

Dressing the Dead: Gender, Identity, and Adornment in Viking-Age Iceland

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The most widespread use of jewellery is as body adornment. This paper will address the social dimension of jewellery and will look at the Icelandic mortuary material from the Viking period and its place in the North Atlantic context. In this paper, I am putting forth a hypothesis on the function of the oval brooch and similar Scandinavian 'type' objects in the settlement and early Commonwealth periods of Iceland. The focus will therefore be placed on female adornment rather than male, though data regarding both genders will be reviewed. This hypothesis may be applicable to other areas colonised by the Norse. I am suggesting that oval brooches (along with pagan burial practice in general) in the early part of the settlement may have changed social significance from that which they represented at home, to become symbols associated with personal and cultural identity, as well as being symbolic items connecting the settlers to their cultural past.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF EARLY ICELAND

The settlement of Iceland extended from AD 870-930. By 930 the country is presumed to have been fully inhabited (Hastrup 1985, 8). Early medieval literary sources (e.g. *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók*) suggest that most settlers came from south-west Norway, particularly from Sogn, Hordaland, and Rogaland and that Norwegian settlers fled Norway due the growing power of the king Haraldr *inn hárfagri* (Finehair) (Jones 1986, 44). Haraldr was attempting to subjugate local leaders, free farmers, and petty kings to his authority, in order to claim rulership over all of Norway (Byock 1993, 53).

When they arrived in Iceland the Norwegian settlers were foreigners in a new country, and far from their familiar homeland. At the same time they encountered no native populations with whom to compete for resources (Byock 1993, 2). As pointed out by Byock (1993), despite its seemingly large size the interior of Iceland is largely uninhabitable, due to its distance from the Gulf Stream which warms the coastal regions (Byock 1993, 10). The task of the newcomers was therefore to create a society on this empty island with a limited area of habitable space (Byock 1993, 10). According to Byock, the lack of indigenous populations enabled the first settlers to claim huge portions of land, thus creating disputes with later settlers (Byock 1993, 55).

Although there were many Norwegian settlers, it has long been acknowledged that not all settlers of Iceland came from Norway, though the dominant culture was distinctly 'Scandinavian' (see P. Sawyer, this volume). Language, religion, social organisation, and a chieftain-based society were similar to the homeland. Many settlers are said to have come from the British Isles, either from Norway via the British Isles, or directly (Jones 1986, 49). Crawford (1987), argued that the Icelandic sources make continuous reference to men and women from the Hebrides and Ireland (Crawford 1987, 210). Kristjánsson estimated the number of settlers from the British Isles at 20% (Kristjánsson 1998, 265). Whatever the exact numbers of Celtic immigrants, Iceland was not settled by a homogeneous population of people from Norway. These different cultural groups were, in effect, sharing the resources of a limited area.

In the first 300 years of settlement, Iceland was a chieftain-based society. It has been described as having a decentralised government and an absence of 'institutionalised hierarchical structures' (Byock 1993, 5). In broad terms there were two social groups: free-men

and slaves. Slavery is said to have disappeared with the Christianisation of Iceland thus increasing the number of freeborn men in the population (McGovern *et al.* 1988, 251). There were no kings, or lords, but, despite this apparent classlessness, social divisions did exist among the settlers.

One cannot sufficiently stress the unique nature of this colony. The settlers of Iceland arrived on an empty island, derived from a mixed background of Norwegian, Hebridean, Irish and possibly even some Swedish and Danish settlers (Jones 1986, 44). It was in this social setting that these populations together created a society which came to be known as Icelandic.

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Through the visual clues of adornment humans are able to convey subtle messages about their social and cultural identity. This information may be of a particularly personal nature, decipherable only by members of a closed group, or it may operate a cultural level conveying information about group identity to other groups at large. According to some anthropologists, jewellery and adornment, by stressing unique physical features, are expressions of individuality and a means by which human societies can display information regarding group affiliation, values and standards of the group (Cannon 1998, 24; Polhemus and Procter 1978, 11). They constitute part of the vast tool kit used in marking issues of personal and cultural identity.

Despite the seeming similarities amongst all forms of adornment, they differ in their degrees of importance. A look at past scholarship reveals that jewellery has been given more weight than clothing in most cultures. I believe this to be the result of its permanence. Jewellery survives time, clothing does not. Furthermore, jewellery is often made of materials which themselves are loaded with symbolic meanings of 'preciousness'. Regardless of time and of cultural context, it is jewellery that we offer to mark society's rites of passage and the important moments of life. Jewellery is given at marriage, at birth, at death; jewellery is inherited.

Jewellery is a constant reminder of events not only to those who experienced them, but also to their kin. Most of us can relate to having inherited a piece of one's great-grandmother's jewellery and felt pride and a connection with one's past. Jewellery as heirloom, therefore, becomes a connecting agent with one's ancestral group. It establishes an emotional rapport with the past in providing the individual with a sense of belonging, a sense of group identity. Barley described the heirloom in the following manner:

Their link with the dead may turn them into inalienable heirlooms or relics, kept by the living as witness to a bond between themselves and the departed (Barley 1995, 85).

FEMALE DRESS AND ADORNMENT OF THE VIKING AGE

From the archaeological data we know that Viking-Age women wore long garments, the basic outfit consisting of a long chemise with long sleeves fastened at the neck with a brooch (Hägg 1974, 108). A pair of oval brooches were worn at shoulder level attached to the straps of a sleeveless apron or dress, which was worn on top of the long dress underneath (Hägg 1974, 108). A string of beads or a pendant was frequently hung between the brooches along with other useful implements: knives, scissors and sometimes keys (Jesch 1991, 17). A wrap or a shawl could be worn over this outfit; and from evidence recovered at Hedeby, well-to-do women often wore an ankle length coat over their dress (Jesch 1991, 18).

Oval brooches, are widespread in the burials of Scandinavia. They are considered as being among the most typical items of female Viking dress found throughout Scandinavia

and the Viking world (Dommasnes 1982, 73; Owen and Dalland 1999, 147). They are so standardised that they have been used as gender identifiers in Viking burials (Dommasnes 1982, 73). Their designs are equally standardised. It is common to find specific brooch types (such as a Petersen 51), in such remote areas as Iceland or Gnezdovo in Russia, wherever the Viking presence was felt. Oval brooches are thought to have been produced in the Scandinavian trade centres, such as Hedeby, Birka, Ribe, where metalworking of gold, silver, bronze, and iron were said to be among the most important urban activities (Clarke and Ambrosiani 1991, 162-163). The archaeological record offers evidence of this local production through discarded moulds, tools, unfinished objects, raw materials, crucibles, and overall workshop debris (Clarke and Ambrosiani 1991, 163). There is no such archaeological evidence from Iceland for the local production of oval brooches indicating, in all probability, that the Icelandic examples were imported. Oval brooches went out of fashion in the Scandinavian homelands and the western settlements during the mid-tenth and early eleventh centuries (Jansson 1985, 228; Owen and Dalland 1999, 147), yet James Graham-Campbell has noted that these brooches became more fashionable in Finland, Lagoda and Latvia (1980, 28).

FEMALE ADORNMENT, BURIAL, AND STATUS

In the burial material from Scandinavia, oval brooches appear to be associated with women from a particular stratum of society. According to Gräslund (1980), oval brooches are found predominantly in female inhumation burials at Birka, less frequently in cremation burials (Gräslund 1980, 81). Furthermore, as was pointed out by Gräslund, Arbman estimated that 50% of Birka burials contained this type of brooch while the graves from Adelsö had none (Gräslund 1980, 81). Gräslund attributed this situation to different burial customs in Adelsö and offered the hypothesis that the grave goods in the inhumation burials of Birka reflect more the customs of central Uppland from which the more affluent members of Birka's population may have originated (Gräslund 1980, 82).

Bergliot Solberg (1985) conducted an analysis of gender and status on Merovingian and Viking-Age burials from northern, western, and eastern Norway. She attempted to rank social status on the basis of grave goods. From 833 female-gendered graves, Solberg's division of status was as follows:

Group 1: 5 beads or more, and/or the presence of textile implements

Group 2: at least one conical brooch, or one oval brooch, beads, textile or agricultural implements, miscellaneous items like keys.

Group 3: a conical and/or oval brooch, and the presence of a third brooch as well as beads, keys, agricultural and textile implements (Solberg 1985, 247-248).

For female graves, Group 3 represented the richest graves and encompassed only 16% of all female graves in western Norway and 13% in eastern Norway (Solberg 1985, 247-248). Group 2 represented the most common category with 40% in western Norway, 60% in central Norway and 54% in eastern Norway (Solberg 1985, 247). Solberg's analysis also included a study of male graves following a similar methodology. Her results proved similar to that of females with Group 3 graves representing the highest status burials but the least representative of the categories.

A similar study was carried out by Dommasnes (1982), for the region of Sogn in western Norway. Dommasnes attempted to rank female roles and status in her sample of 264 graves, of which only 213 were suitable for analysis. Although there was no mention of the frequency of oval brooches in her description, as they were incorporated under the heading

of 'jewellery', she did notice that jewellery ranked as a constant artefact category with higher values in women's burials while weapons were preferred to jewellery in male burials (Dommasnes 1982, 77-78).

What is indicated by these various studies is that the oval brooch is an item of jewellery reserved for women of a certain status. The distribution of oval brooches in Scandinavia indicates that they were given to women who had reached a particular stage in life without necessarily belonging to the princely class. They were definitely not slaves but should perhaps be seen as the quintessential Viking housewife, married, with children, running her own household and farm in the absence of her husband, wife of a *bondi* or yeoman farmer, undoubtedly with slaves under her care. One might even suggest that her married status itself may have been displayed by her oval brooches, similar to the wedding ring today.

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL DATA FOR ICELAND:

MALE AND FEMALE GRAVES AND THEIR JEWELLERY

This section will present the archaeological data for Iceland, looking first at the osteological basis for determining male and female graves in the Icelandic context. This discussion is followed by my own data relating to the frequency of jewellery in male and female graves.

In the most recent edition of *Kuml og Haugfé*, Eldjárn and Friðriksson (2000) established that for all the pagan burials known from Iceland, of which there are 316, only 181 skeletons exist, and of those, only 108 could be sexed. Forty-five are definitely male and another twenty-eight may be male (the sexing here is uncertain based on biological sexing). Another twenty are definite females, with an additional 15 that are potentially female (Table 1; Eldjárn and Friðriksson 2000, 595).

The total number of items of jewellery recorded from graves amounts to 162 separate objects (Hayeur-Smith 2002b). Five male graves contained at least one item of jewellery, while 40 osteologically sexed male graves did not. In contrast, 12 of the 20 graves with osteologically sexed females contained jewellery, while only 8 did not. While some jewellery was found in both male and female graves, the predominant association of jewellery with women's graves is significant at any reasonable level of statistical significance, when this distribution is analysed using a simple chi-square test (Table 2: $X^2 = 17.35$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.001$).

Additionally, within this data set 38 individual items of jewellery could be attributed to female graves and 24 to men's graves (Table 3). An additional 100 pieces of jewellery came from 'indeterminate graves' for which no definite sexing was available.

The apparent association of more jewellery in women's graves is statistically significant ($X^2 = 11.91$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting not only that women were more likely to receive jewellery as funerary accompaniments, but also that they were likely to receive more items of jewellery per grave than were men.

Total	Male	Male?	Female	Female?
316 Graves	-	-	-	-
181 Skeletons	-	-	-	-
108 sexed skeletons	45 (41.7%)	28 (25.9%)	20 (18.5%)	15 (13.9%)

Table 1. Distribution of male/female graves from Iceland (based on research by Eldjárn and Friðriksson 2000).

Gender, Identity and Adornment in Viking-Age Iceland

	Male	Female	Row totals
<i>Graves with jewellery</i>	5 [11.8]	12 [5.2]	17
<i>Graves without jewellery</i>	40 [33.2]	8 [14.8]	48
<i>Column totals</i>	45	20	65

Table 2. Contingency table of male and female Icelandic Viking-Age graves with and without items of jewellery. Bracketed figures indicate expected values for each cell, based on the row and column totals. The Chi-square value for this distribution ($X^2 = 17.135$), at one degree of freedom, indicates that jewellery is more frequently recovered as a funerary offering in women's graves than in men's, at any reasonable level of statistical confidence ($p < 0.001$).

	Males	Females	Row totals
<i>Number of graves</i>	45 [35.3]	20 [29.7]	65
<i>Number of items of jewellery</i>	24 [33.7]	38 [28.3]	62
<i>Column totals</i>	69	58	127

Table 3. Contingency table comparing the number of male and female Icelandic Viking-Age graves with the number of items of jewellery associated with each sex in those graves. Bracketed figures indicate expected values for each cell, based on the row and column totals. The Chi-square value for this distribution ($X^2 = 11.91$), at one degree of freedom, indicates that women's graves contain more jewellery, on average, than men's graves, at any reasonable level of statistical confidence ($p < 0.001$).

What these results indicate is that females were given significantly more jewellery in death than males. Some scholars may find this normal behaviour, yet completely neglect the fact that wearing jewellery along with other forms of adornment is sensitive to cultural variation, and in some societies it is the men who make greater use of jewellery than women. In the Norse context, Petré recognised that a common feature for Norway's early Iron Age and late Iron Age graves was that weapons were associated with male graves and jewellery with females (Petré 1993, 149). A similar pattern is noted for Iceland.

STATUS IDENTIFICATION IN ICELANDIC GRAVES

In order to establish a system of status identification for Iceland I have taken Solberg's criteria of status distinction and adapted it to the Icelandic context. I adapted her tripartite division of Group 1,2,3, with Group 3 reflective of the highest status and Group 1 the lowest. Table 4 indicates the defining characteristics of these groups for both men and women.

Using these criteria, the Icelandic burials with jewellery can be divided as shown in Table 5. Note that the graves presented therein are only the graves containing jewellery and which were recorded as part of this particular research project. I was not able to conduct a similar division for all of Icelandic burials as I did not possess information on the entire burial record.

Male	Female
<p>Group 3</p> <p>—3 weapons: sword, spear, axe</p> <p>—2 weapons: sword, spear</p> <p>—1 weapon: sword</p> <p>—shield boss</p> <p>—tools agricultural, carpentry etc 1 or more</p> <p>—jewellery: 1> items of jewellery (round brooch, ringed pin, belt buckle, strap end, pendant)</p> <p>—beads 1></p> <p>—animals (1 or more), and harness equipment</p> <p>—miscellaneous (gaming pieces, ice spurs, weights, fish weights, knife etc.)</p>	<p>Group 3</p> <p>—2 oval /or tongue shaped brooches</p> <p>—1 central brooch, trefoil or round brooch</p> <p>—additional items of jewellery</p> <p>—beads 1></p> <p>—agricultural, cooking or weaving implements, all or any combination</p> <p>—miscellaneous items (keys, weight scales, shears, combs etc)</p> <p>—animals (1 or more) and harness equipment</p>
<p>Group 2</p> <p>—2 weapons: spear/axe</p> <p>—shield boss</p> <p>—tools</p> <p>—miscellaneous item</p> <p>—1 item of jewellery</p> <p>—beads 1></p> <p>—1 animal</p>	<p>Group 2</p> <p>—1 oval brooch, or other brooch</p> <p>—other item of jewellery</p> <p>—beads 1></p> <p>—textile implements or other (1 only)</p> <p>—miscellaneous items (same as above)</p> <p>—1 animal and harness</p>
<p>Group 1</p> <p>—1 weapon: axe or shield boss</p> <p>—beads, or 1> or 1 item of jewellery</p> <p>—1 animal or none</p>	<p>Group 1</p> <p>—1> beads or simple item of jewellery</p> <p>—additional implement such as a knife, comb etc</p> <p>—1 animal or none</p>

Table 4. Status identification for Icelandic graves.

	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Uncertain	Total
Male	2	2	1	0	5
Male?	2	2	1	0	5
Female	6	5	1	0	12
Female?	3	0	1	0	4
Double					
grave*	1	0	3	0	4
Unknown	10	7	9	18	44
Totals	24	16	16	18	74

Table 5. Recorded number of graves with jewellery. (In my sample of graves with jewellery certain graves were double graves, 2 of which were male/female graves and two of which were male/male graves with the inclusion of a young male child in the latter category.)

As with Norway, Group 1 burials are more frequent for both sexes, (whether sexed or uncertain); Group 2 burials are slightly less common; and Group 3 burials are the least common. Furthermore, double graves appear to be associated with higher status. This could be explained in two ways: 1) double graves such as graves from Kaldarhöfði, and Vatnsdalur (both boat burials) have more artefacts than other graves; or 2) one of the individuals in the double grave may have been of high status such as the grave of Hafurbjarnarstaðir where a boy is interred with an adult male, and Surtstaðir where a woman is interred with a man.

OVAL BROOCHES AND STATUS IN ICELAND

We have seen that in the Icelandic burials males outnumber females although female graves contain more jewellery than males. This is similar to what was found in western Norway where only one fourth of burials were thought to be female (Dommasnes 1982, 73). One might argue from the ratio of male/female burials that possibly only the top echelons of females in society received burials while the remaining may have been disposed of in another manner. In this light even the 'poorest' of female graves with grave goods should be considered higher status burials in comparison with the rest of the population.

From Iceland there are 44 separate oval brooches with 38 being attributed to a possible burial context. An additional 6 are stray finds for which no precise archaeological context is known. Of the 38 oval brooches associated with burials, 18 brooches are from well described archaeological contexts while another 20 are not as well documented.

If one were to sex the graves using both grave goods (particularly on the basis of the inclusion of oval brooches in graves) and osteological sexing, one could argue that possible female graves with oval brooches amounts to 23, and those without, 16. Under this approach the total number of female graves with jewellery could be estimated at 39.

Icelandic Group 3 burials offer the same range of grave goods observed in Norway: a pair of oval brooches, the presence of a third brooch, beads, as well as an array of implements ranging from cooking utensils to agricultural equipment or weaving implements. Group 3 corresponds to what might be suggested as the wealthiest category of burial. Group 2 also displayed similarities with Norway, either one oval brooch or an other item of jewellery, beads, and one category of implement as enumerated above. Group 2 represents an in-between group. Without being very poor these graves possibly represented the graves of the female members of household's linked to ordinary free-farmers. Group 1, also in keeping with Solberg's finds in Norway, represents the least affluent group of burials.

PARTICULARITIES IN THE ICELANDIC FEMALE BURIALS

Specific behaviours unique to Iceland are apparent with regard to the presence or absence of animals as grave offerings. In female burials horses are found in all three categories, indicating that the horse held no particular significance to any specific stratum of society in early Iceland. In contrast in the Birka Chamber graves, horses are associated specifically with wealth and status and they are clearly found together with equestrian equipment and weapons that symbolise military activity (Ringstedt 1997, 70). The observations here, concerning female burials, are particular to Iceland and have been discussed by Ringstedt (1997), as well as Müller-Wille (1971). Both authors remarked on the widespread presence of horses in Icelandic burials, stating that over half of the cemeteries in Iceland which have grave goods also contained horses (Müller-Wille 1971, 120-121, 123, 162, 233, in Ringstedt 1997, 70).

Other unique features are apparent in Icelandic graves particularly those without oval brooches, and they offer an interesting comparison to those with. Three examples are presented here taken (one each) from Groups 1, 2, 3.

Group 3 graves without oval brooches. A grave from Kornsa, Austur-Hunavatnsýsla, is a higher status burial without the presence of oval brooches and on the basis of its overall assemblage could be classified as a Group 3 burial of considerable wealth (for the description of the contents of this grave see Eldjárn 1956, 96-97).

Two tongue shaped brooches with Jellinge-style decoration from this grave (similar to P137) appear to have been worn in a similar fashion to oval brooches but would have been visually distinct and rare in Iceland (Eldjárn 1956, 313). Eldjárn discussed the provenance of these tongue shaped brooches and mentioned that during Jan Petersen's classification only 8 were known from Norway, while several were said to have been found in Sweden (Eldjárn 1956, 313-314). These tongue shaped brooches have been described as being decorated with either foliate ornament, Borre style, or Jelling style ornament. Eldjárn knew of one example from Norway, and one from Birka that were similar to the Icelandic examples (Eldjárn 1956, 313-314). Whatever their place of origin, these brooches appear to have been uncommon in Scandinavia. A bell found in this burial has parallels in Iceland and the British Isles, where Batey (1988) identified similar bells from Caithness and England (Batey 1988, 215).

The Kornsa burial, therefore, offers evidence of unusual and foreign jewellery in a high status female grave from an early Icelandic social setting. This could reflect the internment of someone from a mixed cultural background, or be the result of trade and interaction in the Viking world. In the absence of the standard oval brooch, the deceased was granted an equally valuable item of jewellery that would serve to state her social standing in death, as well as that of her surviving kin group. In Iceland, being far rarer, tongue shaped brooches may even have been perceived as a superior alternative to the oval brooch, therefore symbolising a woman of the highest social stratum.

Group 2 graves without oval brooches. In a grave from Hafurbjarnarstaðir, Gullbringusýsla, classified as a group 2 type burial, the deceased was an adult female placed in a flexed position and was buried with the following items: a ringed pin with the ring missing, a trefoil brooch worn on her chest, a knife, a comb, two pebbles of unusual shape, three clam shells, and some iron fragments (Eldjárn 1956, 74-75). A stone slab had been placed on the upper part of her body and a whale bone plaque on the lower half (Eldjárn 1956, 74-75).

Neither of the items of jewellery from Hafurbjarnarstaðir are typically Scandinavian in origin. The ringed pin is an Irish type, and is of the polyhedral head variant, said to be the largest group of ringed pins from the Dublin sites (Fanning 1994, 25). The trefoil brooch has parallels from elsewhere in Iceland and from Jarlshof in Shetland, and it has been suggested that they were produced in the British Isles under Scandinavian influence (Paterson 1997, 649). Both items of jewellery are, therefore, not typically Scandinavian and one might speculate as to the cultural origins of this person. She may have been among those immigrants of mixed Norse/ Celtic descent, perhaps even Irish or from the northern or western Isles of Scotland.

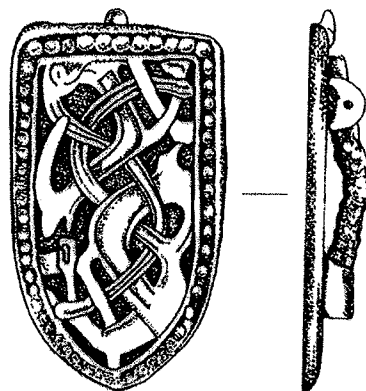


Figure 1. Tongue-shaped brooch, Kornsa, Austur-Hunavatnsýsla (drawing: M. Hayeur-Smith). Scale: 1:1.

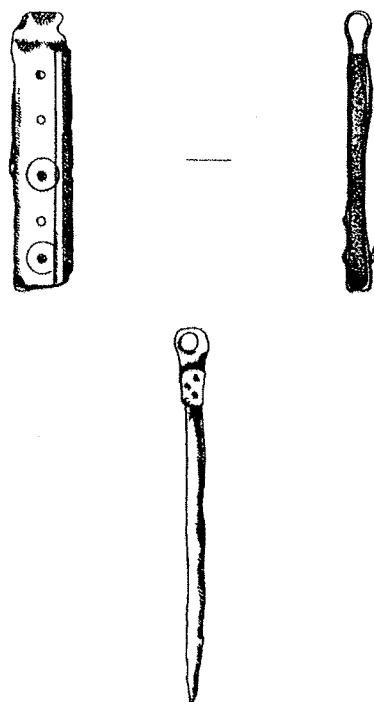


Figure 2. Strap-end from Kroppur, Eyjafjarðarsýsla (drawing: M. Hayeur-Smith). Scale: 2:1.

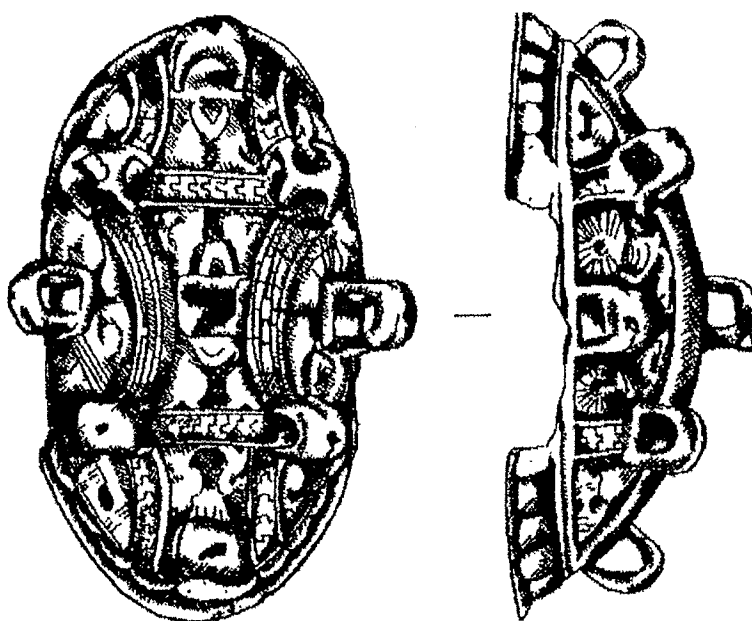
Group 1 graves without oval brooches. The site of Kroppur, Eyjafjarðarsýsla, revealed two burials. The female burial contained a bronze ringed pin of Scandinavian type (Petersen C), as well as what has been described as a folded bronze plate, but which has since been identified as a strap end similar to one found in a Viking burial at Kneep in the outer Hebrides (C. Paterson, pers. comm.). This type possibly originated in the British Isles. No other grave goods were found in this burial and once again, this assemblage of grave goods suggests either trade and interaction with the British isles or a person of mixed ethnic background.

Insular or foreign jewellery in Norway is not uncommon and is frequently the result of contact with the British Isles (Graham-Campbell 1984, 38). In the Birka chamber graves, Nils Ringstedt (1997), reported that high status burials for women included rare items of Insular jewellery such as crucifixes, reliquary pendants, precious stones, silver charms, and jet bracelets, and he suggested that these items reflect high status because they suggest a long distance connection and the economic ability to acquire rare products (Ringstedt 1997, 74). This does not seem to be

the case in Iceland. Non-Scandinavian and Insular items do appear frequently there in combination with Scandinavian type material culture even in graves representing the lowest rank group identifiable in the burials. This combination also seems, based on the review of burial customs from other North Atlantic regions, to be something linking Iceland and Norse settlement areas in the British Isles. It is the type of Insular material mixed in which makes it unique compared to the mainland Scandinavian pattern. The inclusion of this Insular jewellery is in my opinion, the result of the incorporation of non-Scandinavian or mixed settlers from the British Isles who contributed to the colonising population of this island and who are frequently mentioned in the medieval Icelandic historical documents (Hayeur-Smith 2002a; 2002b).

Having reviewed the archaeological data from Iceland relating to status, burials, grave goods and the presence or absence of oval brooches in female graves, I would now like to turn my attention and discuss the social implications of these results. I feel it is relevant to place this archaeological data into a broader social framework in order to understand the role and place of jewellery as a status emblem. As my emphasis in this analysis has been on the presence or absence of oval brooches in graves, I will continue to focus on this type of jewellery. I believe that the oval brooch, as well as other items of Scandinavian jewellery, may have become symbols of status and cultural identity in the social reality of early Iceland.

Figure 3. Oval brooch from Skogar í Flókadal (no. 5030a), 10.8cm x 5.5 cm (Institute of Archaeology of Iceland; illustration: M. Hayeur-Smith).



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JEWELLERY AS A SYMBOL OF PERSONAL, AND CULTURAL IDENTITY THE HEIRLOOM, STATUS, AND ISSUES OF CULTURAL IDENTITY

As already discussed, jewellery, adornment, and clothing act symbolically on a person's sense of belonging. Female graves with oval brooches, as well as other items of jewellery accompanying them, or the presence of elaborately decorated sword hilts and chapes in male burials, convey this sense of belonging to a community or group. It is likely that many people continued to perform Scandinavian pagan burial practises in this new country because: (1) it was familiar and they reproduced what they knew; (2) it had enduring spiritual value to many members of the colonising population; and (3) it may also have become a special and unique way of marking their cultural heritage. This feeling of 'uniqueness' in cultural display is prevalent in the heirloom phenomenon and is intimately connected with identity. For example, there is evidence elsewhere in the North Atlantic that the dates of burials do not necessarily coincide with the dates of the jewellery incorporated in them. The Scar burial in Orkney is a case in point. In the Scar burial, an equal armed brooch (also known as a Troms type brooch) buried with the deceased woman was already of considerable antiquity when placed in the ground. It was made between the eighth and the latter half of the ninth century (Owen and Dalland 1999, 69). The dating of the grave is somewhat complex.

[T]he most likely date for the grave is sometime between about AD 895 and 1030 and more probably after 960; while the most likely date for the grave on the basis of the artefactual assemblage is somewhat earlier, from the second half of the ninth or first few decades of the tenth century (Owen and Dalland 1999, 165).

This suggests that the brooch was an heirloom passed down to the deceased (Owen and Dalland 1999, 165).

In the Icelandic situation, although direct dates of the skeletons are not yet available (J. Arneborg, pers. comm.), it is possible that certain graves with oval brooches are later than the jewellery itself. The oval brooches from Skogar í Flókadal may be such a case (fig. 3). They are Berdal type brooches with Oseberg style ornament dated to the ninth century (Eldjárn 1956, 79). Although we know little of their context, Kristján Eldjárn considered

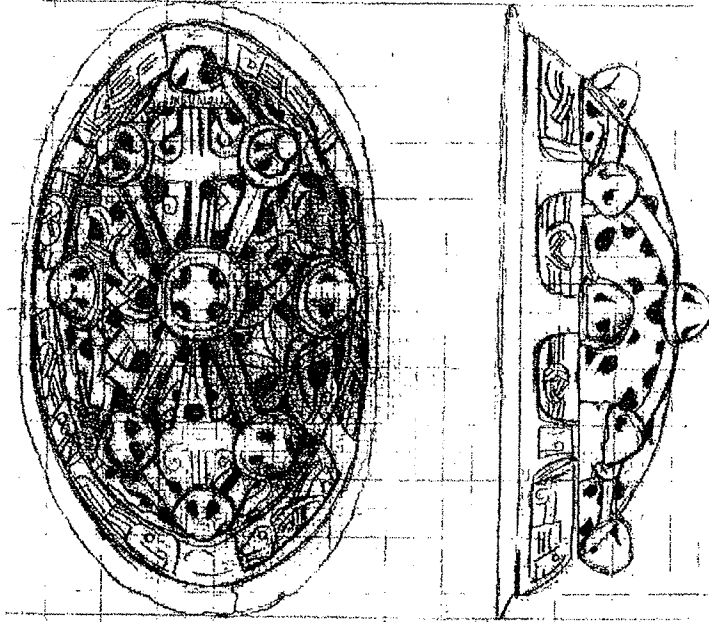


Figure 4. Oval brooch from Daðastaðir of the P51d variant, 10.9cm x 6.35cm (illustration: M. Hayeur-Smith).

them as belonging to a burial, and if Iceland's settlement is securely dated after AD 870, then it is likely that this burial was later than the brooches it contained.

As mentioned above, the heirloom connects with one's descent group and establishes a sense of cultural belonging for the dead and the living. In Iceland, I believe that the oval brooch, as well as other Scandinavian artefacts and the burial mode itself, became symbols of cultural identity connecting the dominant group with its origins. In this context, the oval brooch may no longer have signified simply a woman's status, as it probably did in Scandinavia, but may have come to symbolise far more: where her kin group was from and to which emerging community she belonged.

This is particularly striking with oval brooches from two graves at Daðastaðir, Norður-Pingeyjarsýsla (fig. 4), and Ketilstaðir, Norður-Múlasýsla. Both women's graves have elaborate grave goods and have been classified as higher status burials. Intuitively one would tend to equate high-quality jewellery with higher status, yet both graves produced oval brooches of relatively poor quality and poor rendering. The grave from Daðastaðir is the more elaborate of the two and contained the following grave goods: two oval brooches, a trefoil brooch, bracelet, ringed pin, bead necklace, belt clasp, agricultural implements, textile implements, a comb, one piece of flint, and a dog (Eldjárn and Friðriksson 2000, 212-213). The oval brooches from this grave are not an identical pair. While both are P51 type brooches, one is a P51d type and the other a P51b. The P51d is of poorer quality than its counterpart. This lower quality of workmanship is apparent in the rendering of the brooch itself; for example, the lack of crispness and clarity of the designs on the various panels of the oval brooch. Fuglesang (1987) enumerated a number of criteria to establish good or poor workmanship.

Quality in this connection is taken exclusively as a criterion of craft in the rendering of ornament, eg.: Are the planes of modelling smooth and uniform or uneven and serrated? Are the walls of relief smooth or jagged? Is an incised line evenly curved or angular? Are incised lines of even width and depth or are they uneven? Such criteria of technical ability reflect the amount of training a craftsman had, in other words whether he produced ornament regularly or only intermittently (Fuglesang 1987, 222).

In the case of the Daðastaðir brooches it was likely not their quality that was important but their presence in the grave.

It is likely that this sense of 'Scandinavianess' became all the more important far from the homeland, and identity in this new setting was bound to be altered and adapted to the new social environment. In effect, identity is always something in constant flux and will be affected by circumstances, such as foreign domicility due to colonisation, war, etc. (Gold and Paine 1984, 2; Amory 1997, 16). Gold and Paine (1984) have argued that particular emotions and attitudes may arise when referring to the 'homeland' or 'mother country' among people living in a new place (Gold and Paine 1984, 1). According to these authors, notions and images of the mother country may evoke a variety of responses.

On different occasions, mother country may arouse any one or several emotions across a wide range: nostalgia or bitterness, insecurity or messianism, nationalism or international brotherhood. It is as likely to provoke feelings of elitism as of inferiority. Only exceptionally we think, is it a feeling of indifference (Gold and Paine 1984, 2).

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Both the sense of cultural belonging and ideas of the mother country change with the circumstances of settlement. What people practised in Iceland as funeral behaviour may no longer have carried the same social meaning it originally had in Norway. The symbols may have been modified to suit the current reality, and certain objects placed in graves may have taken on a new symbolic meaning, to become in their own right 'status' objects worn to promote one's place in the emerging social hierarchy. After all, pagan burial, and one could say *all* burial, was by its very nature a symbolic act (Owen and Dalland 1999, 143).

SOCIAL CLIMATE OF EARLY ICELAND AND QUESTIONS OF IDENTITY

The uniqueness of early Icelandic society lay in the fact that Scandinavians arrived in a land which was essentially empty. The new society was thus forced into creating itself, not an easy task in a community consisting of a mixed group of people from both Scandinavia and the British Isles. The cultural element from the British Isles is mentioned in *Landnámabók* as well as other written sources. According to Jones the settlement of Iceland cannot be disassociated from this region, as a decade or so prior to its discovery exploratory voyages to Iceland were carried out from the British Isles (Jones 1986, 41). *Landnámabók* mentions several settlers from Ireland, the Hebrides, and Scotland whose names are Celtic. In addition, there are many examples given of Norse settlers whose spouses were non Norse or of mixed decent. Finally, we know from the written sources that most slaves brought to Iceland in the early period of the settlement were from Ireland and the British Isles (Karras 1988, 49). From *Landnámabók* there is frequent mention of Irish slaves.

He plundered all over Ireland and took a great deal of loot, including ten slaves called Dufthak, Geirraud, Skjaldbjorn, Halldor, Dradrit—the rest of them aren't mentioned by name (Pálsson and Edwards 1972, 19).

Hjorleif drifted west along the coast. He ran short of drinking water, and what the Irish slaves did was to knead together flour and butter saying it was good for thirst (Pálsson and Edwards 1972, 20)

There was a man called Avang, of Irish descent, the first settler at Botn (Pálsson and Edwards 1972, 25).

Even though slavery was said to be officially abolished with the advent of Christianity in AD 1000 (Byock 1993, 123; Karras 1988, 142; Hastrup 1985, 65), Karras (1988) places the actual disappearance of slavery in Iceland roughly in the mid-twelfth century based on evidence from the Icelandic law code *Grágas* (Karras, 1988: 135). Hastrup (1985) stated that *Landnámabók* documents the abolition of slavery earlier during the *landnám* period

(Hastrup 1985, 62). What is clear from the existence of slavery and its rapid or slow decline is that from a social perspective a new social strata of freedmen emerged and were integrated into a formerly stratified social system (Byock 1993, 123; Hastrup 1985, 62). Some freedmen became tenant farmers, some became landowners (Byock 1993, 123), while others may have joined the ranks of free landless workers (Karras 1988, 144). In such a social dynamic there was bound to have been a degree of cultural demarcation at work. Cultural identity may have been affected by such a social environment when more than one social group interacted with each other, as was argued by Amory (1997):

When two groups, whether affiliated hitherto or not, are forced into sharing limited material resources, ethnicity may assume a preponderant role in dividing and defining each of them (Amory 1997, 16).

To further complicate issues in Iceland, the society itself was undergoing rapid social change. We know that the first settlers claimed large portions of land in more advantageous agricultural regions resulting in large farms (Byock 1993, 55) and that by the first half of the tenth century humans were settled in all habitable regions of the country (Vesteinsson 1998, 4). During a later phase of settlement, newcomers were obliged to obtain land from these landowners, which gave rise to tenancy as well as small farms settling around the main farmstead units on land less favourable for agriculture. (Smith 1995, 321; Vesteinsson 1998, 2). For some authors, such as Byock and Hastrup, the large farms of the early settlement had become smaller (Byock 1993, 56-57; Hastrup 1985, 63). Furthermore, from the parcelling up of land it is said that it became increasingly difficult to distinguish the leading families among the settlers, as all landholders benefited from similar rights as freemen (Byock 1993, 56-57). Smith and Vesteinsson argued otherwise, stating that less homogenisation took place and that Iceland's élite maintained its status well into the medieval period (Smith 1995, 321; Vesteinsson 1998, 19).

The process of colonisation, land claiming and land negotiating did not occur suddenly and was undoubtedly gradual, resulting in some possible form of competition and the need to distinguish oneself from others. This probably took place either culturally between Norse and Celtic peoples that in turn may have been transformed and expressed by competition between social strata: élite versus entrepreneurial free farmers versus ambitious freedmen. Undoubtedly the élite tried to maintain its élite status and without a doubt jewellery and material culture in general was used to negotiate social hierarchy. The pagan burial practice, grave-goods, and oval brooches though dated prior to the introduction of Christianity, may have been one of a multitude of elements used in this socio-cultural distinction. They may have contributed to the necessity for some settlers to define themselves as 'the dominant cultural group'. Cultural identity is just one of many hypotheses worth considering when addressing 'Scandinavian' material culture and funerary display in the early settlement of Iceland.

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