

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

by

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## **Chapter 2. Setting the Scene**

### **2.1. Geography**

The study area is the country of Iceland which is located in the Sub-Arctic region, between continental Europe and North America. Iceland is an island with the North Atlantic Ocean on its southern and eastern coasts, the Greenland Sea on its northern coast and the Denmark Strait along the northwest. (See Map 1) The country is approximately 200 km east of Greenland, 400 km northwest of the Faroe Islands, 800 km northwest of Scotland and 900 km west of Norway. Its coordinates range roughly between 63°22'3.64"N and 66°7'42.23"N latitude, and between 13°28'12.22"W and 24°37'6.24"W longitude, creating a landmass that is wider than its length. The island itself is approximately 103,125 km<sup>2</sup>, almost the same size as the state of Kentucky in the United States. (Nordal and Kristinsson 1975:1-2)

#### ***2.1.1. Climate***

As an island in the North Atlantic Ocean, Iceland has a maritime climate with the oceans influencing the temperatures. The North Atlantic Drift is the major current affecting the Icelandic climate as it pushes the warm Irminger Current north along the western coast of Iceland. In most years it also creates a surface current along the north coast as well. The Norwegian Atlantic Current is also created by the North Atlantic Drift and its current moves east and north along Iceland's southern and eastern coasts. (Ogilvie 1991; Ogilvie and Jonsdóttir 1998; Ogilvie, et al. 2000:36-37)

Iceland falls within a temperate climate zone, usually without extremes of precipitation and temperature, thus the norm for Iceland is damp, cool summers and mild, windy winters. However, due to its proximity to Greenland and the cooler Arctic

currents, it can be marked by frequent changes in weather where all four seasons may be experienced in one day where clouds can bring about a sudden drop of temperature changing the temperature from warm to chilly. As a result of the Arctic currents, the western and southern regions of Iceland tend to have much more rain than the north and east. (Hanna, et al. 2006; Ogilvie, et al. 2000)

### ***2.1.2. Natural Landscape***

Due to the nature of this study, the Icelandic terrain requires particular explanation. Iceland is mostly a plateau that is broken by mountain peaks, ice fields and glaciers. The coastline is almost 5,000 km long riddled by deep fiords on all but the southern coast. The elevations of the island range from sea level to the high point of 2,110 m asl at Oræfajökul volcano in the south. Approximately 24,700 km<sup>2</sup> fall within an elevational range between sea level and 200 m asl; 18,400 km<sup>2</sup> are between 201-400 m asl; 22,200 km<sup>2</sup> range between 401-600 m asl; and 37,700 km<sup>2</sup> are over 601 m asl. (Nordal and Kristinsson 1975:7) (See Map 2)

Today, glaciers cover almost 12,000 km<sup>2</sup>, which is about 11.7% of the total area of Iceland. Although Iceland is a relatively large landmass, the vast majority of the interior is uninhabitable desert. (See Map 3) As can be seen, the desert is located to the north and west of Vatnajökul glacier and there are large areas of washed-out plains created by the glacial rivers which continuously change course. The resulting wastelands measure approximately 64,500 km<sup>2</sup> which is 62.6% of the total area of Iceland. This leaves only 25.7% of Iceland suitable for habitation and 11.2% of this is made up of lakes and rivers. Vegetation covers only 23,800 km<sup>2</sup> and lakes and rivers cover about 2,700 km<sup>2</sup>. (Einarsson 1991; Nordal and Kristinsson 1975:7-10)

The Icelandic soils can be broadly grouped into two types: mineral soils and

organic soils. The mineral soils are mostly eolian, built up by powerful physical forces such as volcanic eruptions. They have a low acidity (pH 6-7). Bogs form about 40% of the total soil cover and their composition is about 40-60% mineral soil. The organic soils also have a low acidity (pH 5-6) and with substantial amounts of human intervention by way of fertilization are quite good for agriculture. Unfortunately, Icelandic soils do not contain enough clay, therefore they are susceptible to various types of erosion. Also, investigations near some of the icecaps of central Iceland show that pressure and winds are markedly affected by the presence of the icecaps under various conditions. Ashwell explains that “[t]he main effect is of wave formation and descent of dry air, coming predominantly from Polar or Arctic air masses, and the descent of this air is associated with a belt of severe soil erosion in south and central Iceland. A similar effect can also be detected in northern Iceland.” (Ashwell 1966:538-540; Einarsson 1991; Nordal and Kristinsson 1975:7-10)

Although natural processes have greatly contributed to the various phases of soil erosion around Iceland, the final phase was exacerbated by human activity. Enkhtuya et al. indicate that many of the desert areas were previously fully vegetated and covered with fertile andisols. (Enkhtuya, et al. 2003) Although wind contributed to a great amount of the erosion seen in Iceland’s wastelands today, it is not the only culprit. Erosion induced by human activity in the past years has removed almost all the original soil and vegetation cover of these areas and exposed the underlying soil horizons. (Enkhtuya, et al. 2003:209-210; Ólafsdóttir and Guðmundsson 2002) Since the arrival of humans, Iceland has been dramatically altered. The first major alteration made by the settlers was to clear land in order to make it suitable for livestock and farming. The birch

forests and scrub were cut down and/or burned and Iceland was introduced to herbivorous mammals such as sheep, goats, cows and horses as well as the omnivorous pig. (McGovern, et al. 2000) With the woods gone and the overgrazing of the animals, the very delicate environmental balance was quickly disturbed, creating the ever increasing erosion fields that are common today. Soils were blown away (Enkhtuya, et al. 2003; Ólafsdóttir and Guðmundsson 2002) and today “about half of the land area below 400 m asl, which was previously covered by vegetation, is bare....” (Nordal and Kristinsson 1975:21) Understanding the nature of the landscape is important when attempting to understand the history of the society who occupied and altered the land. Before then it was a pristine environment, so the Viking landscape begins with the settlement of Iceland.

## **2.2. History**

The history of the Icelandic landscape played an important role in settlement strategy as well as illustrating some of the causes of farm abandonment in the more vulnerable regions of Iceland. (Dugmore, et al. 2000; McGovern, et al. 2007) Understanding the nature of the landscape, the limitations on the landscape for sustaining agricultural practices and the rate of landscape change due to both nature and human impact, enabled this study to extrapolate backwards from the modern landscape to the landscape that attracted those first settlers in order to comprehend the relationships between the settlers and their perceived landscape. Using a landscape that is closer to that of 1000 years ago, even if it is an estimated one, provided this research project with more accurate data for interpretations of landscape perceptions at settlement and burial sites. (See Map 4)

### **2.2.1. Placenames and Settlement**

The Book of Icelanders mentions Christians, called Papar, living in Iceland when the Norsemen arrived, who left because they could not live with heathens. (Jónsson 1986:2) The Book of Settlement provides even more information and says that “more than 120 years before Iceland was settled by the Norwegians ... there were other people there, called Papar ... they were Christians ... it was clear they must have been Irish.” (Jónsson 1986:23; Pálsson and Edwards 1972:15) According to the Irish monk, Dicuil, in his work entitled *De mensura Orbis terrae (A Summary of Geography)*, a group of islands about a six-day sail from Britain were visited by monks on hermitage. (Jónsson 1986:2; Sveinbjarnardóttir 2002:98-99) Although such stories, as well as place names such as Papey and Papafjord, indicate that Iceland may have been home to Irish hermits, there is no concrete evidence to suggest that their presence was long-term or left any distinguishing marks on the landscape. (Ahronson 2002; Karlsson 2000; Sveinbjarnardóttir 2002) It is clear that the Norse were the first humans to set up permanent settlements on the island, which was separated from the Norse homelands by a great distance. Such a situation provided the settlers with the opportunity to create a society based on the Norse ideals of the time. It is very possible that being in such a position affected every aspect of the lives of the settlers from land taking, to politics, social structure and economy which may be evidenced by studying the placement, inclusions and symbolism of burials.

After their arrival, the great distance allowed the settlers to develop their chieftain societies, divide their new lands as they liked and govern themselves in a manner that suited their own interests without interference from owners of previously marked or worked land. Discovering an untouched landscape provided the opportunity for the

settlers to place farms and burials in locations of their own choosing, without having to avoid areas due to prior activity or any other restrictions. They also were faced with uncertainty when they found their new lands were not as environmentally stable as those from which they came.

The earliest settlement farms were acquired on a first-come-first-served basis and those first settlers more than likely acquired the lands most suitable and with more resources for an agricultural lifestyle first, after which the next wave of settlers took any land in Iceland that was capable of supporting life. The later settlers were probably limited to less suitable lands and eventually newcomers were allotted property on lands already claimed, until all were eventually settled. (Pálsson and Edwards 1972, 1976; Vésteinsson, et al. 2002) These waves came in swift succession; and more than likely, the process of settlement was quick and the new landscape was established earlier than was once believed. (McGovern 2009, pers. comm.) The Book of Settlement lists the number of settlers at approximately 420. (Jacobsen 1978; Jónsson 1986; Pálsson and Edwards 1972; Smith 1995:320) However, this number does not include households, servants and any other individuals associated with that settler. Clearly, as will be shown in Chapter 3, the burial data represents only a fraction of the population of Iceland during its pre-Christian period.

### ***2.2.2. Landnam – The Settlement of Iceland***

The Viking Age began during the latter half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century when traders, settlers, explorers and pirates began to travel beyond their homelands in modern Continental Scandinavia – Norway, Denmark and Sweden – and came into contact with other cultures, with varying results. These Vikings traveled east, as far as the Volga in modern Russia, and south to the Byzantine Empire, usually raiding, trading and moving

on. They settled into areas along the Baltic and along rivers in Russia and became an integral part of the eastern trade system during this time, as well as becoming part of the region's political agenda. (Edgren 2000; Graham-Campbell 1994; Noonan 1991; Pálsson and Edwards 1972, 1976; Stalsberg 1991, 2001) They went westward, raiding coastal areas in Scotland, Britain, Wales, Ireland, France and Spain. (Haywood 1995; Price 2000a) They also created a trade network, even establishing trading centers in York and Dublin. (Batey 2000; Hall 1990, 1994; Ó Corráin 1997) Finally, they settled further west, in Scotland, the Faroe Islands, Iceland, Greenland and even established a short-term settlement in North America. (Arge 1993, 2000; Arneborg and Seaver 2000; Baldwin 1978; Barrett, et al. 1999; Berglund 2000; Buckland, et al. 1993; Debes 1993; Jones 1984; Lynnerup 2000; McGovern 2000; McGovern, et al. 2007; Vésteinsson, et al. 2002; Wallace 1991, 2000)

In the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, first contact with the Viking world is mentioned in 787 C.E. in Portland when three ships were mistaken for merchant ships. When approached, the Norsemen (Danes) killed the reeve and his men as they attempted to redirect the unknown merchant ship to the "king's town." (Ingram 1996:27) However, this was a minor altercation when compared to events recorded six years later when Vikings raided the monastery located on Lindisfarne, an island off the eastern coast of England – the event that traditionally marks the beginning of the Viking Age in the British Isles.

*“A.D. 793. This year came dreadful fore-warnings over the land of the Northumbrians, terrifying the people most woefully ... the harrowing inroads of heathen men made lamentable havoc in the church of God in Holy-island, by rapine and slaughter....”* (Ingram 1996:28)

The end of the Viking Age is traditionally marked in England by the failed invasion attempted by Harald Sigurdsson, who was defeated by the Saxon king Harold Godwinson in 1066 and soon thereafter Viking control was lost in neighboring regions as well. (Graham-Campbell 1994; Haywood 1995)

Knowing who chose to immigrate to the uninhabited Icelandic landscape, helps to better understand their belief system and what motivated their actions. Section 2.3 focuses on their social background as it was drawn from the ancient texts.

## **2.3. Mythology**

### **2.3.1. Norse Cosmology**

The cognitive aspects of this project consider three of the categories of human intellectual activity defined by Flannery and Marcus (1998) (cosmology, religion and ideology), a description of the first two categories of the Norse worldview will aid in clarifying this project's focus: facets of the Icelandic ideology during the Viking Age. (Flannery and Marcus 1998:37-45)

Cosmology is the philosophy of the origin and general structure of the universe. Thus, it is different for distinct societies in separate periods of time. This general structure in turn aids in defining the rules, codes and ethics by which a society lives. Thus cosmology is closely related to and affects both religion and ideology. The sources providing insight into the Norse worldview have their limitations due to the possibility that there are variations in the worldview created by both space and time. That being said, one plausible version is found in the Prose Edda written by Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241) (Young 1964) and various explanations and interpretations of that work by scholars over the years. (Anderson 1888; Andersson 1977; Cotterell 2000; Davies 1999; DuBois 1999; Hastrup 1981; Litchfield 1890; Page 1990; Young 1964) The universe in

which the Norse believed was fashioned around a tree of life named *Yggdrasil*. There, the nine worlds of the universe existed: Muspelheim (the world of fire), Asaheim (the world of the gods), Ljosalfaheim (the world of the light elves (minor fertility gods)), Vanaheim (the world of the Vanir (major fertility gods), Mannaheim (the world of man), Jotunheim (the world of the giants), Svartalfaheim (the world of the dark elves), Helheim (the world of the dead (not the same place Christian or even contemporary society pictures), and Niflheim (the world of mist). (Anderson 1888:186-187; Page 1990:56-58; Young 1964:32-47)

The description of the Norse universe also comes mainly from Snorri Sturluson's work. This work is comprised of three books, the first of which, *The Deluding of Gylfi*, is a "sophisticated guide to Northern mythology based on poems, some of which are looked on as older than any skaldic verse." (Young 1964:17-18) In his work, Sturluson explains the mythology surrounding the creation of the world and how the lands of Scandinavia fit into this story. In the beginning, nothing at all existed, just an open gap (Ginnungagap). At the lower part of the gap was a world filled with ice, darkness and cold; this was the world known as Niflheim. At the upper part of the gap was a world filled with warmth, fire and light; this was known as Muspelheim. Eventually the fires from Muspelheim came into contact with the ice of Niflheim and a giant by the name of Ymir arose from the mist. When he slept a man and woman formed from sweat under Ymir's arm and his two legs created a son. This is how the family of frost ogres came into being. Ymir lived on the milk of a great cow that formed from the frost, Audhumla. In an interesting tale the first god, Buri, emerged from a salty iceblock licked by Ymir's cow. In due course, there came to be three brothers who were descendants of Buri, Odin, Vili and Ve. These

three brothers were able to defeat the frost giants and kill Ymir. From his corpse, Odin and his brothers created the universe. The middle portion of the earth which was created for men, known as Midgard (middle world) was created from Ymir's flesh, his bones became the mountains, his teeth became rocks, his blood became the seas and lakes. His skull became the sky, held up by the dwarves, Nordri, Sudri, Austri, Vestri one at each of the four corners. Clouds were formed from Ymir's brains; the sun, moon and stars were created from the sparks of Muspell. The sun and moon were carried by chariots across the sky, driven by Day and Night, perpetually chased by wolves who occasionally devoured them, only to release them when they heard the cries of the people of Midgard. All aspects of the universe that were observed by humans were explained in this way, for example, including the setting and rising of the sun and moon as well as the times when there was no moon or sun, the extent of the sky, the ever-present ice in the north and the warmth in the south, to mention a few.

Once Midgard was created, humans followed. A woman was created from a branch of an elm tree and her name was Embla; and a man was created from the branch of an ash tree and his name was Askur. Similar to the Adam and Eve story from the Bible, these two humans procreated and all humans came from them. The gods watched over these humans. (Young 1964:29-93)

As in other cultures, the Norse cosmology contained a vision of the end of the world, *Ragnarok*. It will not happen overnight. There are various portents that will indicate the beginning of the end. Then, after the destruction of the gods and the world, when all settles, a fair new world will appear in which life will spring independently (fish will thrive in the waters, crops will grow unattended) and in the forest a man and woman

(Lif and Lifthrasir) will survive and create an all new race of humans and a new age will begin. (Young 1964:86-93) Many cultures have such an End of Days view of their universe but the Norse mythology is different in one respect. The outcome has already been foretold and all the gods know their destiny. Yet, they still fight valiantly showing their courage. (Anderson 1888; Young 1964)

There are many stories in *The Deluding of Gylfi* that divulge not only the strengths and powers of each of the gods, giants, and other prominent players of the Norse mythological world who define the religion of the Norse, but also examples of how the landscape was formed. Thor traveled to the land of the giants and met Skrymir, a giant. While Skrymir slept, Thor struck him three times with his great hammer, Mjollnir, though seemingly without impact. However, it was revealed to Thor later that he was deceived by spells and before his hammer struck, the giant put a hill between himself and Thor, thus his hammer did indeed have an impact, just not on the giant's skull: "where you saw a saddle-backed hill close to my stronghold and in it three square-shaped valleys and one very deep – they were the marks left by your hammer." (Young 1964:77) Another example is when Thor drank from the great horn which he could not empty. The giant had the end of the horn in the ocean and no matter how much Thor tried, he could not empty the horn in three sips. However, we learn that he did drink much more than was expected and when they looked at the ocean it was lower than before – in this way ebb tides were explained. (Young 1964:77)

The Prose Edda also provides a bit of insight into the beauty and status of certain materials which also may explain the power that can be found in the materials. For instance we know that the goddess Freyja searched the earth for her husband, Od, and

during her search she wept for his loss and her tears were gold when they fell onto land and red gold (amber) when they fell into the sea. (Page 1990; Young 1964:59) Amber was considered a very powerful material by the Norse and was often made into talismans and amulets. Such beautiful materials were worthy of the gods as in the great hall of Glitnir which had walls, posts and pillars of red gold and a silver roof. Another great dwelling called Valaskjalf, owned by Odin, had a roof of pure silver. (Young 1964:46)

We also gain an understanding of the desirable and undesirable qualities for which humans should strive, by recognizing both the strengths and weaknesses of the gods. Obviously, being a strong warrior and dying in battle are very good traits to have, which is why Odin sent those who fell in battle to the great hall, Valhalla, where they enjoyed food, drink and the opportunity to practice battle tactics all the days, which prepared them to serve in Odin's army when the great battle was near. However, not all those who were slain in battle went to Valhalla. Freyja chose half of the fallen and the rest went to Odin. Those chosen by Freyja went to her hall, Sessrumnir. This division of the dead warriors indicates that warriors were not only men of great skill in battle (Odin represents these traits), but also men of strength of heart (Freyja represents love, poetry and honor). Together, these qualities make up the most successful warrior. (Anderson 1888; Young 1964) Even those who were good could fall prey to weakness as seen when Freyja lost her husband, Od, because she betrayed her husband for the chance to own the necklace *Brisingamen*. (Page 1990:55) Loki, in too many examples to list here, epitomized deceit. The best example was his role in the death of Baldur, where he disguised himself and went to the goddess Frigg to find out if there were any elements in the world who did not swear an oath never to harm Baldur. He discovered that the

mistletoe was too young to be asked for such a promise. Loki then tricked a blind man into throwing a twig of the mistletoe at Baldur. He told the blind man that it would be an insult not to participate since everyone was doing the same to show Baldur he could not be harmed, the mistletoe thus caused Baldur's death. (Anderson 1888; Young 1964:80-81) These few examples show how the Norse cosmology provides a foundation for the Norse, a base not only for their religion, which will be discussed next, but their ideology and iconography as well. (Anderson 1888; Faraday 1906; Page 1990)

### ***2.3.2. Norse Religion***

Another aspect of cognition considered in this project is religion. Religion comprises a set of beliefs in a superior being(s). This being has control over the universe, dictates the rules a society follows, how people should live and die and what happens to them after death. Although the line is blurred between cosmology and religion, this section should help to make the distinction between religion as a concept and cosmology clearer. (Flannery and Marcus 1998:37-45)

The pantheon of gods, giants and monsters found in the Norse religion was created to represent all aspects of human nature, good and bad. The Norse gods, just as the gods, saints and angels of other religions, guided humans through life, explained events that took place in the natural world, helped them through various trials and tribulations, aided in the healing process, offered hope when there was none, gave them strength in battle and eased their souls in death.

In the Norse religion, there were two groups of gods, the Aesir and the Vanir. More than likely, this division is much older than its appearance during the Viking period, as it is found among other Indo-European peoples who believed there were major gods (Aesir) and minor gods (Vanir). However, by the Viking period, the difference

between the major and minor gods was only slight. (Page 1990:27) The most well-known of the gods is Odin of the Aesir. He is the ‘All-father’, the oldest of all the gods. He created heaven, hell and all things in between, he watched over the human race at all times and knew everything that was taking place on earth. He is known for his poetic inspiration and as being the patron of warriors. His wife, Frigg, knew the fates of all men. They had children, one of which was Thor, a warrior god who defended the others with his great hammer, Mjollnir, and wore a belt that doubled his already superhuman strength. Njord was the god that controlled the wind and was the god of seafaring and fishing. Baldur was considered the fairest of them all, the wisest and most merciful and very sensitive; all were upset by his death – brought about by trickery and deceit on the part of Loki. Tyr was the boldest, the most courageous and had power over victory in battle. Freyr and Freyja were of the Vanir; they were beautiful to look at and powerful. Freyr was invoked for peace and plenty and brought about prosperity while his sister Freyja represented love, poetry and fertility. Eir was a great physician and Gefjon “is a virgin, and women who die unmarried served her.” (Young 1964:59) There are too many to list here. However, this small sample is used to show how the gods epitomized – to the extreme – all the traits and virtues humans endeavor to attain or to avoid. See (Young 1964:48-93) for more information on the various gods. (Anderson 1888; Page 1990; Young 1964)

The sagas are very good indicators of the level of religious commitment found within the Norse community, particularly the Icelandic community, since the majority of sagas took place there. We can see from Eyrbyggja Saga how Thorolf declared that “he would settle at any place in Iceland where *Thor* chose to send the pillars ashore ... Where

the pillars came ashore, Thorolf named it Thor's Ness ... He established a great farm which he called Hofstad and had a large temple built there. The whole building was considered a sanctuary." (Pálsson and Edwards 1989:28-29)

There are many examples of bravery in battle and dying with honor in the sagas. Egil's Saga has quite a few good examples. For instance, in the verse where Kveldulf and Skallagrim learn the events surrounding Thorolf's death: "Kveldulf questioned him on every detail of the events at Sandness when Thorolf was killed. In particular he wanted to know what Thorolf had done to his credit before his death." (Pálsson and Edwards 1976:64)

When telling of a death, religion plays a strong role. In various sagas mention of a mound being erected over the dead is typical. Although the funeral pyre has been described in other areas of the Viking world, it is unknown thus far in Iceland. (Friðriksson 2000; Frye 2005) However, the account depicted in Ibn Fadlan's story of a Viking-Rus funeral does provide insight into the offerings included with the burials and connects religion to burial. (Frye 2005; Parker Pearson 2001) In Ibn Fadlan's account, it is obvious that the burial ritual was performed in order to usher the dead to the next stage. There was an existence beyond the living and basic supplies were needed for the dead to complete the journey to the next stage.

Archaeology has contributed to the knowledge we have of the religion of this time with the burials providing the bulk of the information. In the ship and boat burials we see not only the great wealth of some of the more prominent individuals, but also get a glimpse of the religious burial rites as well. For instance the Oseberg Ship burial contained the remains of 14 horses, an ox and three dogs, four decorated sleighs, a four-

wheeled wooden cart, also decorated, and a wooden chest. Everyday household items and agricultural tools were also present. (Ingstad 1995; Sjøvold 1985) The Gokstad Ship burial contained three smaller boats, a sleigh and riding equipment. Both of these, as well as other ship burials, were located under substantial mounds. (Sjøvold 1954) In burials of lesser status, we find many with small boats or in some cases no boat but an outline of a boat created with stones – a representational boat. According to various interpretations of inclusions of Viking period burials not only were grave goods and boats placed into the graves as a display of status, prestige, social position for the deceased, or more likely for his or her descendants, but also boats and the horses were included to help the deceased travel to the otherworld. Other animals in the graves are interpreted as being placed there as companions or as a food offering. The warrior's burial included weapons while others might have tools of their trade. Thus, all were placed into the grave to serve the individual(s) in the next level. (Batey 1993; Friðriksson 2000; Gräslund 2001; Härke 1997c; Jensen and Nielsen 1997b; Jørgensen 1997; Nielsen 1997a; Pedersen 1997; Randsborg 1981; Ringtved 1997; Sørensen 1997)

The Icelandic pagan burials included in this project provide a good measure of the people who settled Iceland as the record is considered to date from the beginning of the settlement period in the latter half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century to the Christian conversion approximately 1000 C.E. (Jónsson 1986; Vésteinsson 2000:17-18) Although it is handy to place the pre-Christian burials into this small bracket of time, such a strict temporal division is unrealistic. Burial rites, customs and religion do not necessarily go hand-in-hand with history – or each other. It is highly reasonable to expect pagan burial rites to continue past this time, as it is just as reasonable to expect Christian burial rites to begin

before 1000 C.E. (Andersson 1977; Bagge 2005:108-110; DuBois 1999; Graham-Campbell 1989; Vésteinsson 2000:24-26) Ideology is the final focus of this project. Not only did this work begin with a basic understanding of the current perception of the Viking period Icelandic ideology, but it expanded on the current view as well. Here, it is explained in more detail.

### ***2.3.3. Norse Ideology***

As defined by Flannery and Marcus, “ideology falls within society and politics, not religion. It may be defined as the body of doctrine, myth and symbolism of a social movement, institution, class or a group of individuals, often with reference to some political or cultural plan, along with the strategy for putting the doctrine into operation.” (Flannery and Marcus 1998:40)

Iceland is the perfect setting for shedding light on the social and political ideology of the Viking age settlers for a few reasons. First and foremost, these settlers found a large, uninhabited island that could sustain their preferred way of life. Whether or not they were able to fully achieve their ideals will never be known, but it is reasonable to assume that under the circumstances, they tried. Second, since the land was unoccupied and because so many of the new settlers probably emigrated from their homelands for similar reasons, they aimed at sustaining their way of life, more than likely their economic status and political power as well. In Iceland they had the opportunity to take cheap or free land, build it up the way they saw fit, bury their dead in locations that would show ownership and in a particular manner and style suitable to their politics, social status, religious customs and beliefs. They were also able to control their own lands and surroundings by joining forces with their neighbors to settle disputes and other problems in the traditional Norse way, or in a manner to which they were accustomed.

The sagas and research indicate that Iceland was settled by individuals from Norway and the British and Irish Isles, for various reasons. Some were attempting to start anew: “Kveldulf and Skallagrim ... were in complete agreement that they could no more remain in Norway than any other of the King’s enemies.” (Pálsson and Edwards 1976:68) Like so many others they chose Iceland, not only because others had already made such a move and they would have friends there, but also because there was still a lot of available land so they would be able take as much as they wanted and choose where they wanted to create their new home. Sæmund of Sognefjord, Norway, chose not to risk his life for the king’s sake and when he met his foster-brother, Ingimund, he was told: “I know ... that it is not your lot to live in peace, and I think it would be a good idea for you to go away ... It seems to me not a bad idea for you to head for Iceland, as many worthy men do these days who cannot be sure of defending themselves against the power of King Harald.” (Thorsson and Scudder 2000:202-203) Others were banished: Thorvald and his son, Eirik the Red, “left their home in Jæderen, Norway, because of some killings and went to Iceland, which had been extensively settled by then; so to begin with they made their home at Drangar, in Hornstrands.” (Magnusson and Pálsson 1965b:49)

The sagas provide many examples of the role of the chiefs, whose elevated status was based on wealth, prestige in battle and/or intelligences. (Andersson 1977; Byock 1990; Magnusson and Pálsson 1960, 1965a; Pálsson and Edwards 1976, 1989) Such chiefs served as lawspeakers and, according to some sources, possibly held some sort of priestly function as well. (Byock 1990) This latter belief is based on the Norse term for chieftain – *godar* (pl.)/*godi* (sing.). There have been arguments about the application of this term to a religious background. The word itself is obviously related to *gud/god* in

Icelandic, meaning god. According to Karlsson this shows that the “governing system of Iceland grew up around persons who simultaneously had religious and secular tasks thus they were referred to as godar.” (Karlsson 2000:19) It is difficult to tell just how much religious power was connected to the position of the chieftain in the Viking period in Iceland and what this meant for any long-term position of power. Power was indeed perceived through the gatherings which took place in the Viking halls and although it is tempting to attribute ritual and religion to these gatherings (see Friðriksson 1994:48-74 for a more detailed description of this tradition), it is far more realistic to follow the archaeological evidence and, as Vésteinsson points out, the large Viking halls filled with prestige objects are archaeological support for social stratification and it is reasonable to assume that to enhance this status, holding large feasts on or near to your home reinforced it. Thus, “we do not need to know the nature of the gatherings that took place in the chieftains’ halls to appreciate that they were one of the principal means through which power was maintained and exercised.” (Vésteinsson 2000:7-8)

Although the sagas can be used as an aid to understanding the society and culture under study, once again it should be noted that they were written a few hundred years after the events that they describe, and during Christian times. Therefore, these writings, although helpful, also reflect their own times which may have influenced not only the image of an organized pre-Christian religious structure, but also the position of women in the society and the structure of the early governing body of Iceland. That being said, it can be seen in the following excerpt from Eyrbyggja Saga how one can be elevated in society and eventually earn a position as both chieftain and priest: “Snorri was soon running his farm in fine style, with plenty of men to follow him ... He was a very shrewd

man with unusual foresight, a long memory and a taste for vengeance. To his friends he gave good counsel, but his enemies learned to fear the advice he gave ... As Snorri was now in charge of the temple, he was called Snorri the Priest. He became a man of great power and some people envied him bitterly, for there were plenty who thought themselves just as well-born.” (Pálsson and Edwards 1989:44-45) From this passage it is also clear that being privileged as well as shrewd in business was useful in society. Not only did such men achieve chieftain status, but possibly also priestly status. As noted in a footnote clarification in *Njals Saga*, the Lawspeaker was elected by the “priest-chieftains.” (Magnusson and Pálsson 1960:64) *Njal’s Saga* is filled with important information on the laws, the legal system, compensation for damages and murder, women’s rights in society and at the court (Althing), banishment and exile as well as the shortcomings of this system and what happens when it breaks down or does not work. It makes very clear the fact that chieftains in the Viking period wore many hats. (Magnusson and Pálsson 1960) As mentioned earlier, the Althing was not established until Iceland was settled c. 930, therefore, the insights provided by some of the sagas about matters of law and the later issue of how the switch to Christianity took place at the Althing, should be used cautiously when applied to the early settlers and their social and political situation when they first arrived in Iceland. (Jones 1984; Karlsson 2000; Magnusson and Pálsson 1960; Pálsson and Edwards 1972; Vésteinsson 2000)

The Icelandic laws were brought to Iceland sometime around 920 from Norway by way of an individual by the name of Ulfljotur who modeled these laws on those of the area in Norway from which he had come. (Jónsson 1986:3-4) It is believed that the chieftains assembled and agreed on the laws and chose a time and place as well as an

elected Lawspeaker to head the meeting. The meeting was held annually from the Thursday falling between June 18-20, to the Wednesday falling between July 2-8. It was held at Thingvellir. The Lawspeaker was elected in three-year terms. The meeting was known as the General Assembly or Althing. (Dennis and Foote 2006:246) There was a General Assembly for all of Iceland as well as smaller assemblies held in the spring and autumn which were held locally in designated thing-sites around Iceland. (Dennis and Foote 2006:240) This creation of laws, rules and some sort of governing system for all those inhabiting Iceland clearly indicates a separate society with its own identity. Whether or not these settlers referred to themselves as 'Icelanders' is unclear, but they certainly distinguished themselves from other Scandinavians by putting together their own legal and political system. (Karlsson 2000:63-65)

The Norse burial sites have provided a wealth of information on this society as a whole, providing information regarding dress (Ewing 2006; Jesch 1991), afterlife (Graham-Campbell and Batey 1998; Pedersen 1997; Sjøvold 1985; Trotzig 1985), economic and social positions (Eldjárn 1984; Myhre 1992; Sjøvold 1985; Trotzig 1985; Vestergaard 1991), diseases (Gestsdóttir 2007; Price 2000b), lands of origin (Gestsdóttir and Price 2003) and even the differences between Nordic peoples from different parts of the world (Bjarnason, et al. 1973; Helgason, et al. 2001; Helgason, Sigurðardóttir, Gulcher, et al. 2000; Helgason, Sigurðardóttir, Nicholson, et al. 2000; Sigurðsson 2000). From burial practices in Latvia, we have information on animal inclusions, specifically how horse inclusions were connected with Viking burials in cemetery settings. (Bertasius and Daugnora 2001; see also Pedersen 1997: for information gleaned from riding equipment inclusions). Also in the east, further evidence of the trading

connections and gender relationships have brought a new understanding of the Vikings in Russia where females are not seen simply as companions but key players in trade. (Stalsberg 1991, 2001) Much work has been conducted in Sweden where there are more cremation burials than are seen further west as well as, based on runic inscriptions, an enlightened view of gender. (Gräslund 2001) Also, Sweden has provided a wealth of information on Viking period clothing and dress. (Ewing 2006) Burial sites in Scandinavia (Crumlin-Pedersen and Thye 1995; Ellmers 1995; Godal 1990; Kobylinski 1995; Lincoln 1995; Schjødt 1995; Sjøvold 1985; Sørensen 1997) have provided information on women, wealth, changing artistic styles, ships and much more. (Dommasnes 1998; Myhre 1992; Sjøvold 1985) The commonalities between burial sites in Scotland, including its Northern Isles, and Iceland have been brought to light by continuing research in both areas during the past half century. It has also brought our attention to the variation in wealth and styles in the settlements closer to the fringe. (Batey 1993; Crawford 1995; Eldjárn 1958, 1984; Friðriksson 2000) These are only a small sample of past and on-going projects. However, from these, it is evident that burials are particularly well-suited for enhancing our understanding of the Viking age peoples of Iceland.

#### **2.4. Burial Customs**

The burial ritual in the Viking period was not necessarily a simple affair. According to Ibn Fadlan, for a poor person a small boat was built, the person was placed in it, then the boat was burned. A wealthy person's possessions were collected and divided into three, one part for the family, another for the burial garments and a third for the mead. However, the actual cremation was only one small part of the ritual. When the

person died, the body was placed in a grave with a roof over it for about ten days while preparations for the ceremony were made – proper burial clothing was sewn and all other accountings were put in order. Plenty of food and drink was placed in the grave with the deceased in order to keep the person well-taken care of during this time. This was done to encourage the deceased to stay in his or her grave, especially since it was well-known at the time that the 'undead' were very hungry. (Chadwick 1946; Faraday 1906) This last point has been made in many of the sagas where the dead make a habit of disturbing the living in various ways. (See for example: Grettir's Saga, the Kings of Norway Saga, Eyrbyggja Saga, the Book of Settlement and other texts). If the deceased was of a high social position, a slave girl might be selected to accompany her master and she too, was prepared for the ceremony. (Frye 2005:67-69)

Although archaeological examination of burial sites presents us with only one portion of this entire sequence of the burial ritual, it is worth noting that there is still much knowledge to be gained from each burial site and that the external and internal characteristics are not mute. They all add a bit of information about the individual, the family, the society, their religion, economy, gender and age roles and worldview. By understanding the burial sites separately, as well as in the Icelandic context, the amount of variability may be weighed to provide information about social and cultural variations as well.

The Viking period burial ritual differed across the Viking World. In the east, cremations were more common than in the west, especially in Iceland where, until recently, none were recorded. (Byock, et al. 2005; Byock, et al. 2003) In Norway, there are many prestigious and wealthy burials very much unlike those of Iceland. (Gjerland

and Keller 2009 (in press)) Despite such differences, the organization of the burials, their inclusions and appearance have many similarities. (Batey 1993; Crawford 1995; Eldjárn 1958, 1984; Keller 2008) Thus it appears that the dissimilarities indicate differing cultural norms within the larger society, where we see variations in approaches to similar customs. The diversity probably stems from many factors, for instance, the landscape, especially the amount of quality land and overall terrain, the distance between cultural groups and the contact and relationships with foreigners, all of which increased the variations from east to west.

#### ***2.4.1. The Conventional Icelandic pre-Christian Burial Site and Its Social Implications***

On more than one occasion, Kristján Eldjárn has described the typical physical features of the pre-Christian burials found in Iceland, as well as identifying characteristics of artifact inclusion based on sex and the overall wealth of the Norse in Iceland during the settlement period. (Eldjárn 1958, 1984) Typically, a shallow grave was dug, narrower at the feet than at the shoulders, the body was usually placed on its back with some variation in the placement of the arms, or on one of its sides with the knees bent. Orientation was more than likely based on local conditions as it varies. Many of the bodies were not protected from the earth and stones covering them although there are quite a few instances of wooden coffins and even small boats being found in the burials. He goes on to state that these graves were more than likely built to have very little visibility above ground and that gravestones are not known during this period in Iceland. He further states that all the known graves in Iceland thus far were inhumations as no cremations have been found. (Eldjárn 1958:31-32) He adds that the Icelandic Viking period graves are rather modest and that their assessment as poor was based more

on quantity than quality. The few outstanding graves which appear wealthy by comparison were not common and this reflected the fact that this was a democratic society made up of a ruling class of “well-to-do” free farmers and their constituents. (Eldjárn 1984:4)

Eldjárn also noted that horse inclusions were relatively more prevalent in the Icelandic context than in other parts of the Viking world, but argued that since horses were such a common animal in Iceland at the time, they represented somewhat less value in the record. (Brunwasser 2007; Cool 2005; Friðriksson 2000, 2005; Gjerland and Keller 2009 (in press); Keller 2008, pers. comm.; McGovern 1988; McGovern, et al. 2007)

As indicated by Eldjárn (1958; 1984), Friðriksson (2000) and others, inhumation was the preferred method of burial in the Icelandic society; however, the impact of such a preference needs to be better understood.

#### ***2.4.2. Cremations v. Inhumations***

Until 2001, it was the general consensus in Viking studies in Iceland that all of the pre-Christian settlers of Iceland chose inhumation as their preferred method of disposing of their dead. (Eldjárn 1958, 1984; Friðriksson 2000) Obviously, the subject was brought up and people wondered why there were no cremations. However, without evidence of any, it was just believed not to have been practiced in Iceland. Cremations are not unknown in the Viking world. Indeed, they were more than likely the preferred method for disposing of the dead until the encounters with other cultures began, for example with Christians and Muslims, which eventually influenced the method of disposal. (DuBois 1999:70-72) Ibn Fadlan’s account of the Rus or possibly Swedish Vikings indicates that both rich and poor were cremated though the amount of splendor in the ceremony

depended on the wealth of the individual. (Frye 2005:66-67) Also in his detailed description of the Viking ritual, Ibn Fadlan discussed a conversation between a Viking and his interpreter where the Viking called Arabs “stupid” because they cast their dead into the earth where they were devoured by worms and creeping things whereas the Swedes “... let them burn for an instant and accordingly he enters into a paradise at once in that very hour.” (Frye 2005:70)

With the exception of a site known as Huldaholl in Mosfellsbær (excavated in 2001-2003) where fragments of cremated human bone were found in association with cremated animal bones, ash, charcoal and metal artifacts, at this time there are no other known cremations in Iceland. (Byock, et al. 2005; Byock, et al. 2003) Although this site is an important addition to the burial record of Iceland because it is the first site to provide evidence of cremations, it is also the only burial of this type found, thus making it difficult to assess within the dataset. However, it does appear that cremations were practiced in Viking period Iceland. Where there is one, there are probably more that are undiscovered.

With this recent find one must consider more seriously why others have not been located, by asking whether the lack of cremations could be due to a failure on the part of past researchers to recognize such remains or even more so due to the state of many sites upon their discovery. It is likely that such sites are a rarity in Iceland and there may have been only a small number of cremations in the first place.

Inhumations are the prevalent form of burial in the Icelandic landscape and have been accepted as the cultural norm for the Viking period in this area. According to Dubois, the practice of inhumation was more than likely introduced to the Vikings during

their many contacts with other cultures as traders, settlers and even raiders during the earlier part of this period. (DuBois 1999:72) By the time Iceland was settled, inhumation was not an uncommon form of burial practice; and, with the Gaelic genes found in the Icelandic population, it is more than likely Ireland, at least, was one of the sources of influence. (Bjarnason, et al. 1973; Gestsdóttir and Price 2003; Helgason, et al. 2001; Helgason, Sigurðardóttir, Gulcher, et al. 2000; Helgason, Sigurðardóttir, Nicholson, et al. 2000; Sigurðsson 2000) The idea of inhumation might have been modeled after other cultures; however, the funerary ritual was still very much Norse. This is obvious when looking at the graves and the artifacts associated with them.

### ***2.4.3. Graves or Graveyards***

It is very difficult to devise a plan to properly categorize burial sites. In this project I arbitrarily labeled four or more graves a graveyard or cemetery. The word cemetery means a place used for interring the dead, either the body or the cremated remains. So, in theory, all places with burials, individually or in groups, are indeed cemeteries. The purpose here was to underline the stronger connection to the landscape. Burying numerous individuals together suggests they had close ties to each other as well as to the surrounding landscape. Friðriksson distinguishes between individual burial sites and those with two or more burials which he calls cemeteries. (Friðriksson 2000) It is difficult to say which makes more sense. However, it seemed relevant to this study to make a distinction based on a similar situation in use today: the family plot. In this scenario, multiple individuals occupy the same plot, each being positioned at differing elevations below ground. This is quite common for married couples or small family units. Along this line, I include burial sites with fewer than four dead individuals. Some of these include two individuals buried together and others where one person was interred

into an existing grave at a later time. (Friðriksson 2000:590)

Making the distinction between individual grave and cemetery may have been irrelevant since, as Friðriksson notes: “The ratio between single burial sites and cemeteries does not accurately reflect the situation in the Viking period. Contrary to the numeric evidence, isolated burials seem to have been the exception.” (Friðriksson 2000:590) He supports this by adding that some individual burials were placed hundreds of meters apart but were attached to the same farm as well as noting the instances when a single burial site later produced more remains turning the individual site into a multiple burial or more likely a graveyard. This has been further supported by recent discoveries, especially during the past two excavation years (2007-2008) when not only are more boat burials being discovered but also burial grounds consisting of more than a few individuals. In 2008, we have seen the addition of at least four more graves at Br No. 163 (see Ch. 1.4 for abbreviations), where in 2007 three individuals were discovered in a boat grave – bringing the number to seven individuals. Also, Br No. 160 has proven to contain at least four individuals, one with a horse. Of the two most recent discoveries in 2008, Br No. 167, had at least five individuals with a likelihood of finding more and possibly even a boat; and Br No. 168, another graveyard, is being investigated now and has possibly 15 graves just outside the home field of a well-preserved farm complex. Although these new sites are used here to indicate the shift in finds from individuals to cemeteries, it is unfortunate that they have not yet been fully investigated and analyzed for inclusion in this study. (H. Roberts 2008; H. M. Roberts 2008, pers. comm.)

Without enough support, individual burial sites cannot yet provide the time depth gained by studying the graveyards. It is apparent that a prestigious grave is one where

numerous artifacts, particularly leisure items, jewelry and weaponry, are included. Such graves are good indicators of the distribution of wealth and social position during the study period, but can describe only the possible social status of individuals. Technically, one cannot be positive of the association between the landholder and the deceased, although this connection is usually inferred.

Although many aspects of the graveyards are still unknown, if they turn out to have been the norm in Iceland for this period, then, as will be shown, the dataset seems to indicate that overall prestigious graveyards were probably a strong indicator of elite families while the less extravagant may have been the graveyards for the rest of society. Wealthy graveyards suggest the long-term wealth and position of a particular farm or estate. The individuals associated with such graveyards were members of a part of the elite family who owned this land. All who were buried here had the same power, wealth and social position as those buried before and after.

#### ***2.4.4. The Significance of Artifact Inclusions***

There was cultural motivation in this society to gain material wealth and what constitutes wealth in the Viking society is evidenced by the history of the Vikings themselves. The beginning of the Viking Age in the west is often defined by the first major recorded raid on a monastery where many valuables made from rare gems and precious metals were taken. These items and similar items were later discovered in a variety of places, including burials, across the Viking world. (Cavill 2001; Fitzhugh 2000; Graham-Campbell 1994; Page 1986) According to many of the sagas, a successful Viking acquired such items abroad and returned with enough wealth to support himself and a wife on a farm.

Ibn Fadlan noted the value placed on various items. For instance, Rus women

were described as wearing neck rings of gold and silver, "one for each 10,000 dirhams which her husband was worth ... some women had many. Their most prized ornaments are green glass beads of clay... They trade beads among themselves and pay a dirham for a bead. They string them as necklaces for their women." (Frye 2005:63)

The inclusion of artifacts and animals had many roles in the burial ritual and their source(s) is just as involved. Artifacts could represent wealth and prestige; accomplishments and success, networks, travels and alliances; power and control; or even a glimpse into the cosmology and belief system. The objects found in the various burial may have actually belonged to the deceased, but also could have been gifts to the dead during his or her life, gifts after his or her death (both given from either sex), or even family objects placed within the burial to denote or project real or perceived wealth, prestige and power for the remaining family. Animals, such as horses and dogs may have been placed in association with graves as companions or transport, however, it is fairly certain that any included animal should represent some wealth or prestige due to value in life. However, such things may never be known.

Here, some examples of objects found within the grave context are discussed further. As mentioned above, one role of such items in the burial ritual was to stress the high status of the members of a household within their community. The inclusion of animals, leisure items and even those that possibly indicated a person's skill at or control over a particular craft or trade displayed the prestige of the deceased and his or her family. This would explain the social significance of the specific toolkits found in the graves of a normally frugal society, including artifacts of fishing, weaving, blacksmithing and even trade.

There are symbolic and ritual meanings behind the incorporation of such items as well. For instance, a blacksmith was known as a master of fire and metal and the most skillful of these were held in high regard. (Haaland 2004) Vessels were not only a sign of prestige, but also a symbol of rebirth and fertility. (Ellmers 1995; Ingstad 1995; Kobylinski 1995; Wait 1995) Weaving instruments might divulge the social position of the individual, as in the case of the Oseberg ship where a small loom was included, obviously not meant for everyday weaving. (Ingstad 1995; Sjøvold 1985) There are also metal rods found in graves that are usually referred to as spits, as in the case in the Icelandic context. (Friðriksson 2000:171, 240); however, similar items have been found elsewhere in the Viking world (see, for example, the Oseberg ship burial) and have been referred to as staffs – representing the staffs held by shaman and included in burials as part of his or her religious duties. (Ingstad 1995; Price 2002:197-200; Sjøvold 1985) In the case of the two metal rods noted by Price in the Icelandic context (2002:198-99) which he believed to have been staffs, one found in Br No. 91 and the other in BR 151, he noted that “...both from female burials [although it is now known that one is likely to be male] of the ninth to tenth centuries, but both artefacts were so badly corroded that it is not certain whether or not they originally had a 'basket' construction around the 'handle'. Indeed, in one case only .2 m of the staff was preserved and although the other was .78 m in length when discovered, little remains of it now.” (Price 2002:198-99) Thus for both, it cannot be said for certain if the knobs present on the remains were mounts or corrosion products and, unfortunately, it cannot be said with much certainty whether these items were indeed staffs. If they were indeed staffs, they were not part of exceptional graves in Iceland and cannot compare at all to the Oseberg burial. Thus, these artifacts, for the

time being, remain in the domestic category as spits.

The artifacts found in each grave, tell us, at least, that wealth and material gain were sought by this group for political, economic and social ends. Prestige items form an interesting category as they can take many forms. For instance excess is a good way to display prestige. Obviously, if one could afford to bury items such as gaming pieces, elaborately decorated whalebone plaques and large cauldrons, then one was thinking not only about the impression that such an item might have on the other dead in the afterlife, but the impression such a display made on those witnessing the burial ceremony and gazing upon such fine items. Artifacts of prestige were included in the burial with the sole purpose of indicating social position – real or not, whether or not associated with other artifacts that might indicate a position or role within the society. (Brumfiel 2006) Many of these were objects for leisure time like figurines, dice and gaming pieces, or others non-utilitarian purposes like keys or elaborately decorated objects. Also in this group were iron cauldrons and steatite bowls; such vessels, particularly the cauldrons, represented death and rebirth, fertility of the soil, women and both the human world and the other-world. (Kobylinski 1995:16) When these items were placed into a burial context, they connoted another meaning besides their typical use. These artifacts, when found alone, were impressive. When found with artifacts exclusive to a specific class or role in society, they elevated the individual's position even higher.

*Njálssaga* mentions that cooking was women's work and not meant for men, but the iron cauldrons are found with men, even warriors. It is also known from the sagas that food could be cooked on a spit because they didn't have a cauldron. In *Sturlunga saga*, when brigands roasted a cow on a spit over a fire, the saga author felt it necessary to

explain that this was because there was no kettle available (Jochens 1995:131; McGrew and Thomas 1970-4). Boiling meat required large cauldrons and meat forks or skewers to spear and lift the boiled meat from the vat. Meat was usually boiled, often being cooked in clay or soapstone pots. Vessels of all styles were also symbols representing not only fertility, but rebirth, thus their inclusion was both practical and cosmological. (See, for example, Kobylinski 1995; Rieck 1995)

Burying an individual in a boat was both a display of social prestige and a burial rite of passage. When a boat was placed into a burial, it was no longer simply a boat, the item now became 'burial furniture' which suggests property, status, social position and the roles the individual played in the social system. (Kobylinski 1995:15) Boats were relatively expensive in Iceland because they were difficult to build with the scarcity of quality wood. Thus, burying someone in a boat that could still have been sailed or recycled was an extravagant display, whatever the size of the boat. For the boat to signal wealth and social position, it needed to be in association with artifacts as well or the boat might be thought to be included because it was unseaworthy or had washed up with the individual. Unfortunately, if the grave were robbed of inclusions during the 1000 plus years before discovery, we would not be able to understand the context of the burial. In these cases, it is difficult to make any further statements about their prestige, only about the ritual aspects of boat burials.

The boats are associated with water, and "any use of water with a religious intention brings together the two basic points in the rhythm of the universe: reintegration in water and creation." (c.f. Eliade 1958:212 in Schjødt 1995:21) Water is presented in the Norse mythology quite often with respect to the dead. Odin is seen carrying the dead

across the river from this world to the next in the Saga of the Volsungs (Morris and Magnusson 1888) The Prose Edda describes the ship of the dead, Naglfar, (a ferry made from their toenails and fingernails) which carries the army to the battle during Ragnarok. (Young 1964) Baldur was placed in his ship, Hringhorni, the greatest ship of all, and the ship was set aflame and pushed to sea. (Young 1964) Although it is largely believed that the water does not hold such a significant position in Viking period burials, as will be shown in Chapter 5, it plays a more important role than once was believed.

Jewelry for both males and females also indicated wealth, and social position and even took on religious symbolism as in the case of talismans. Unlike weaponry, jewelry was functional in the dress of people of all social standing though the amount and type were significant. Just over one-third of the total graves yielded artifacts of jewelry, so, though they were part of everyday dress in this society, these items were not always found in the burial record. What was found ranged in amount and quality, but could be broken down into at least three levels: first, those burials with only one or two items, mostly meant to fasten the typical dress, next, those with three or four items, enough to meet the requirements of the particular style of dress, and finally, there were those with more than five items of jewelry, clearly evidencing surplus in that household. If adornment is considered a measure of social position, the majority, the commoners, (73.5%) had very few items. Another 17.6% seem to represent those free landowners with more opportunity to obtain such items; and the upper-most level (8.9%), chiefly families, were represented by an abundance of expendable jewelry.

Tool-kits are a part of the Icelandic pre-Christian burial record, but depending on how one wants to use and choose categories, identifying objects as such is clearly

subjective. The tool-kit that can most easily be identified is weaponry. Obviously, weapons were necessary on a daily basis and not just for warfare. Axes were used for other than bellicose purposes, and all weapons could be called upon at any time in individual battles with neighbors or other Icelanders. That said, a distinct warrior-class spoken of in the sagas, which is seen in the burial record, as almost one-third of the Viking period graves include weaponry. The majority had only one or two weapons. There appears to have been at least seven well-equipped warriors, and four could probably be considered warrior-chiefs, elevated above the rest of the society.

Almost half (49.2%) of the graves contained animal inclusions, either this suggests, as Eldjárn noted (1958; Eldjárn 1984) that horses were so common that anyone or even everyone could indeed be buried with them; or it suggests that they were indeed a status or prestige item and begins to shed light on who has the right to burial in this society. Therefore those seemingly poor burials may actually be a middle class or some other level of the society with the right to burial, however, they either come from a slightly different cultural group or may not have the means to perform elaborate rituals or even that those graves were subsequently robbed. Alternatively, another view of the horse inclusion is that it is a strong feature of the symbolism found in the burial ritual, reflecting at least part of the journey to the otherworld. As Ellmers noted, the dead would more than likely have to travel from the landing site of the boat to the final destination. (Ellmers 1995:169; Ingstad 1995) This image is clearly projected on the Gotland stones and the Oseberg tapestry. There is a hierarchy among these graves, as 20.8% had no artifact inclusions – only animal remains. There is the possibility that such graves could have been robbed of any artifacts at an earlier time. However, it is also likely that these

were the graves of persons with lower social standing if all that could be included were animal remains, perhaps an old, tired, or partial animal after the other portion was consumed. This cannot be determined at this time since analysis of the animal remains in the graves was never undertaken. However, when animal remains were considered with artifact inclusions, an interesting picture of the individual graves emerged.

There seems to have been a few individuals who may have gained status in the society based on their skill or their ability to succeed in status-creating ventures. These individuals apparently excelled in a particular craft that set them apart from others. The four sickles found in burial sites possibly represent a belief by these families in the walking dead, where a sickle is placed over the body to prevent the corpse from walking. Leaving the folklore associated with sickles aside, the four burials with sickles might indeed represent individuals with unusually successful harvests or good control over farm production. With respect to artifacts dealing with blacksmithing, it is quite possible that local blacksmiths made names for themselves as being exceptional at their craft. There are only three burials with artifacts associated with such an activity and being a successful blacksmith in the Iron Age would have been prestigious. Weaving could have been lucrative for a household. Successful weavers would have stood out in the community as would successful traders of wadmal. To project such successes in their burials would have been natural. Fishing is the final skill considered here. Although the fish trade was not quite at the level it would be a few centuries after the Viking period, there was no reason that a successful fisherman could not be honored.

All of these items could have been included in their burials due to circumstances surrounding each individual's death. They could also indicate acknowledgement of an

acquired social status based on their skillful acquisition of a surplus or their control of certain goods. Equally, these items may have been included because of the individual skills involved and the symbolic power these individuals had over that specialty.

The purpose of this section has been to introduce the study region by presenting the landscape and people who settled the area as well as the information on-hand which provides the foundation of the study. The next section will provide background information on the Icelandic burials for this study.

## **2.5. The History of the Pre-Christian Burials of Iceland**

The Icelandic Viking period burials have been the focus of systematic study since the middle of the 20th century. More than 300 individual burials have been discovered across Iceland. Various factors aided in the discovery of these burials including erosion, field leveling, road maintenance/construction and building construction. Most burials have been discovered by accident and very few have been discovered by archaeological investigation. However, this last point may be changing slowly.

Adding to the wealth of information regarding all of the pre-Christian burials of Iceland that were updated and reorganized by Adolf Friðriksson (2000), his current research shows promising results regarding the location of certain types of burials near boundaries and tracks (Friðriksson 2005; Friðriksson, et al. 2005) and aids in locating certain types of new burial sites. (Friðriksson, et al. 2005) Still further research may help to distinguish variations in burial rites and practices. By including the world geographic coordinates of the burial sites (Maher 2002) and understanding the burial sites in their individual surroundings (Maher 2005; Maher 2004a, 2008), as well as including a clear focus on engendered analyses (Maher 2007; Maher 2004b), a more complete

understanding of the societal differences during the Icelandic Viking period were made.

The pre-Christian burials have distinct features which, when combined, help to identify them as being pre-Christian. Such features include, but are not limited to location outside a Christian cemetery, orientation other than west-east (though there are many pre-Christian burials that do have such an orientation), multiple individuals in one grave (again this cannot be used on its own as Christian burials in Iceland have been known to have multiple individuals in one grave, as at the site of Storaborg in Southern Iceland (Snæsdóttir 1988:26), artifact-inclusion and associated animal bones. Although there are exceptions to these characteristics, this seems to be a fair typological assessment of pre-Christian burials of Iceland. (Eldjárn 1958, 1984; Friðriksson 2000) Kristján Eldjárn, published his doctoral dissertation, *Kuml og haugfé*, in 1956, which was the first complete catalogue of the known pre-Christian burials in Iceland. In 2000, Friðriksson updated *Kuml og haugfé* by adding recently discovered burials as well as up-to-date information with respect to each burial and incorporating English summaries; his work continues with the excavations of more recently located burials as well as an overall examination of the topography of burials. (Friðriksson 2005; Friðriksson, et al. 2005) Hildur Gestsdóttir has reexamined the available skeletal remains, which is providing this study with the age and sex of individuals. She is also currently carrying out a palaeopathological study of the corpus of Icelandic skeletons, including those from pagan graves. (Gestsdóttir 1998a, 1998b, 2007) As mentioned earlier, strontium isotope analysis is underway that has been providing indications of the origins of individuals in the burial record. (Gestsdóttir and Price 2003) This project continues the research by adding spatial, gendered, aged and cosmological components. The gendered analysis

contributes greatly to this study and is described further below.

## **2.6. The Tale of Two Sexes**

From the sagas, it would appear that the Viking culture was led by males while females were subordinate to them. A woman could travel, trade and control her own possessions only if her husband gave her permission to do so; otherwise, the man was the custodian of her property as well as her freedom of movement. Whatever power or influence a female had within the family could not transcend that position into legislative, judicial or political realms. (Jacobsen 1978; Jesch 1991; Jochens 1995, 1996) All those associated with the family had a similar standing in the society; thus, children, even foster children, and extended relations shared that position. This will be discussed further in Chapter 5 as one explanation for the grave (Gr. no. 8) containing a younger individual with substantial artifacts and two horses.

A female's social position was dependant upon the social position of the family in which she belonged, and derived from male relations, either her father's status or her husband's. Women were often depicted, both negatively and positively as clever or astute, proud and tough. These qualities, when they furthered and protected the prestige of the family, were considered admirable; however, if used to undermine the husband or for other dishonorable reasons, were frowned upon. (Jacobsen 1978; Karlsson 2000) Thus a woman's image depended on the amount of support, wealth and prestige she could bring to the family and whether she was able to take over the farm and all its day-to-day details when her husband was unavailable; while a woman's social position depended on the social group to which she belonged.

Males, who were also described with some of the same qualities, tended to be

characterized by their skill with weapons, physical strength, trustworthiness and intelligence. These too were described negatively or positively. However, males had an advantage in politics, trade, wealth, matters of law and the freedom to come and go as they pleased. A male had the means and the opportunities to gain prestige and wealth, enabling him to advance his social standing, or just as easily, to lose it. A female did not have those same rights. In marriage, family bonds were formed and partners could gain from the union. Either or both could strengthen family alliances and gain support from or become a part of a well-established family. (Jacobsen 1978; Jesch 1991; Jochens 1995, 1996; Karlsson 2000)

On their face, many of the sagas and laws would lead one to believe that there was a rigid binary gender system in pre-Christian Iceland with women restricted to the private sector while the men controlled the public sector. (Jochens 1995, 1996; Smith 2004) The contention here is that the social roles were neither rigid nor were the social roles of women confined to the private sphere and they often overlapped with the so-called public roles occupied by men. (Brumfiel and Robin 2008; Gilchrist 1999; Hays-Gilpin and Whitely 1998; Nelson 1997) This merging of spheres took place in the day-to-day activities under normal circumstances and particularly during times of change affecting the public realm. Such a flexible sex and gender role system should be evident in the archaeological record. (Brumfiel and Robin 2008)

In death the male and female graves here show social affiliation (see Chapter 4, below). For males and females, their level of prestige are identifiable by their burial inclusions, perhaps as a means of solidifying the family status for the descendants or other family relations that would benefit. This does not account for the entire burial

ritual, including its length and the wealth displayed during the funeral period, nor for any political or other type of affiliation displayed and transmitted to those bearing witness, as such things cannot be derived from the portion of the ritual that we are able to study.

According to studies of the Book of Settlement, “[a]mong the names of four hundred original settlers ... [there were] thirteen women who claimed land on their own ... and ninety wives who accompanied their husbands are included among the original female settlers. Other wives remained nameless and many more women came as sisters and daughters of the first settlers.” (Jochens 1995:86) Indeed, most women are invisible not only in the written record, but also in the archaeological record, due to, among other things, the failure of earlier studies to pursue gendered analyses. Celtic slaves – both men and women – were imported from Ireland and other Norse outposts and females of Irish descent who may have had a higher standing in the society due to their relationship with Norse males, more than likely followed other religious and cultural burial rites. (Jochens 1995:86) Therefore they would be seemingly invisible in the numbers for this project as well. Scholars report that there was a 6:1 ratio between males and females in the Book of Settlement. (Jacobsen 1978:24-32; Jesch 1991:81; Jochens 1995:86) In this data set the overall ratio of males/? to females/? is 2.3:1. This ratio changes depending on the particular dataset being used for analysis, but as will be seen from the total analyzed skeletal remains at the date of this writing and the various types of analyses thus far, it is clear that the archaeological evidence does not support the almost 6:1 male to female ratio described above. This raises the possibility that the ratio may have changed over time or that those written numbers reflect a bias towards women on the part of the Christian authors who wrote down the history in the first place.

In modern Iceland, the ratio is closer to 1:1, however, historically, in many cultures a ratio in favor of males is not unknown. (Balikci 1970; Jiao 2001; Karlsson 2000; Scott 2001) The archaeology supports the existence of a male dominant society during the settlement period, probably a factor of the early conditions of settling and exploration, since males initiated the immigration to Iceland. Though some females of varying capacity were on the journey, others might have settled first and sent for family later and still others journeyed to Iceland unattached. This explains a portion of the unbalanced ratio, and the fact that infanticide was still very much practiced, whether legally or not, and this was a society where sons were valued more than daughters, may help to further explain the ratio. (Clover 1988; Jochens 1995; Karlsson 2000:34; Scott 2001)

Although this would seem to indicate that women were not revered in any way, evidence indicates the contrary. This could be due to the competition to acquire females since they were scarce, or, more likely, it could be a sincere respect for females, their contribution to the household's success and their position as the family matriarch. In Sweden, almost 39% of the rune stones are either erected by or in the name of a female. A superb example which shows not only the commemoration, but also the strength and position of the female in the household is: "The good farmer Holmgöt had the stone set up in memory of Odendisa, his wife. There will not come to Hassmyra a better housewife who runs the farm...." (Gräslund 2001:84) The famous Oseberg ship burial is quite elaborate, even the boat is of the highest quality, and this burial contains two females, obviously of very high social position. (Ingstad 1995; Sjøvold 1985) Similarly, if the elaborate Vatnsdalur (Br No. 54) boat burial in the Westfjords of Iceland turns out

indeed to belong to the female, as postulated by Þór Magnusson (Friðriksson 2000:564), it too indicates a high social position in Iceland. These examples reveal a society which held their females in high regard, not as secondary or of lower status. This display of power seems to contradict claims that what happens in burials may not be a direct indication of what happens in practice. (Brumfiel 2006:38) However, there is the possibility that the burials are an indirect indication of what happens in day-to-day practice. In other words, women may indeed have been substantial players in unifying households, securing power and alliances between families and households and adding to the overall family status within the community which warranted their prestigious and powerful burial rituals – even if they were openly subjugated in the public sphere.

## **2.7. Conclusion**

This chapter has brought together the space, place and society of the early settlers and it is believed that what has been described here creates the setting for an analysis of the cognitive behaviors and perceived landscapes which helped define the culture that put down its roots and became part of a very special island. From this point forward, the information in this chapter provides a platform for the discussions of theory, method and data to allow a better understanding of how these immigrants perceived their new world in this land of fire and ice.