

**LANDSCAPES OF LIFE AND DEATH: SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF A
PERCEIVED LANDSCAPE IN VIKING AGE ICELAND**

by

Ruth Ann Maher

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Chapter 1. Introduction

2008: Smalltown, USA. The individual dies and immediately plans begin. The undertaker is called in and sets out a framework of acceptable plans, procedures, services, guests, gifts and the overall ritual from the length of the wake to the service, the funeral procession and the final destination. This entire process is based first and foremost on the religious affiliation of the deceased and his or her family as well as the laws and regulations governing the society. The guidelines are set forth and the normative ritual practice is set out before the family. The length of the ritual is chosen based on costs, numbers of guests and even space at the location. Accommodations and food are organized and provided for those making a long journey, and small remembrance ‘gifts’ are provided to all those who attend.

The deceased is buried in clothing that has some significance to the deceased, to the family, to those bearing witness to the ritual; whether this is his or her finest ‘Sunday dress’ or formal dress which marks his or her social position in a specific organization, it will convey a message to all. Certain ornaments and items of memory are included so that the deceased will not forget loved ones and will take items cherished in life. There will also be religious items to help guide the deceased to the next stage. Some folks will even have their loyal companion interred as well, such as the family dog.

Finally, the procession order is based first on family membership with those closest to the deceased directly behind the casket, then extended family, and after them, there is a social pecking order created by those who follow, some based on wealth or social standing others based on alliances and so forth. This parade is organized by the guests themselves, and becomes politically charged. Finally, the last act in this aspect of

the ritual is performed, usually according to religious ‘rules or laws’ and customs, but could also be chosen by the deceased – interment or cremation, or any other form of disposal that is part of burial ritual in Small town USA.

Those who attended and could bear witness, then take part in another aspect of the ritual, solidifying bonds and ties with the remaining family members. This reinforces ties that were based on the relationship to the deceased, thereby creating a new tie with other members of the family – forming new alliances, strengthening old ones and even establishing new hierarchies socially, in business, in politics or possibly breaking all ties as well.

1.1. The Argument

Many theoretical frameworks can play a part in deconstructing a modern ritual comprised of many stages and mirroring social identity, perceived spaces, memory, economics, politics, tradition, religion and the relationships between the living and the dead. If the modern funerary ritual is this complex, why should the prehistoric ritual have been any less multifaceted?

It is difficult to consider burials in any one theoretical framework. In one, we are asked to regard all the inclusions as a mirror of individual and group identification. (Alekhin 1983; Parker Pearson 1982; Saxe 1971) Another asks that we regard the burial not only as a reflection of the individual within, but as a reflection of the living and their relationship with the dead. (Parker Pearson 1991) A third approach suggests that the humans and the inclusions are separated mentally, socially and spatially and should be considered as separate entities. (Arnold and Wicker 2001) Finally, we are told that one cannot separate the individual from the inclusions or from the culture as a whole. (Olsen

2003) With so many differing theoretical frameworks, it would appear that one must choose between them and follow that course of action. However, as this study suggests, they all have something to add.

Thus, the Icelandic pre-Christian burials should be viewed as more than just the sum of their internal parts. Instead, all of those internal parts, and all the external parts of any burial, together provide information on the intellectual activity that defines social relations and social standing, political agendas, religion and cosmology. Here, I offer a more inclusive line of analysis as a way to understand what the pre-Christian burials of Iceland tell us about the cultural identities of those who lived in Iceland during settlement period.

The purpose of this study is to look beyond the catalogs of data already in the record and put the data in its social context. This study will show that the internal and external aspects of any grave reveal not only information about the deceased, but also about his or her family, society and, most importantly, the ideological realms of the people burying the dead which was, up until recently, not considered accessible from material remains. In so doing, the catalogs of internal data were anthropologically interpreted with the help of external data to provide an image of the society showing differences based on age and gender, gender roles and the role cosmology played in burial placement.

In addition, this study will show that using Geographical Information Systems does not limit research to statements of quantity. In fact, GIS can be used to explore a range of subjects including qualitative analysis. This is achieved by integrating Cognitive, Landscape and Mortuary theory; and Gender and Age approaches to the burial

sites of pre-Christian Viking period Iceland.

The Anthropological approach to archaeology focuses on culture; and culture is made evident by human artifacts and activities. Thus, the approach of this study was to analyze the internal grave structures and artifact inclusions and the external surroundings to draw out the meanings, symbols and behaviors behind these materials which define the culture. Much of the current trend in Icelandic archaeology today is to focus on the quantitative data only, which is advancing our understanding of how the Viking period settlers lived, what they ate, where they came from and what constitutes wealth and status. However, it has rarely been used to explain the lifestyle or ideology or the cognitive relationships to each other and to the perceived environment of the early Icelanders. The vast amount of quality data utilized in this study were expertly collected and analyzed over the years by exceptional scholars both in Iceland and abroad and collected here in an anthropological study to further our understanding of the original culture of Iceland. Similar undertakings that focus on gender, social memory and social approaches to studying the burial ritual are beginning to be pursued in archaeological research there, and this research complements the processual approaches. It is believed that this study is important both for understanding the pre-Christian Icelandic burials in their cultural context and as a timely contribution to the new body of emerging Anthropological Archaeology in Iceland. In placing the lists of data into a cultural context, the first step was to review the various sources which could provide some background on the society under study. The next section will provide details of the written sources and their inclusion into this project.

1.2. Written Sources

1.2.1. Ancient Texts

A number of ancient texts are used in this study. All of these writings needed to be read carefully and an understanding of their context is essential to focusing on the historic information and cultural images that reflect the Viking period accurately because these texts were written either contemporaneously, but through the eyes of a foreigner, or by someone looking back at the earlier culture. All of these texts were written with a specific purpose pertinent to their own space and time. If these factors did not make their use complicated enough, it also must be kept in mind that all of these texts were written almost a millennia ago and not only have they been translated from other languages, including earlier versions of Icelandic, but also these texts are often copies of copies of copies. Thus, mistakes are bound to have been made even with expert transcription skills (see, for example Sawyer 1962:17-18). By comparing texts regarding the same events but from different sources, mistakes have indeed been caught; however, it is not unreasonable to assume, due to the paucity of original source material, that many more errors have gone unnoticed. (Sawyer 1962:32-47)

There are two ancient texts referred to in this research that are contemporary with the study period, though they were written by men from other cultures. The first is the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle which is an annual record of historic events important to the Anglo-Saxons. The annals were first written in the 9th century CE, in England, and after that, copies were sent to monasteries across England asking the monks to record events in each area. Some recorded events more acutely than others and no originals survive today. (Ingram 1996) Some of the accounts are clearly biased, omitting unfavorable events as well as exaggerating others. Still, these chronicles are a good source of information

about the impact the Vikings had on England and the clash between the two cultures. Unfortunately, they do not describe any amicable meetings between the two cultures, although there surely must have been a few. The texts were written in Old English, and one version was even written in Middle English.

Another source used in this study is the observations made during the journeys of an Arab traveler who reported his encounters in foreign lands to the Caliph in the 10th century. His name was Ahmad ibn Fadlan ibn al-Abbas ibn Rasid ibn Hammad, but he is also referred to simply as Ibn Fadlan. During his travels, Ibn Fadlan described a group that he met along the riverbanks near Bulgar, Russia as *Rus*. It is believed that these Rus or Varangians are indeed the Vikings of the eastern expansion, most likely from the Swedish area of Scandinavia. He described them as traders with rather filthy hygiene and the men and women's figures and manner of dress were also detailed. One of the most important contributions to this study is his discussion of the funeral of a chieftain which paints a vivid picture of the long funerary ritual from the moment of death until the cremation. (Frye 2005:67-69; Warmind 1995) Obviously, translations of the text create some questions about its usefulness to scholars of the Viking World. The significant issue is who, exactly, Ibn Fadlan was writing about – though the general consensus among scholars is that it was indeed about Norse traders. Another issue pertaining to this study is that Ibn Fadlan's accounts are about an eastern expansion group and do not reflect the ways and traditions of the western expansion group. My contention is that they reveal one aspect of the Viking society which concerns their cosmology, religion and ideology, widely shared throughout the Norse cultures, that can be, at least partially, considered applicable to those Viking period Norse in Iceland. (Frye 2005:63-71; Parker Pearson

2001:1-3; Sawyer 1962:47)

The Book of Settlement, possibly written by Sturla Þordarson or even Ari Þorgilsson, and the Book of Icelanders most likely by Ari Þorgilsson, are believed to have been written closest to the period under study, early in the 12th century. The book of Settlement describes in great detail the initial land-taking of Iceland by at least 430 men and those who joined them, including family and others in the household in the latter half of the 9th century. In the descriptions of each of the original settlers, information is also given about their ancestors and descendants. It also reports important events which took place in the Viking World at that time. (Jónsson 1986:21-241; Pálsson and Edwards 1972) The Book of Icelanders records major events in Icelandic history. For this study, the relevant chapters are the first through the seventh. The book begins at the initial settlement and states that most of the settlers immigrated from Norway. It tells of the few Irish monks or hermits who inhabited Iceland but left when the heathens arrived, then goes on to discuss how the laws came to Iceland and how the Althing or general assembly was established, then how Iceland was divided into judicial quarters, the discovery and settlement of Greenland, and finally the conversion to Christianity around 1000 CE. (Jónsson 1986:1-12) These are invaluable sources contributing greatly to the history of Iceland. However, as with all of these ancient texts, they were subject to transcription errors and especially to subjective story-telling as they were written after the fact and were intended for a specific audience and for a specific purpose. (Sawyer 1962:12-47)

Gragas or The Gray Goose Laws, were enacted during the Commonwealth period (930-1262 CE). Prior to their being written down in the early 12th century, these laws

were traditionally recited at the Althing (the national parliament held annually at Thingvellir) by the lawspeaker. (Dennis and Foote 1990, 2006) Although they are concerned mostly with Christian times in Iceland, they contain a lot of information about the reasons the laws were created and provide insight as to the situation prior to their enactment. For instance, the act of writing down a law stating that horse meat should not be eaten and that this old practice is not Christian and should be abandoned, infers information about diet during the pre-Christian period. Many insights into the social roles of men and women and the politics between them in the earlier society can be derived from the laws regarding divorce, politics and even infanticide. (Dennis and Foote 1990, 2006) Though these are only hints into the Viking period society, they are very useful tools if used with caution. (Sawyer 1962:12-47)

The final sources that contributed greatly to this study are the family sagas from which were gleaned the social, familial, political and even cosmological and religious practices in the prehistoric period outlined above. The sagas offer a picture of the Viking period Icelanders through their descriptions of families, places, clothing, events and even battles which provide the reader an opportunity to imagine how adornment and weapons were worn, ships sailed on the water and people moved from one stage of existence into the next. (for example, Kellogg and Smiley 1997; Magnusson and Pálsson 1960, 1965b; Pálsson 1971; Pálsson and Edwards 1972, 1976, 1978, 1989; Thorsson and Scudder 2000) These sagas have been the focus of various studies over the years about the nature of the writings and their usefulness (Byock 1982, 1990; Faraday 1906; Friðriksson 1994; Guðmundsson 1993; Hastrup 1981), and about their efficacy in providing an accurate image of women's position and roles in society. (Borovsky 1999; Clover 1988; Damsholt

1984; Jacobsen 1978; Jochens 1995, 1996; Smith 2004; Stalsberg 1991, 2001).

The Sagas of the Icelanders are considered by most to be an amazing source of information on the Viking period. Although they were written at least two hundred years after the events they describe, they do provide some insight into the history, genealogy and family ties of the Icelanders by including various aspects of settlement, such as who chose to immigrate to Iceland, from where, why and with whom. These sagas also describe farm life, connections to the landscape, land tenure, marriage, infidelity, alliances, laws and democracy, gender roles, division of labor, social position, religion, worldview, politics, morals and many other aspects of the lives of the families who lived in Iceland between the 9th and 11th centuries. The authors of the majority of these sagas are unknown. However, Snorri Sturluson is believed to have contributed to at least one story about the life and family of a man known as Egil. (Byock 1982, 1990; Damsholt 1984; Friðriksson 1994; Sawyer 1962)

The sagas are a source of useful information about the Viking culture – mostly due to their being written relatively close in time to the subject matter – but they are an historic artifact themselves. They were written by Christians about a period in their own very recent past when their ancestors were considered by many to have been heathens and barbarians. For this reason, some expected the sagas to paint a pejorative picture of the Vikings, especially when discussing women and that many characteristics that were not considered to be those of a good Christian woman would be assigned to the women in the sagas. Also, the fact that the sagas were written by later, powerful, Christian males lead some to assume that they depicted Viking females who were subordinate to the males as a reflection of their own society. (Gilchrist 1999; Jacobsen 1978; Jesch 1991;

Jochens 1996) Others maintain that the archaeology and law codes support the fact that there was differentiation of power and freedom based on sex. (Gräslund 2001; Smith 2004) The sagas were written close enough to the Viking period to surely be correct about the gender roles, division of labor and social positions of women in the Icelandic society. Had the women been more equal to men in all aspects of power, prestige and politics, it is more than likely that such a fact would have been over-exaggerated by the authors, to show that such a condition was unchristian. Since it is not, it seems more likely that the sagas were not deliberately misrepresenting the pre-Christian perception of male/female relationships. However, it will be shown below that while the data suggests clear differentiation in the roles and the perception of females and males by the Viking period Icelanders, it is not so clear that women held a subordinate position during that time.

Not only were ancient texts used to gain insight into the society under study, but also the wealth of research derived from historians and scientists over the years. The next section outlines how this more contemporary research contributes to this study.

1.2.2. Modern Research

The pre-Christian burials of Iceland are quite numerous and are thus a major source of archaeological material regarding the Viking period in Iceland. Most of the early research on the burials focused on confirming the sagas. Thus, for the most part, the archaeology was linked to an historical tradition in archaeology where the texts explained and pointed to the location of sites and the sites confirmed the authenticity of the texts. (Friðriksson 1994:6-8) In Iceland, for instance, in 1882, Kristian Kaalund created the first catalogue of burials which he had surveyed during his travels around Iceland, based on sites mentioned in the sagas. (Friðriksson 2000:12) At times, comparisons were made

between the Icelandic and Norwegian corpus of burial remains. Since the Icelandic materials were sparse in comparison, an assumption was made that the Icelandic Vikings were poor in comparison to their Norwegian contemporaries and their meager graves were evidence of a politically egalitarian group. (Friðriksson 2000:12-15)

Although pre-Christian burials (*kuml*) have been excavated and recorded by amateurs and scholars alike for over a century, it was not until Kristján Eldjárn wrote his dissertation in 1956, *Kuml og Haugfé* (Pre-Christian Graves and Grave goods) that a complete catalogue of the pre-Christian graves, independent of saga citations, was compiled and systematically reviewed. (Friðriksson 2000) His research marks the change from a more historic approach to the burials to an archaeological approach in Icelandic archaeology. His catalogue describes the morphology of the burials, their orientation, the placement of artifacts, grave associations, a history of their discovery and excavation, osteological analysis and artifact typology, amongst other things. (Friðriksson 2000) From the first, Eldjárn had begun to compare the burials of Iceland to those of other Norse areas and he was the first to discover remarkable similarities with those found in Scotland. (Eldjárn 1958, 1984)

In 2000, Adolf Friðriksson updated *Kuml og haugfé* by adding pre-Christian burials discovered after the original publication in 1956 until 1999. He provided up-to-date information with respect to each burial and incorporated English summaries; his work on burials continues with research into and archaeological surveys of potential burial sites and patterns. Based on his theory of placement, he has since located and excavated previously undiscovered burials, for example at Saltvik and Litlu-Nupar. Also, he has contributed greatly to the overall examination of burial topography in Iceland.

(Friðriksson 2000, 2005; Friðriksson, et al. 2005) Hildur Gestsdóttir has reexamined the available skeletal remains in order to determine age and sex. She is currently carrying out a palaeo-pathological study of the corpus of Icelandic skeletons, including those from pagan graves. (Gestsdóttir 1998a, 1998b, 2007) Strontium isotope analysis is also underway which has been providing indications of the origins of individuals in the burial record. (Gestsdóttir and Price 2003) There have been various studies of the blood groups of the Icelanders (Bjarnason, et al. 1973; Einarsson 1994) as well as studies identifying their genetic code. By studying their DNA, scholars hope to form a better understanding of who the original Icelanders were and what their connections were to Norway, the British Isles and Scandinavia. (Helgason, et al. 2001; Helgason, Sigurðardóttir, Gulcher, et al. 2000) The work continues today with the most recent discoveries (H. Roberts 2008; H.M. Roberts 2008, pers. comm.; Zoega 2007, pers. comm.). Gender studies in archaeology have begun to be undertaken, in one case looking at issues of gender through adornment (Smith 2004), and the first cremation has even been discovered in Iceland. (Byock, et al. 2005; Byock, et al. 2003)

This work was built on many aspects of the past scholarship noted above. However, it includes further quantitative and qualitative analyses of the data and asks questions regarding age, gender, landscape perceptions and the meanings behind the positioning of the graves. By doing so, it may expand our image of the world of the Viking period Icelanders. (Maher 2005; Maher 2004a, 2008). Gender is of particular interest to this study and the next section will explain the resources contributing to this project.

1.3. Foundations of the Research

1.3.1. Norse Gender Studies

Over the years, many aspects of the Viking World have been studied and recorded. Prior to the feminist revolution in Anthropology, most studies did not address gender, *per se*. Based on contemporary western attitudes, gender roles were binary and males and females did not overlap. Artifact associations were interpreted according to these assumptions and the role of children, unless there were atypical inclusions among their grave goods that indicated an elevated status, were hardly mentioned.

Once archaeologists began to ask questions about gender, women's roles in the Viking period were being addressed. One of the earlier studies involved a very complete analysis of the Book of Settlement, an historic account of the Settlement period of Iceland, by Jacobsen. (Jacobsen 1978) Her thesis has since been referred to by others applying gender research strategies to the Norse. (Jochens 1995) When Conkey and Spector (1984) came out with their ground-breaking article about gender and archaeology, a new journal was first published in Norway by the name of K.A.N. Women in Archaeology (K.A.N: Kvinner i arkeologi i Norge). (Engelstad 2007:217) Since then, in Scandinavia there has been growing interest in gender research for the Viking period from various fields, including folklore, history, anthropology and archaeology. (Borovsky 1999; Damsholt 1984) Much of the research focused on gender differentiation derived from the ancient writings, and the later studies incorporate archaeological material as well. As previously mentioned, Jacobsen worked with the sagas, particularly the Book of Settlement where she first suggested a 6:1 male to female ratio during the settlement period of Iceland. (Jacobsen 1978:24-32; Jochens 1995:86)

As gender studies continued, archaeological material was used in conjunction

with the sagas. Damsholt addressed the issues of female production and her contribution of homespun to family status and wealth. (Damsholt 1984) Jochens and Jesch both sought to draw on the sagas, history and archaeology to provide a well-rounded image of the Norse, rather than the one-sided view so often put forth, and in particular they both sought to make the invisible visible and bring to the fore that the Norse women did appear in history and brought them to light today. (Jesch 1991; Jochens 1995, 1996) Clover discussed the relationship between men and women and how power manifested itself and was perpetuated by the system. (Clover 1988, 1993) Today, we see empowered Viking period women running the household and contributing to its social standing, because of the research of Stalsberg (Stalsberg 1991, 2001), Dommasnes (1998), Graslund (2001), and many others who have contributed to gendered research on the Norse.

A wealth of information is gained from these studies; however, some seem contradictory. On the one hand, it is argued that the ancient writings paint the ‘pagan’ females in a poor light because they were written by Christian males. On the other hand, there are many images of socially respected, strong women who not only helped to support their own households, but also their husbands and families, without being censured by some Christian male authors. More than likely, both arguments hold true. More females were probably presented pejoratively because of the Christian male bias. That being said, the gender roles, division of labor and the politics of gender and age were probably not too distorted since some of these texts were written not long after the period in question and because there are other writings, such as the law codes, that also describe these roles and relationships. (Gilchrist 1999; Smith 2004)

A study of the role of women in trade during the Viking period, revealed that women in the eastern expansion were often associated with artifacts of trade. Prior to this study it was accepted that trade was a male domain, so individuals buried with trade artifacts must be male. (Stalsberg 1991, 2001) In fact, what has been shown here is that in the Icelandic context there were only a few artifacts that could be designated as being either male or female, but gender has also been identified in other aspects of the burial rite. More interesting was that age seemed to be a factor and although there were some inconsistencies, a strong connection could be made between artifacts and age. These results might open the door to new assumptions regarding artifact association, but caution is needed when making them as they are estimates based on a percentage of identified remains with many unknowns in the mix. The following section will describe the background of age as an inclusion in the research.

1.3.2. With Age Comes Standing

Women and children are usually placed together in the private sphere. As discussed with respect to gender and gender roles, especially through time, age categories are just as arbitrary. Age like gender are both biological conditions which create noticeable differences between individuals in households, communities and social and political groups. It is very likely that, similar to gender, the age divisions of labor, roles, and social position within a society changed from culture to culture and over time. (Joyce 1999; Kamp 2001) In legal documents from “the 7th century Anglo Saxon Britain, 10 was the age at which children became adults, but by the 10th century the boundary had been raised to age 12.” (Crawford, 1991 as cited in Kamp 2001:4).

However, contemporary thought leads us to pursue the archaeology of childhood based on the much later age that we consider adulthood in western society today.

Examining other cultures across the globe, there are clear variations for division of labor based on age as well as the age of maturation to adulthood. Many societies do not take into consideration the biological age division, but focus more on skills, intellect, mental and physical readiness to tackle particular tasks and various other attributes. This project will reveal age as a major contributor to differentiation in burial rites during the study period.

Two of the main assumptions of this project have thus been outlined – that age and gender differences will be evident in the archaeological record, The final two, which are based on years of archaeological research, will be addressed. Here the understanding of prestige goods and their use for interpreting social position will be discussed in the context of this study.

1.3.3. Approaches to Prestige Goods and Social Position

The archaeology of prestige and power is not new and the power and prestige found in chiefdom societies is well documented. (Arnold 1995; Byock 1990; Carneiro 1981; Driscoll 1988; Earle 1987, 1997; Nelson 1997; Parker Pearson 1991; Trinkaus 1995; Vésteinsson 2000) Similarly, the assumptions regarding wealth, status and prestige goods in this research are not new, nor am I adding any new information *per se* to the body of knowledge on that subject. However, by focusing on the Icelandic corpus and organizing the various artifacts, including the so-called ‘prestige goods’ into categories based on function as measures of differentiation within and between the sexes, interesting results were reached. Thus, it becomes necessary to briefly describe the background regarding the quantity and quality of the artifact inclusions and their implications for the dataset.

Much of the burial data in this project are derived from the work of Kristján

Eldjárn who discussed and compared the data within the broader Scandinavian context. My study, however, focused on Iceland, although reference is sometimes made to the broader context of Norse burial style. His view stated that the graves in Iceland were modest and that social differentiation was measured by quality and not quantity. Such an assessment was based on the comparison of the Icelandic Viking period burial sites to the burial sites found in other parts of the Viking World, especially Norway, where there have been numerous, exceptionally wealthy graves recorded by archaeologists over the years. See, for example (Bruce-Mitford 1979; Carver 1995; Ingstad 1995; Sjøvold 1954, 1985; Sørensen 1997; Wamers 1995). Although comparing the Icelandic burials to those of the rest of the Viking World is relevant, particularly in placing them into a wider social context, it seemed more productive to study them as they related to other Icelandic burials in order to understand the shades within the social hierarchy of this place and time, rather than simply labeling them rich or poor without establishing the specific social, political and economic differences.

Many of the known Viking period farms in Iceland show architectural and zooarchaeological signs of substantial wealth, even by continental standards, but artifact finds from excavations as well as burials are modest in quality (especially the precious metals) and many imported items show evidence of long curation and repair or the use of local materials as substitutes for imported goods. (Edvardsson 2003; Einarsson 1994; Vésteinsson 2002) Whether the long-held view that the majority of the Icelandic settlers were simply poor was accurate, or Iceland's position on the periphery and distance from the major market centers artificially depressed the quality and quantity of artifacts available for signaling wealth and power, is uncertain and controversial.

Whether there is a direct or indirect relationship between burials and the social practices of the living has been a subject of debate for quite some time in archaeology. However, as Nielsen states: “burials do reflect real life, but only when the historical context and [other] factors...are taken into consideration. It is clear that an expensive burial rite is pre-eminent only in certain situations, depending not just on social mobility, but also on the religious allegiance and personal success, not of the deceased necessarily but of his descendants.” (Nielsen 1997b:110) Quantifying the artifact assemblage of the Icelandic burial context has provided similar results. First, it shows that in all societies, even one claimed to be marginal by comparison, differences in the perceived power and prestige of individuals will be visible in the burial inclusions. Second, the more prestigious the burials, the fewer there will be, while the less prestigious graves will comprise the majority. In the Icelandic context, a small percentage of graves contained items categorized as leisure and prestige clearly indicating social inequality in Iceland and, as will be shown in the chapters ahead, these make up only about 10.7% of the artifacts. There are also non-local items and artifacts that quite possibly signaled status-creating ventures in the collection that were also prestigious. Similar to other studies, the burials here were assessed based on grave goods, thus the term ‘poor’ when used here is relative to this particular body of data. (Crumlin-Pedersen 1995) However, the project is aware that the seemingly poor graves may in fact be individuals from a different cultural group living within the society under study. Thus, although it is possible to evaluate indicators of wealth in the burial record, it is almost impossible to assign a ‘poor’ status based on lack of artifacts, at least in the context of this dataset.

The final assumption which needs some explaining is how lineage and ownership

have been defined and applied in archaeological contexts around the globe and how it applies to the Icelandic corpus.

1.3.4. Reflections on Culture: Lineage and Ownership

As noted by Friðriksson, it is impossible to rely on certain man-made features dating from the settlement period because of various human and environmental factors. This means that the prehistoric farm boundaries are very difficult to assess and use in modern analyses. Still, he finds that burials are commonly found near to tracks and roads. (Friðriksson 2005:15-16)

It is relevant that farm sizes could vary drastically and based on the type of farm probably affected burial location. Thus, it seemed useful to study the burials in an area which included a possible Viking period farm, regardless of its boundaries, to assess how close the relationship was between the living and the dead. It was believed that for this project an arbitrary boundary beyond the possible farm house position would serve the project best. At the core of the research was the assumption that for the most part the burials were placed to convey an association between the living and the dead, and that regardless of their relation to property boundaries, burying the deceased on one's own farm provided sufficient evidence of claim. (Chapman 1995) Also, it seemed clear that by placing a burial site on a prominent feature in the landscape such as a hill, cliff and even hillock, the Icelandic pre-Christian burial sites were declaring their rights to the land, as well.

There are a number of prehistoric and more contemporary cultures who buried their dead close to or even under the home. For example, the much earlier Bronze Age Argaric of Iberia were buried under house floors with artifacts revealing the personal wealth and position of the individual and thus, the family occupying the house. (Lull

2000) Also, the Oneota of North America employed various burial practices including ‘within-habitation cemeteries’; leading researchers to conclude that households were occupied by the same groups repeatedly. (Gilman 2001; O’Gorman 2001:29). Closer to the subject period, during the British Bronze Age, previously mummified bodies of ancestors were buried under round-house floors to preserve lineage and family ties at Cladh Hallan. The bodies were found under various layers of jewelry, lamps and even animal remains. (Pearson, et al. 2004:74-82) These are just three examples where personal and family wealth, ancestry and land ownership are clearly demonstrated in the archaeological record.

However, there are many more peoples in historic and prehistoric times who adopted the tradition of separating the dead from the living. In many societies, especially in the North Atlantic region, the distances tended to be much greater than in Iceland. The Christian practice of burying the dead in churchyards is obviously notable since these were the contemporaries who regularly interacted with the Icelanders. In the Roman period many burial sites were located along roads at the outskirts of towns and in various places during the Medieval period, we see that burials were also placed beyond habitation areas, whether they were towns or smaller hamlets. (Aries 1994; Chapman and Randsborg 1981a, 1981b; Daniel 1998; Davies 1999; Goldstein 1981; Parker Pearson 1991, 2002) Of course, there are variations within each of these examples. It is important to note, however, that the Viking period Icelanders had a choice and analysis shows that they had reasons for their preferred locations.

Drawing from the position of the pre-Christian Icelandic burials we can see that it is likely that their positions in the landscape suggest a society that was not only creating a

lineage through their burials, but also staking claims to their land – creating a history for the descendants of the first settlers and connecting the Icelanders to their new homes in their new landscape.

With the goals, resources and assumptions underlying this project characterized, it is necessary to define terms and abbreviations used throughout the text.

1.4. Definitions

The majority of terms used are not uncommon, however, some of the terms need to be defined to narrow and clarify their use in this dissertation. Other terms are unique to certain computer applications and might be useful for a reader who is not familiar with such language.

- ***Burial Site***. The specific location where one or more pre-Christian burials are located and identified by a specific Burial Reference Number (“*BR no.*” or “*Burial Site No.*” is used to refer to each site) which was originally based on Eldjárn’s chronology with the newly discovered sites continuing in the numbering sequence. These Burial Sites are usually called by their farm names, for example the “Litlu-Nupar” burial site, or by their general location, for example the “Berufjord” burial site.
- ***Cemetery or Graveyard***. Both these terms reflect the concept of an area being used for the burial of humans. However, here, the terms have been used to differentiate between Burial Sites with only a few graves and those Graveyards or Cemeteries with four or more Graves.
- ***Distance***. All distances are in metric and most have been measured using handheld GPS devices (described below) during various surveys of the region.

- ***Elevation***. Elevation data is based on either surface maps created for landscape analysis or GPS coordinates collected during archaeological survey of the burials, in which case the datum is the WGS84 spheroid and points are measured in meters above sea level (asl).
- ***Environmental/Vegetation Maps***. A map representing the vegetation of Iceland, also known as a Vegetation Map. The Settlement period map is an estimated landscape created by Eyþór Einarsson and Einar Gíslason in 2001. Both the settlement period and the modern environmental landscape maps are being used with the express permission of Nátturufraeðistofnun Íslands.
- ***Farms***. In Iceland today, although there are cities, towns and hamlets, the majority of archaeological sites discussed here are located on farms around the country.
- ***Geographical Information Systems (GIS)***. A computer-based relational database with the ability to integrate, store, manage, edit, analyze, query and display spatially/geographically referenced data.
- ***Global Positioning System (GPS)***. A satellite-based navigational system, in this case used to record the coordinates of the Burial Sites and the Farmhouses used in this study.
- ***Grave***. This term refers literally to the hole in the ground. One Burial Site may contain one individual grave, a multiple grave (where more than one individual is interred in one or more holes) or numerous graves (as described above) as in a cemetery or graveyard. When individual graves are being discussed and the provenience for skeletal remains, artifacts and/or animal

inclusions is known, graves were referenced by their specific grave numbers or “Gr. no.”

- ***Interpolation.*** A process of predicting unknown values by using and calculating a number of known values around the unknown value. Most often applied to point elevation data in order to create a continuous surface.
- ***Line of Sight.*** A graphic line between two points on a surface that shows whether or not the view between the two points is clear or obstructed.
- ***Norse.*** The term used to describe the Scandinavians as a cultural group (the people of Norway, Sweden, Denmark, the Faroe Islands, Iceland and Greenland) and the individuals are known as “Norsemen.”
- ***Placement.*** There are many ways that this term can be interpreted when working with burial data. For the purposes here, this study regards the placement of the burial in terms of location. Thus the placement of the burials are being researched in order to understand the location of the burial within the landscape: elevation, vegetation, region, distance from associated or possibly associated farms, etc. The orientation and positioning of the skeleton or grave are not addressed by this term.
- ***Querying.*** A method of questioning the data in a database so that the entire database can be searched and relevant information can be separated from the rest.
- ***Relational Database Management System (RDBMS).*** Drawing on the definition of a DBMS which is a software system that supports the creation, maintenance and use of an electronic database; an RDBMS may be a DBMS

in which data is stored in the form of tables and the relationship among the data is also stored in the form of tables.

- **Viewshed.** A map created from the analysis of topographic surfaces that depicts all locations visible from a predetermined viewpoint.
- **Viking.** A Norseman who went by sea on expeditions to raid, trade and colonize foreign lands from the 8th to 11th centuries CE.
- **Visibility.** The measure of the distance at which an object can be clearly discerned.

As was the case of the defined terms, it is also necessary to explain the spelling, pronunciation and variations of both throughout the text. The next section attempts to clarify the Icelandic text for English readers.

1.5. Language Conventions

Over the years translations of Old Icelandic have been used with many different writing conventions and spellings for names and places. My goal here, is to make it easier for those readers unfamiliar with Old Icelandic to read the Icelandic terms at the same time that I preserve the names and places as much as possible. Old Icelandic has three characters which are particularly difficult, the letter Þ or þ, the letter Ð or ð and the letter Æ or æ. The Þ is voiceless and is pronounced “*th*” as in the word *ether* and is always found at the beginning of a word; in English, we tend to substitute “*Th*” for this letter, thus Þor becomes Thor. The Ð is voiced and is pronounced “*th*” as in the word *either* and is never found at the beginning of a word; in English, we tend to substitute “*d*” for this letter thus Óðin and fjörð become Ódin and fjörd. The Æ is pronounced like the English word “*eye*”; in English, the original character has been retained since using “*AE*” does

not make it easier to read. Accents have been removed in the English version of words so that á, é, í, ó, ö, ú and ý have become a, e, i, o, o, u and y. These conventions have been used throughout this text, except in direct quotations where the spelling from the source material was retained as they were in the references cited throughout so that the materials can be located.

Icelandic case endings are omitted: Egill is Egil, Odinn is Odin, Skallagrímur is Skallagrím. However, there are still spelling issues that cannot be so easily resolved. There are times when words are spelled one way in one source and spelled differently in another and in Icelandic spelled yet a third way. In such cases, I attempted to choose one spelling and use it throughout. In most of this text, I chose to use the English as this thesis is written in English and will also be in a digital format and not all non-Scandinavian systems will be able to handle or print the Icelandic characters. However, there are a few examples throughout where the Icelandic characters will be used – usually italicized and in the Appendices, so that the data is kept in its original form.

Finally, outlining the organization of this work was deemed the best means for clearly preparing the reader for the arguments, data, outcomes and suggestions for future research in this subject matter to follow.

1.6. Chapter Overview

I have used the data obtained from the burial sites and graves by others together with data obtained during my archaeological survey of the Burial Sites and their surrounding landscapes and spaces to understand the individuals and groups in the context of their social and political affiliations. In order to understand any social meanings of the artifact assemblage within its perceived environment, much more than

bodies and artifacts were needed to present a rich, full image of the culture and the symbolic connections to their world. I have therefore chosen to organize this work in the follow manner:

- **Chapter 2** provides the context of this research by describing the island in the North Atlantic encountered by the Norse travelers, its history and the world of the original settlers. This chapter also introduces the reader to the burial practices of the Icelandic pre-Christians which were the focus of this project.
- **Chapter 3** introduces the theoretical and methodological approaches applied to the dataset including a relatively new one: the use of cognitive theory and cognitive GIS in conjunction with the quantitative data analyses.
- **Chapter 4** breaks down the burial data into their respective Graves, illuminating the individuals who occupied the Graves and the meanings of the artifacts and other inclusions related to the dead and to each other. Of particular interest are the patterns emerging with respect to age and gender differentiation.
- **Chapter 5** continues the analysis focusing on the data external to the Graves particularly with regard to how the spaces surrounding each Burial Site were perceived and the ties to their land. The focus of the previous chapter is further developed to understand the differences in burial rites between age categories and gender. The final sections explore the possible interpretations that could be drawn from the dataset, quantitatively and qualitatively. In doing so, the analysis reaches beyond the obvious grave good associations to the symbolism and the mental processes behind their deposition in order to

understand the social positions and relations, and political affiliations and the religious and cosmological foundations.

- *Chapter 6* concludes this work with a discussion of how the interpretations drawn in *Chapters 4 and 5* relate to the expectations set forth in this thesis, where this work fits into the current research on pre-Christian Viking period burials of Iceland and other regions, and the next steps for continued research.