's analysis): In 1933 sheep collectors found a grave, 5-600 meters south of a sheep pen. The site was examined by Þórðarson shortly after. The grave looked like a small tuft, rising low out of the ground with a few irregular stones inside. Below the tuft was a grave, 1, 68 meters long, 1, 70 meters wide and about 50 centimetres deep. No directions were given. The grave contained bones from a middle aged male, which so irregularly laid out that it indicated the grave had been disturbed before. Iron remains were spread out in the grave, most likely from weapons that fell apart during the disturbance. A few remaining items were still in the grave, one possibly from a sword sheath. 1, 50 meters east of the grave was a horse grave.

**Sólheimar** (number 70 in Eldjárn's analysis): During road work in 1956 two graves were found on a hill 200 meters south of Sólheimar. Eldjárn examined one of the graves that contained the remains of a human and a horse. No grave goods were in the grave and Eldjárn concluded the grave had been robbed at some point. The bones were from a male.

**Elivogur** (number 72 in Eldjárn's analysis): A grave was found in 1954 that contained human and horse bones. The grave was located in eroded gravel hills on the southern most part of the farmland. The grave site was south of the highest hill below large rocks that had been collected and placed on top of the grave. The grave's directions were WNW-ESE, it was approximately 4 meters long and 1 meter wide. A ledge squared the middle of the grave and its eastern part was 10 centimetres higher than its western part. The grave had been disturbed by people. The human bones were in the western part of the site, and the head had turned WNW, they were from a male. The horse bones in the eastern part of the grave were in much disarray and the only artifacts left in the grave were five iron pieces, not easily identifiable.

**Þorljótsstaðir** (number 74 in Eldjárn's analysis): During the summer of 1948 Eldjárn examined a grave site located about 1, 5 kilometers north of the farm. The site was

quite high in a hilly area that was eroded with patches of thick vegetation in between. Bones and stones were sticking out of one of those patches. The stones had been laid on top of the body and when the grass and stones were removed Eldjárn found human, dog and horse bones, greatly disturbed. Some remains of iron and wood items were found. The grave's directions were NW-SE. It was about 2 meters long and 80 centimetres wide. Jawbones at the NW part of the grave indicate the head faced that direction. Most of the dog bones were in the SE part of the grave, at the skeletons feet. The horse bones were in a separate burial nearby. The bones belonged to an aged male.

**Enni** (number 77 in Eldjárn's analysis): Adult male bones were found 1934, in a small hill below the grazing area of the farm. Þórðarson examined the site the following year. The bones had been greatly disturbed, most likely in antiquity. 1, 75 meters west of the human skeleton were horse bones, in disarray as well. A whole nail and five pieces of nails were found with the horse skeleton, mixed with some wood. No other items were found.

**Brimnes** (number 79 in Eldjárn's analysis): In the summer of 1937 Þórðarson excavated three graves by the sea near the farm of Brimnes. The graves extended over an area of about 12 meters lying side by side. The middle grave had been disturbed long ago, in the northwest part where the person was buried. The bones were in a pile in the middle of the grave, quite damaged. They were most likely from an adult male. The grave was 1, 80 meters long and 75 centimetres wide. Its direction was NW-SE, and the person's head is likely to have been in the north west end. South east of the body were two horse skeletons within the same grave. These were untouched. Among other less significant items a spear was found in the horse grave. It was in an upright position, indicating it had been stuck in the grave when the man's grave was opened.

**Ytra-Garðshorn**<sup>2</sup> (number 87 in Eldjárn's analysis): Bones were found at the site 1953 after work had been done with a bulldozer the previous year. They belonged to two men, one male and the other of indefinable sex. The male had been buried in the

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<sup>2</sup> Some of the graves at this site fall into groups two and three and are discussed in respective sections.

grave and the other bones came from a ruined grave nearby. The grave was covered by a large amount of stones, and those and everything else in the grave had previously been moved around. The grave was situated SSW-NNE, was 2 meters long, 80-90 centimetres wide and 60 centimetres deep. The skull bones were all in the grave's west end so the body's head must have been laid there initially. A space of about 50 centimetres separated this grave from a horse grave with two horses which was undisturbed.

Several more graves were found in the area and Eldjárn examined them in 1956 and 1958.

Every inch of the fourth grave had been disturbed. It looked similar to the third grave; it was approximately 1, 75 meters long and 75 centimetres wide. A few human bones were left in the grave and there was no horse grave. The bones belong to an old male.

The eighth grave's directions were SW-NE. It was 4 meters long. Its west end was 90 centimetres wide, where a human had been inhumed. At the corpse's feet a horse had been buried and that part of the grave was 75 centimetres wide. The grave had been robbed but not disturbed as much as some of the others. The bones are from an old person, most likely a male. The grave contained a few artifacts, a knife, pieces of a comb and a spear. The horse grave was untouched and contained bones only.

**Dalvík – Brimnes**<sup>3</sup> (number 89 in Eldjárn's analysis): A multiple burial place was found in 1908 and examined in 1909. Most of the graves were near the seashore. Not all of the graves in this gravesite had been disturbed previously. The excavators of 1909, Bruun and Jónsson did not think the first three graves had been disturbed (Bruun and Jónsson, 1910). Eldjárn on the other hand, thought it possible that grave three had been disturbed because of the layout of the bones inside the grave. Bruun and Jónsson stated that the corpse had been placed into the grave in a sitting position, but Eldjárn disagreed with this. The grave's directions were NE-SW, it was 1, 60 meters long and 90 centimetres wide. The bones were those of a grown male.

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<sup>3</sup> Some of the graves at this site fall into groups two and three and are discussed in respective sections.

There were a few artifacts in the grave. A large spear, remains of a nail and three weights.

A third grave out of thirteen graves at the site that Eldjárn thought might have been disturbed, was grave 12. It was a 6 meters long low mound, 2 meters wide. In it were a skeleton from a human, horse and a dog. Eldjárn assumed it was a male skeleton. The artifacts in the grave were nineteen pieces from a board game, three unidentifiable iron objects and a little knife sharpener.

**Grímsstaðir** (number 116 in Eldjárn's analysis): During the summer of 1937 human bones were found but Eldjárn did not examine the site until 1952. Eldjárn thought the bones had been disturbed, but gives no further details about the site apart from guessing that the bones appear to be those of an old male.

**Aðalból** (number 129 in Eldjárn's analysis): A mound near the farm was examined in 1890 by Vigfússon. It contained two skeletons. One female skeleton was unmoved and the other one, that of a male, was in disarray. There were no artifacts in the graves, but some rust and green colors in the ground indicate there might have been iron and bronze objects there at some point.

**Hrólfstaðir** (number 131 in Eldjárn's analysis): The grave was found in 1996. Its directions were NE-SW and it was 1, 55 meters long and approximately 60 centimetres wide. The bones were those of a male and had been moved around. The grave contained some charred wood remains, a broken comb and a knife.

**Surtstaðir** (number 132 in Eldjárn's analysis): People first became aware of this gravesite in 1945. It was disturbed in 1947 by locals and finally excavated in 1949. Two men were buried on the site, not simultaneously. Only the leg bones and bones of the feet were in original positions and it was evident the grave was disturbed a long time ago. A middle aged man was buried first; the corpse was laid on its back with the head turned southwest. Later, an adult woman was buried in the same grave, and her legs placed over the man's legs. Other bones had been moved and placed in a pile. Locals removed the skulls in 1947, and their location within the grave was unknown. A few items were found, thirteen white glass beads and four fractions, with some thread as well as remains of a knife.

**Brennistaðir** (number 146 in Eldjárn's analysis): Road workers found a grave in 1950 which had evidently been disturbed. The bones belonged to a teenage boy and the grave contained some artifacts, such as remains of a sword, a spear, iron buckle, a knife and two beads. Some iron and wood remains were visible as well.

**Gilsárteigur** (number 147 in Eldjárn's analysis): Two graves were found in 1949. One of the graves was disturbed. The size of the grave was not noted, but its directions were NW-SE. The only artifact in the grave was a knife. Gestsdóttir judged the bones to be those of a young male.

### *Group two. Female graves*

**Selfoss** (number 26 in Eldjárn's analysis): A grave was found in 1962 in a garden. It was greatly disturbed but it was evident that the grave's angle was SW to NE, with the body's head in the south-west end. Although the grave had been robbed it included several objects; twelve beads, an iron knife, a sickle, an iron objects with some fibers attached, and several metal items that could have been part of a chest. The skeleton was most likely female.

**Hólaskógar** (number 34 in Eldjárn's analysis): A grave was found in 1978 on an eroded hill. The grave was very much damaged due to erosion but the bones were in good condition. They appeared to have been piled up in a heap. The directions of the grave seemed to be NE-SW. Fifteen beads were found in the grave as well as some unidentifiable rusty wood remains. The bones were from a middle aged female.

**Öxnadalsheiði** (number 76 in Eldjárn's analysis): In 1962 two graves were discovered due to erosion on the heath. The first grave had been disturbed. It was located in the western part of the heath, about four kilometers from the Norðurá bridge. The grave was situated SW to NE, the skull had been moved from the SW end to the NE end. The grave was 1, 80 meters long, 80 centimetres wide at the SW end, 70-75 centimetres wide at the NE end and about 15-20 centimetres below the eroded surface area. Only a part of the skeleton was found, the bones were female, and most of them had been disturbed. Wooden remains were found, possibly from a coffin or twigs placed under the body. The artifacts in the grave were in dire

condition, it was difficult to distinguish which ones belonged to the grave. They were all small. A horse grave was situated nearby, 30 centimetres NE of the foot of the grave. The horse's head was laid in the NE part of the grave and this half was disturbed. Artifacts were few, all remains from riding gear.

**Ytra-Garðshorn** (number 87 in Eldjárn's analysis): Initially the third grave<sup>4</sup> looked undisturbed but turned out to be robbed as well. A sheet of stones was on top of the grave, covering an area of 5 times 3 meters. The graves directions were SW-NE and its placement was in the middle of the stone spread. The grave was 3, 60 meters long and almost a meter wide. The grave robbers only uprooted the top half of the grave, leaving the bones below the waist undisturbed. The skeleton was that of a young girl's, and the grave contained several artifacts, mostly various tools. Near the skull bones were two beads, possibly from a necklace removed by the grave robbers. The horse grave adjacent was untouched.

The seventh grave's directions were SW-NE. It was 3, 20 meters long and 70 centimetres wide. It was full of rocks and had been uprooted like the others. A few scattered human and horse bones were in the west end of the grave where the person was originally placed. The human bones probably belonged to a female. The grave contained some lead and iron artifacts, the iron ones mostly from riding gear.

The ninth grave contained human and horse bones separated by a partition. The graves directions were SW-NE and it was 3, 70 meters long, out of which the person's grave was a 1, 60 meters long and 60 centimetres wide. Bones were scattered around the grave and in one area two femurs had been laid out to form cross, as if by purpose. The bones were those of a middle aged female. The grave included a few artifacts, twenty-five beads all found together, a bronze ring, little tweezers of iron, some glass and a piece of beeswax.

**Surtstaðir** (number 132 in Eldjárn's analysis): People first became aware of this gravesite in 1945. It was disturbed in 1947 by locals and finally excavated in 1949. Two men were buried on the site, not simultaneously. Only the leg bones and bones of the feet were in an original position and it is evident the grave was disturbed long

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<sup>4</sup> For a general description of the location, see 87.Ytra-Garðshorn in the section Group two. Male graves.

ago. A middle aged man was buried first; the corpse was laid on its back with the head turned southwest. Later a woman was buried in the same grave, and her legs placed over the man's legs. Other bones had been moved and placed in a pile. Locals removed the skulls in 1947, and their location within the grave is unknown. A few items were found, thirteen white glass beads and four fractions as well as remains of a knife.

**Hrollaugsstaðir** (number 141 in Eldjárn's analysis): In 1952 Eldjárn examined a grave he thought had been disturbed a long time ago. He thought the bones were female. There were no artifacts at the site.

### *Group three. Other*

**Strandarhöfuð** (number 6 in Eldjárn's analysis): A grave was excavated by Eldjárn in 1951. It was found near the farm of Strandarhöfuð. The bones were situated 4-500 meters from the farm, buried in a mixture of sand and soil. The bones had been moved a long time ago, and were irregular in the grave. The grave was 1, 70 meters long, 1, 70 meters wide and about 90 centimetres deep where it was deepest. The leg bones were the only unmoved bones, where the grave was most shallow. The grave's direction was E-W, and the man's head had been in the west end of the grave. An unidentifiable piece of iron and some traces of wood were in the grave, indicating it had included some artifacts.

**Lækur í Flóa** (number 28 in Eldjárn's analysis): Both human and horse bones were found in 1969 after the area had been worked on with a bulldozer. The burial site was about 600 meters from the farm, and excavators thought it evident it had been robbed in antiquity, judged by the bones not touched by the machine. It was not possible to determine the directions of the grave because of how damaged the area was by the bulldozer. No artifacts were found.

**Snartarstaðir** (number 41 in Eldjárn's analysis): A grave was found in 1938 by road workers. The circumstances are unclear. According to Eldjárn this grave might have been disturbed by people, or its bad condition might have natural causes. The grave included both man and horse bones, as well as a spear and a piece from riding gear.



**Borgarnes** (number 43 in Eldjárn's analysis): A mound was opened in 1866. It had already been broken into at least once before, written poems tell of pillaging sometime between 1650-70. The mound was empty of bones and artifacts when it was opened in 1866. Eldjárn's thought it certain that it was a burial mound from antiquity.

**Innri-Fagradalur** (number 49 in Eldjárn's analysis): At this site Vigfússon counted three or four graves, directions from north to south. One of those was excavated and the excavator's estimation was that it had been disturbed. One bronze artifact was recovered, and the soil showed signs of bones. The other graves were not excavated but seemed to have been disturbed as well. Eldjárn is reluctant to declare the place a burial site, but nevertheless counts three disturbed graves at the site.

**Berufjörður** (number 50 in Eldjárn's analysis): Four multiple burial sites were first excavated in 1898 by Bruun and Jónsson. They are all at the bottom of Berufjörður, in the land of the farms of Berufjörður and Hyrningsstaðir. In the westernmost burial site the 1898 excavation revealed four or five disturbed burials, with one bead and some remains of metal, now lost.

In another location Bruun found remains of seven stone layered graves but examined only one of those. There he found nothing. He also examined another location where he found another six stone layered graves out of which he examined four. In one of those were remains of a skeleton but the rest were empty of human bones. Snæbjörn from Hergilsey reported having examined some graves in this area much earlier. Some of the disturbances might be from his work. According to Bruun's report there might have been altogether twenty-seven graves in the area, perhaps they were not all for human remains. However, Eldjárn thought the report was rather unreliable. According to him most of the graves were robbed a long time ago.

**Skerðingsstaðir** (number 51 in Eldjárn's analysis): A few graves were examined in 1898 by Bruun and Jónsson. They appeared to be empty, apart from a few bones. According to Eldjárn's estimation they might have been robbed. Perhaps the corpses were placed in a shallow grave and stones laid on top. The excavators do not document the number of graves, although they must have been several.

**Breiðavík** (number 53 in Eldjárn's analysis): Bones of horses and men were found when a foundation was dug for a building around 1913. No artifacts were found. Eldjárn thinks it might be because there never were any, or because the grave was robbed earlier.

**Kornsá** (number 63 in Eldjárn's analysis): A grave was found in 1879 on a hillock. The grave is situated SE to NW and is approximately 1, 25 meters deep. The corpse appears to have been laid with its head turned north, on its back. This grave is intact and rich in artifacts. Judged by the artifacts, Eldjárn concludes the skeleton is that of a woman. East of the grave, approximately 3, 50 meters away another grave was found seemingly younger than the first one. It included human, horse and dog bones. This grave had been disturbed. Eldjárn concluded that perhaps the human bones were documented by mistake and the grave only included dog and horse bones buried simultaneously with the other corpse. However, Eldjárn thought it might be another grave, disturbed earlier at which time the grave robbers left the bones in a pile.

**Sólheimar** (number 70 in Eldjárn's analysis): About 35 meters ESE of the first grave<sup>5</sup> was another grave below large stones. The grave's directions were N-S, it was about 2 meters long, a meter wide and 30 centimetres deep. The grave contained a few human bones of unidentifiable sex, horse bones but no items. Eldjárn thought the body had been laid with its head north and feet south because more horse bones were found by the grave's south end. The bones in the horse grave had been moved, and a few items still remained, all seemingly from riding gear.

**Brimnes** (number 79 in Eldjárn's analysis): The grave south west of the middle grave<sup>6</sup> was disturbed as well. Its position was NW-SE. Remains of a human skeleton were in the northwest end. The grave was shallow, 15 centimetres deep, 90 centimetres long and 75 centimetres wide. A couple of broken iron artifacts were in the grave. A horse grave was south east of the human skeleton with a few horse bones.

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<sup>5</sup> See description of site under 70. Sólheimar in Group one. Male graves.

<sup>6</sup> See description of site under 79. Brimnes in Group one. Male graves

**Ljótsstaðir** (number 80 in Eldjárn's analysis): The grave was found during road work in 1958. Eldjárn examined the site the following spring. It was situated in gravel hills, about 1000 meters from the farm. The road workers had damaged the western end of the grave but otherwise it was intact. Because of the damage it was not possible to tell the length of the grave, but it was 80 centimetres wide, directions WSW-ENE. It was obviously robbed. At the east end of the grave was a horse grave, with bones which were in disarray as well. Eldjárn assumed the person's head had been in the western part of the grave. Some remains of items were in the grave, they were, however, either small or insignificant.

**Austaríhóll** (number 82 in Eldjárn's analysis): During the summer of 1964 Eldjárn examined a grave from which he thought the bones had been removed. The grave was 4 meters long and 1 meter wide, with directions from NE-SW. Horse bones were at the grave's north east end. The bones seemed to have been removed but a wide array of artifacts left behind, such as a spear, arrow points, scissors, and other small items

**Ytra-Hvarf** (number 85 in Eldjárn's analysis): Road workers found a multiple burial site in 1949. A bulldozer scraped the top layer off the graves, quite possibly removing some of the artifacts from the graves. However, the site had undoubtedly been robbed a long time ago according to Eldjárn. The site was on the edge of an old riverbank. A few years earlier the tussocks covering the graves had been flattened and the rocks inside them pushed over the riverbank's edge. Two complete graves and remains of others were found in the area. The first grave was very long, 4, 75 meters, 80 centimetres wide, directions N-S. It was 65-70 centimetres deep and appeared to have been deeper originally. It was full of pebbles and larger stones, mostly in the northern end of the grave. A man and a horse had been laid in the grave, the man in the south end with his head to the south. His bones were gone but the direction of their previous position can be discerned from a spear which point was headed north, meaning the men's feet would have headed north as well. A wand made of bronze was in the grave, with a stylized animal head, as well as some

unidentifiable iron pieces. At the grave's northern end were horse bones with some artifacts of riding gear.

The second grave was 5 meters west and a little south of the first. It was similarly made, without human bones but some horse bones in the north end. Evidently the bones had been removed from both graves, the artifacts taken and the horse bones disturbed.

**Ytra-Garðshorn** (number 87 in Eldjárn's analysis): The second grave<sup>7</sup> was in a bad condition, but its SW-NE directions were discernible, with the body in the SW end and a horse by the man's feet. Nothing has been found from this grave, except for a few human bones, some of which had mixed with the bones from the first grave. This grave is likely to have been robbed but the horse's grave was left intact.

The fifth grave's directions were exactly N-S. It was 1, 70 meters long and 70 centimetres wide. The whole grave had been disturbed, and little left except some nails, a child's skull bones along with other bones, remains of a knife and a black layer on the bottom and sides of the grave indicating there might have been a coffin in it.

The sixth grave's directions were approximately NE-SW. It was 3, 60 meters long and 70 centimeters wide. Both on top and inside the grave were many unusually large stones. The whole grave had been disturbed except for about 80 centimetres in the east end. In the west end a man had been buried, but all the bones were gone and only some horse bones remained. A few iron riding gear artifacts were found in the grave but nothing else.

The tenth grave was altogether 4 meters long, with a separation between the human remains and horse remains. The human remains were in a 2 meters long grave, 70 centimetres in width. A horse was placed on the other side of the separation at the man's feet making the length of the whole grave 4 meters altogether. The directions of the grave were SW-NE, and stones had been placed on its top. There were no human bones in the grave. It contained five beads, a sharpener, some glass and unidentifiable iron pieces. The horse grave was untouched.

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<sup>7</sup> For a general description of the site see 87. Ytra-Garðshorn in Group one. Male graves.

**Dalvík – Böggvisstaðir** (number 88 in Eldjárn's analysis): A grave was found during a dig for a water pipe, about 300 meters from the shore. It was examined in 1937 by Þórðarson. The grave was partially covered with stones that had been brought from the coast. It was evident that a boat had been placed in the grave which was situated from NE to SW. A lot of nails, presumably from the boat were in the grave but all human bones and artifacts had been removed, probably when the grave was reopened. Horse bones were all scattered except for the head. The excavator found a small iron piece, possibly from a sword previously placed in the grave and removed by the grave robbers.

**Dalvík – Brimnes** (number 89 in Eldjárn's analysis): Eldjárn thought grave number four<sup>8</sup> likely to have been plundered, whereas Bruun and Jónsson were not as certain. Grave four was a boat grave, 10 meters south of the other three graves. It was 7 meters long and 1, 50 meters wide. The grave's directions were SW-NE, the boat's front faced NE. The skeleton's gender is uncertain, but the excavators thought it was that of a youth. The grave also included dog and horse skeletons but was empty of artifacts. According to Eldjárn many clues indicated the grave had been robbed or disturbed. It is possible that the grave diggers knew approximately where the boat grave was, and opened the other two in search for it. Once they found it, there was no need to search through the other, less rich graves in the area.

**Hámundarstaðaháls** (number 92 in Eldjárn's analysis): There is no direct indication of grave robbery in this area, but Eldjárn speculated that the graves that were in this area had been disturbed.

**Glaumbær** (number 120 in Eldjárn's analysis): A gravesite with indistinguishable number of graves was found by road workers, who ruined the surface layer of the graves with their work. Þórðarson examined the site in 1915. He determined that at least one human grave had been in the area originally and that this grave had been disturbed. Some of the artifacts indicate that there were weapon's in the grave at some point. The grave was 4 meters long and 70 centimetres wide. No directions

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<sup>8</sup> For a general description of the site see 89. Dalvík (Brimnes) in the section on male graves.

were indicated. Steffensen concluded later that the bones from the site were both male and female, making two human graves in the area likely.

**Hrollaugsstaðir** (number 141 in Eldjárn's analysis): A robbed grave<sup>9</sup> was found above the farm. Within it was a mixture of human, dog and horse bones. The grave was 1, 75 meters long, 75 centimetres deep and 90 centimetres wide, directions E-W. The grave had been covered by a low mound. The grave also contained a few pieces of iron.

**Hrífunes** (number 155 in Eldjárn's analysis): A grave was found in an area where graves had been found before. Previous graves were seemingly undisturbed but this one had been mangled with. The grave was 1, 70 meters long and 75 centimetres wide. Its directions were E-W. The bones were in bad condition, they belonged to an adult but sex could not be determined. The grave contained several small artifacts, mostly indefinable (Eldjárn, 2000).

### *Summary*

Altogether there are at least fifty-six graves, in thirty-four sites, from the pagan period that have been robbed or tampered with in some way. This number is on the low side, since there are a couple of sites where it is likely that more graves were robbed than are listed here, such as number 50, Berufjörður and number 51, Skerðingsstaðir. The amount of robbed graves with male skeletons is eighteen, female graves are eight and graves with undefined sex are at least thirty. This supports the theory that male graves were more frequently robbed than female graves and makes it likely that the statistics of grave goods recovered by today might actually under-represent the male grave furniture. It is therefore tempting to explore the assumption that weapons were among the favored targets of the grave-robbers. Possible explanations for this will be discussed in chapter three.

In the years since *Kuml og haugfé* was republished several robbed graves have been found. One in Hríngsdalur, three in Lyngbrekka in Reykjadalur and a boat grave in

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<sup>9</sup> A female's grave was found near this one, and is discussed in Group two. Female graves.

Litlu-Núpar in Aðaldalur, to name a few. These are an addition to the over fifty graves already found to date, making the case for looking into possible reasons for grave robbery all the more plausible. Why has no one in Iceland asked this question? It seems never to have been brought up, at least not in print, except to mention how grave robbery has decreased the research value of robbed graves. Grave goods have from the outset of modern archaeology in Iceland, formed the bases of archaeological knowledge of the Viking period in the country (Eldjárn, 2000). The fact that this material has been so hugely affected by grave robbery should make investigating its reasons a worthy challenge. However, no one has of yet taken this challenge on. Over 300 pagan burials have been found in Iceland. Most of these burials have yielded only fragmentary information, because of poor research and documentary methods or poor condition of the sites (see Eldjárn, 2000). Now, that research methods have been vastly improved and with the introduction of tephrochronology the options for thorough and detailed dating of graves and grave furniture have increased manifold. Tephrochronology, the dating of geological and occupational deposits through the study of volcanic ash or tephra, offers the chance to more accurately date the timing of a grave robbery, which helps to give answers to questions such as how recently after interment the grave was robbed, who the grave robbers were and what were their reasons for disturbing the grave site?

In the following chapter an attempt will be made to connect some of the Icelandic Viking age graves that have been robbed with different reasons for grave robbery discussed in the chapter.

### **3 Grave robbery in the Nordic countries**

The history of death is a subject that seems to fascinate most people, scholars and laymen alike. Rituals of death and the processes of interaction between the living and the dead have been the subjects of research for every chronological period, a subject pursued by historians, anthropologists and archaeologists. One ritual undeniably linked to death is the practice of grave robbery. Much has been written on the ritual of burial, the nature of burial data and how burial data are a direct reflection of social organization (Härke 1997; Parker Pearson 1999; Hayeur-Smith 2004). However, what happens once the grave is closed and mourners and spectators have left the site, is a story much less explored.

Sociological approaches to the interpretation of burial customs have been built on an increasingly systematic adaptation of ideas from current social theory. According to Parker Pearson (1999), Giddens' structuration theory, in particular, has important implications for the interpretation of burial data. Giddens noted that society is not a given framework in which individuals play pre-ordained roles, but interplay of rules and actions, with ideology providing the legitimization for the former. Based on this, burial ritual is not a mere passive reflection of society, but the result of actions which contribute to shaping society itself. Taking this line of thought further, Samson argued that grave goods reflect not so much the social status of the deceased, but the claims of those burying the dead to his or her property and position in society (Härke, 1997).

If those left behind had claims on the property of the dead, and those claims were legitimized by the surrounding society, the question remains: Were the grave goods themselves beyond reach? It is a difficult question to explore, but it is well worth looking at. As mentioned before, archaeological excavations in Iceland have revealed a large number of Viking age graves that were opened sometime after interment and their bones and grave goods partially or wholly removed (see Eldjárn, 2000). This gives rise to questions such as: What were the possible reasons for grave robbery?



Were the graves opened on purpose or because people came across them by accident? Were they opened in order to remove specific things or all of the grave goods? Were people fearful of opening the graves? Did specific people open graves, or just anyone?

It is perhaps not possible to answer any of these questions directly, but some light might be shed on the topic while the answers are being sought for. We know that burial is a part of a complex ritual which begins with the death of an individual (or even earlier), lasts through the actual funeral proceedings, and ends after a period of mourning. However it may even continue beyond that, almost indefinitely, with rituals of remembrance (Härke, 1997). A ritual of remembrance may include the re-opening of the grave and the various reasons for such an act and the purposes thereof will be discussed in the following section. The aim of this chapter is to discuss studies of graves that have been robbed, and theories on why robbery of pagan graves took place. Most of the literature examined is Scandinavian as burial customs in some of the Scandinavian countries are similar to those in Iceland during the Viking Age.

### *Discussion of different reasons for grave robbery*

There are several types of situations one can find when excavating a grave that has been previously robbed or disturbed. To begin with, in order to be able to explore possible reasons for grave robbery or grave disturbance, one needs to distinguish cases where only grave goods have been removed, ones where just the body is removed and one where everything is removed or the grave seems to have simply been destroyed.

### *Graves where grave goods have been removed*

There are a few possible interpretations of the first situation. First, graves might have been opened by people simply hoping to find treasure. This seems possible, but rare. The interpretation seems too modern, in line with people's ideas of fictional heroic

characters such as Indiana Jones. However there are possible examples of this sort of grave disturbance. The Oseberg barrow in Norway seems to have been robbed by people looking for precious artifacts (Myhre, 1994). At first glance this might seem a clear case of treasure hunters, but the skeletons were also seriously damaged by the grave robbers making other explanations more plausible. Another theory might be that when graves are robbed only for their artifacts, it is something that happened towards the middle ages or later when the grave furniture had ceased to hold any kind of symbolic meaning and grave robbers were simply hoping to find something they could turn into money. It is possible that there are some grave robberies in Iceland of this kind, and likely that those graves were found by coincidence. Third, when trade declines, with access to precious items becoming rare, graves may provide a good source for new prestige items. This reason is rather unlikely, since most graves are opened soon after burial, and it does not seem to be related to the economy. Fourth, objects might have been searched for because they had symbolic meaning for those robbing the graves, perhaps as family heirlooms or powerful objects in some way. Out of these four explanations, the last one seems the most likely. It is difficult to tell apart removal of grave goods because of symbolic or social factors and grave robbery caused by simple greed. This is a problem for researchers who might want to explore different reasons for grave robbery. One way of getting around this problem, is to use the site context to ascertain the time of inhumation and time of grave robbery. The further apart they are in time, the less likely it is that the disturbance was intentional. In those instances it is likely that the grave sites were found by accident, because of erosion or during farming and objects were removed for opportunist reasons.

The deposition of weapons and other objects in burials was widely practiced in pre-Christian times. This was a common practice during the Viking Age in Iceland (Eldjárn, 2000). According to Härke (2000) there were four mechanisms by which weapons could regularly and repeatedly change their owners. Such rituals maintained cycles of giving, receiving and deposition, operating within a framework

of social relations and rituals. These mechanisms are: The gift from lord to retainer, the gift from retainer to lord, the heirloom and ritual deposition in graves and rivers. It is the deposition of weapons into graves that is of interest here and furthermore their eventual removal from graves.

Grave robbery was widespread in Merovingian cemeteries. It was rarer in Anglo-Saxon England (Myhre, 1994; Härke, 2000) but seems to have been quite common in Viking Age Iceland (Eldjárn, 2000). In his research, Härke (2000) notes that the proportion of robbed weapon burials is higher than the proportion of robbed inhumations overall. This indicates that grave robbers were familiar with locations of weapon burials and targeted those. This is in accordance with Brøgger's theories on grave robbery in Norway (1945). Stories also indicate that relatives of the deceased sometimes recovered precious grave goods from burials of family members (Härke, 2000). Such instances lay convincing proof that grave robbery was an accepted way of recycling weapons, to ensure their continued use and perhaps maintain the status of power such weapons provided.

In this context, one should keep in mind the possible meaning past artifacts might have had for past people, even if the difference is just a few generations in time. It is possible that the objects were only intended to lay buried in the ground for a certain amount of time, before they were retrieved to be used during important ceremonies and moments in the family's life (Brøgger, 1945).

Another reason for removal of objects from graves, and in some instances the complete destruction of the grave site, is to render the buried person powerless, to prevent the ghost from cursing the land and its people. When powerful weapons, such as swords and axes are removed from graves its inhabitants can no longer exert their influence on those living in areas nearby (Brøgger, 1945; Myhre, 1994).

There are many disturbed grave sites<sup>10</sup> in Iceland, where there are no weapons or other valuable objects but bones are still in the grave. Often some smaller items are still intact such as beads, or small utensils of some sort, such as knives. Many graves have also been found from the Viking period which are poor, or appear to be poor in grave furniture. Perhaps the case is that those people were laid to rest with none or few riches of this world. Antiquarians have recorded these graves as poor but it is quite possible that they have been robbed but that those people examining the sites lacked the necessary skill to detect the disturbance, thus dismissing the burial as one lacking grave goods. In any case it is clear, that there are quite a number of graves from the Viking period in Iceland, where grave goods have for some reason been removed.

#### *Graves where bones have been removed*

Some of the possible interpretations of reasons for bone removal include reburial of the dead elsewhere, as part of change in religion or the need to bury people on sacred ground and removal of the dead because their presence is threatening either spiritually or symbolically. Some cases of grave robbery seem to indicate that its purpose was to remove the bones. Perhaps the grave was only meant to be temporary until a proper funeral or resting place had been found. This could be linked to changing customs as well since an increasing number of people were beginning to observe Christian customs, therefore wishing to move their ancestors to Christian cemeteries, so they could be interred in sacred grounds. The scattering of bones often left behind at sites where most bones have been removed makes it difficult to imagine people reverently transferring their ancestor's bones to sacred burial ground. One tends to think that if the motives were religious, more care would have been taken than indeed was often the case (Myhre, 1994).

Another explanation for this, and perhaps a more plausible one was to remove the dead because their presence is threatening, spiritually or symbolically. The fact that

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<sup>10</sup> See for example graves 6, 59, 67, 74, 77, 79, 129, 131 and 141.

partial bones were left behind is perhaps because removal of certain bones was thought to be more crucial in rendering the dead person powerless. An example of this is the Oseberg barrow. In his examination in 1917, Brøgger (Androshchuk, 2005) concluded that two women had been interred in the burial site. Androshchuk does not agree with him but thinks that a man was buried with the women as well. He bases this conclusion on artifact finds within the grave, and believes that the bones of the man and most of the bones of one of the women were removed. It will not be argued here whether there ever was a man inside that grave or not, but the question remains: Why were the bones of only one woman removed? A reasonable explanation for that is that only the bones of the noble, powerful woman were removed. The other one, whose bones showed signs of a life of hard labor and thus low status, posed no threat to the living. However, the other woman's bones, showed no such signs of wear and tear. She was therefore more likely to be the person of high status the barrow was made for, and later on that status either had to be symbolically transferred to someone else or her power over the living diminished by breaking into the barrow, removing her bones and destroying or removing certain artifacts.

There are many more cases of grave disturbances where bones have been removed. Capelle (1978) speaks in his article on Grave robbery in the Viking North about several sites<sup>11</sup> where graves have been disturbed in order to remove bones. At these sites, some of the bones were left behind and in some cases were still joined together because decomposition was not so far gone at the time of the grave robbery.

Old folk beliefs might be another reason why only parts of skeletons were removed. During the middle ages, human bones were thought to have ritualistic powers, both benign and malign. Access to such bones would have been important to those people who believed in their power and used them for their rituals. It is possible that such rituals were practiced during the Viking Age as well (Androshchuk, 2005). It is likely

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<sup>11</sup> For example in Jelling and Årby.

that certain bones from the skeleton were more important than others, explaining why some parts of the skeleton were left behind after a grave was robbed.

There are in fact not as many examples of this sort of grave disturbance in Iceland as there are in the Nordic countries. At least one grave<sup>12</sup> however with a relatively large assemblage of artifacts but no bones has been found. It is more common that some bones are missing but not all. In such cases, it may be that none have been taken but that the bones have simply decomposed. When looking at Eldjárn's accounts of sites, it is difficult to ascertain whether bones are missing and what bones, because he does not give such details. Usually he talks about bones being found, some bones or a few bones. It is therefore difficult to separate cases where bones have been taken and cases where natural forces have simply taken their toll.

#### *Graves with everything removed or apparent destruction of burial site*

The idea of disturbing the dead is abhorrent to present day people, and it is likely that it has always been so. Today, we do not like the idea of exhumation, it feels wrong, and is also felt to be unhygienic and a disgusting thought altogether. Yet, at some time in our not all too distant past, our ancestors felt compelled to open the resting places of the dead. It is clear that in this context one needs to think about the possible meanings people's ancestral bodies might have had for past people, and what might cause them to disturb them. Evidently, customs were different from what they are today. Perhaps grave robbing was part of a general phenomenon related to using the past to help legitimate present (i.e. later past) practices. Digging up an ancestor's sword and displaying it shows a family or a clan has history, which might be used to legitimate power and authority. It seems likely that the need or desire for the power of prestigious items and weapons was stronger than people's respect for their ancestors.

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<sup>12</sup> Number 82.

Another way to render the dead powerless is to destroy their gravesites. There are cases where little or nothing was removed but artifacts and bones left in disarray. This scenario is what archaeologists excavating the sites of the Gokstad barrow and the Grønhaug barrow found (Brøgger, 1945; Myhre, 1994). The purpose of such plunder seems to be make the dead powerless and his grave uninhabitable (Brøgger, 1945), the same purpose as could be behind removal of weapons or certain bones. It is also possible that weapons have been removed from destroyed grave sites, although this would be difficult to ascertain. It is possible as well, that people would have found it necessary to incapacitate the dead after removing their weapons from the sites to ensure the dead would not come after the living to retrieve their possessions.

In their article on grave robbery in Norway, Brendalsmo and Røthe (1992) concluded that it was evident those doing the robbing knew what they were after and where to look for it. Based on contextual evidence at sites it was also evident that not more than a generation passed between inhumation and exhumation. They believed the graves targeted were those of people holding high positions in society, regardless of whether they were male or female. This is consistent with Androshchuk's theories (2005) on why bones of powerful people are removed to graves, that is in order to incapacitate the dead and take the power they held in life away from them. Perhaps the grave destruction is a way to transfer that power to those left behind to carry on the legacy, or it is committed by competing clan who want to seize it away from the family of the deceased.

Nearly all of the robbed graves in Iceland are in bad condition. Those who opened them did not show much respect doing so, and left behind turmoil of bones and objects often mixed together in heaps. Sometimes it is evident that the skeletons were not moved much, perhaps because the grave diggers' aim was to locate objects and they were successful in doing so without causing much damage to the bones.

However there are also cases of grave disturbances<sup>13</sup> when the purpose seems to have been to destroy: Where the bones were left in much disarray, some missing, some broken. The general feeling one gets when reading about such sites is that the living held no respect for the dead.

### *Who were the grave robbers?*

If one knows what reason lies behind the disturbance of a grave, then it is possible to speculate about the identity of the grave robbers. Perhaps occasionally, graves were robbed because people were looking for valuable objects. It is also possible that there are some instances where bones of deceased were moved to sacred ground by family members who had reverted to Christianity. People who felt threatened by their dead family members might have destroyed their graves to prevent them from haunting those still living. On other occasions, graves were reopened by family members who wanted to retrieve objects that held meaning for them, such as objects that were symbols of power. Lastly, if families were fighting over power, one family might have destroyed gravesites of powerful members of a competing family, to symbolize the transfer of power from the deceased family to the new clan. Dyke and Alcock (2003) define social memory as the construction of a collective notion (not an individual belief) about the way things were in the past. Because it can vary by gender, ethnicity, class, religion it allows for multiplicity and possible conflict, of memories in any society. One thing is certain, people in the past shared memories, just like we do now. Like us, past peoples observed and interpreted traces of more distant pasts to serve the needs and interests of their present lives. Social memory is often used to naturalize or legitimate power (Dyke and Alcock, 2003). If the custom is and always has been, for as long as people can remember, then what that custom enholds is what will be carried out.

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<sup>13</sup> See for example graves 34, 76, 87, 132.



## *Discussion*

Brøgger noted when he wrote about the Oseberg grave (1945) that most of the multitudes of mounds in Norway are undisturbed. It is mainly those containing graves that have been disturbed or robbed. Those doing the digging, whether they were grave-robbers or had different reasons, knew what they were doing. They must have known what they could expect to find inside those burials. Most authors writing about grave robbery agree on this fact (Capelle, 1978; Brendalsmo and Røthe, 1992; Myhre, 1994; Härke, 2000; Androshchuk, 2005).

The actions of grave robbers in the Nordic countries were huge undertakings. This means they could not have been performed under the cover of darkness that lasted a few hours. These were procedures that needed man-power and time and therefore it is likely that they were accepted by society and overseen by its leaders (Brøgger, 1945; Myhre, 1994; Androshchuk, 2005). Based on this one might assume that grave robbing was an integrated part of social ideology, regarding religious beliefs, inheritance laws and transfer of power from generation to generation. It seems to have been common all over Scandinavia and it was not until the Church passed laws against grave robbery that it became unacceptable (Androshchuk, 2005). During the Viking Age in Iceland, when society in the country was in its first stages, it must have been especially important for families to establish themselves and to keep their status and power once it was reached. History and traditions were in the making. Different types of identities were in being created, such as the identities of leaders, of families as head clans, identities of different individuals who held positions of power and so on. The competition for leading roles in this new country must have been fierce. Recycling of precious grave goods to establish and show power, and destruction of graves to seize power might have been some of the ways for families and individuals to establish themselves.

## 4 Discussion and conclusions

It is interesting to wonder why Eldjárn spoke as little of grave robbery as he indeed did in his thesis. All he mentioned is that approximately thirty sites were at some point disturbed, which damaged the research value of their context (Eldjárn, 2000). He does not mention the research value that the disturbance and the reasons for the grave robbery hold in them. Eldjárn thought the subject worthy of study, but did not think that such a study belongs within archaeological studies of burial customs, but rather in connection with folk beliefs on ancient graves. Eldjárn dismissed the occurrences of grave robbery, by assuming that their causes were at most people's greedy search for treasure.

If anyone is interested in doing further research on this subject, it would be necessary to distinguish between the graves that appear to have been found by accident and those that appear to have been disturbed on purpose. It is the latter group that has informative value for those exploring reasons for grave disturbance. It is a fact, that a large proportion of the graves found in Iceland have been robbed and the answer as to why is still to be found and should be an interesting challenge to take on.

Research methods and excavation techniques have vastly improved. A great help to further research are the tephra layers, which can assist archaeologists to quite accurately time when the grave robberies took place. It would be interesting to see the results if archaeologists currently working in Iceland would look outside the box and take advantage of the growing skill and experience they have to explore grave robbery. The fact that it was so common and affected the research materials available in such a way, should make grave robbery nearly impossible to ignore. Yet, this has been the case.

If it is in fact weapons that grave robbers sought after, we should expect to find more male graves robbed than female graves. If the people committing the grave robbing knew what they were looking for and where to find it, they would have been fairly

accurate in their choices of graves to target. This is indeed the case. Twice as many male graves have been robbed as female graves. This has some implications. First, it is quite possible that more weapons were in common use than has previously been thought. Second, if grave robbers knew what they were looking for, it is likely that they targeted rich graves, leaving present day archaeologists with the impression that grave furniture in Viking age Iceland was poorer than it really was.

If identity was as important during the Viking Age as one would think, especially identity where some sort of hierarchical status is implied, the importance of objects that symbolize such identity comes clear. It also explains actions to transfer such power from individual to individual, or from family to family. One of the means of this transfer might have been grave robbery, or destruction of graves.

It is necessary to re-examine the bones from graves found in Iceland, to more accurately establish the sex of each skeleton. It is possible that either males or females are underrepresented and it is also possible that with increased knowledge and expertise of current scientists, it will be possible to ascertain the sex of more of those skeletons that have yet to be sexed. A very rigorous analysis of the existing and future sites in Iceland is needed in order to move forward theoretically. It is not possible to base today's research on the past's faulty evidence.

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