

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

by

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## **Chapter 5. Landscape Perceptions**

### **5.1. Introduction**

Once the internal aspects of the graves were considered and analyzed quantitatively, it became necessary to place the burials into their likely surroundings in order to present an argument for how the landscape related to the burial sites. In this way the dots on the maps became more than points with connecting lines; they became social groups made up of individuals with group identities and interpretations of burial rites according to the group with which they identified themselves. This phenomenological approach enables a better understanding of the social relationships derived from applying the data on-hand to the landscape using both the physical surroundings as well as GIS applications. (Ingold 2000; Rajala 2004; Tilley 1994:16-18; Whitley 2004)

The first step was to include aspects of the landscape surrounding the burial sites. Once the surroundings were defined, the graves were placed back into the landscape from which they were removed in the earlier chapter and each area was reviewed separately. This was done by looking at the burial sites, rather than individual graves, to better understand placement. Finally, the individuals were placed back into the landscape to appreciate the connection each individual had with his or her surroundings.

By combining internal and external variables, questions regarding burial location and placement can be answered, such as: How important sight visibility was for burials; how important the relationship was between burial and farm and whether visibility mattered; how important were location and placement, what were they used for; what did placement indicate and what connection did it have with the burial rituals; and were there notable differences in burial placement based on sex and/or age.

Such a combination of variables also better explained agency and community in the Viking period Icelandic society. The internal variables considered here were both personal in that each grave was considered separately to learn about social position and gender roles, and communal in that the graves were grouped with others of their own type to rank them and compare them to the entire dataset in order to understand the community preferences and worldview. Artifacts, animal inclusion, sex and age have been considered and were presented on an individual basis. Analysis of this data allowed this project to study the burials individually, which helped to understand each grave, the engendering of the person interred, and the effects of age on these roles. In this section, variables such as the environment, the situation of the burial, the distance between the farmhouses and their associated burial sites, the elevation of the burial sites relative to the farmhouses as well as the burial sites' surroundings and visible landscapes are first presented on their own, then combined with the burial inclusions to create a better image of the possible perceived landscapes and what that landscape might have meant to the various social groups. While landscape is often in a description of community, here it is believed that both individual and community can be explained since each of the burials in Iceland have personal qualities and unique spaces. (Tilley 1994; Whitley 1998b; Whitley 2004: 4.0) The aim here, then, is to understand how these spaces were perceived by both the living and, in the minds of the living, by the dead.

## **5.2. Location and Meaning**

Location is a very broad term describing not only the physical point where the burial was found, but also the view from this point. In this way, a possible image of the burial site's perceived surroundings can be put forward so that the process of choosing

the location for the burial site can be assessed. Attempting to understand if the choice of burial site location was made by the deceased, by family or by a friend is impossible. However, it may be possible to create an image of an ideal location and the meanings that these locations held for the Vikings. This image, for the most part, is created by drawing the landscape from the point of the burial site. Such a drawing is based on the environment in which the burial sites are placed, the features that the burial sites are placed on or near to, the overall view from the burial sites, and the distances from the burial sites to their likely associated farmhouses. These drawings are then assessed to create the possible perceived spaces for the burial sites. It was this project's aim to attempt to understand what this view meant to the individual as well as the group. Together the landscape variables provided insight into the landscape rooms surrounding the burial sites as well as the limits of their visibility and helped to explore the relationship of the burial sites to those landscapes beyond visible limits. None of these views were separate or even parallel events, they were harmonies blending together into one social space. (Ingold 2000; Tilley 1994:14-20)

This overall space is not a mirror reflecting the view of the deceased; it is more like a prism with the light shining onto the burial site, which is the main view being considered, so that through refracted beams of light various views of the landscape are revealed from the point of the burial. However, from each of the various positions in the landscape there is only one view of the burial landscape, so that people at each outside location perceived and interpreted the burial differently. Unfortunately, not all outside locations can be considered here. However, there are a few ways this project attempted to bring in such outsiders. The first was to consider the possible farmhouse or farm

ground locations and the view or connection, if any, from the farmhouse to the burial site. Natural landscape features were also considered in order to make similar connections from the surroundings to the burial site and *vice versa*. Finally, natural boundaries, as opposed to man-made ones, were considered towards the same end. Natural boundaries are more stable and more likely to have remained constant since the time the burial site was in use. Man-made boundaries, such as farm boundaries and tracks, may indeed have been constant, but their existence and position from any current features cannot be confirmed to the satisfaction of this project.

### **5.3. Burial Site Locations**

Placing the burial sites into the landscape could only be done when the burial sites were reliably located. This meant that a new rating system needed to be created and applied to the 150 burial sites being used in this project. In 2001, 85% of the burial sites listed in *Kuml og Haugfé* (Friðriksson 2000) were surveyed. (Maher 2002) Many of the locations were investigated based on old farm maps and information generated by farming landowners from the earlier part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Some of the farms are no longer in existence or have moved due to the unsuitable conditions created by erosion, among other things. Some sites could not be located at all because the descriptions of the burial sites were too vague to mark an accurate location. Any subsequently discovered burial sites were added and rated using the same system. The original system had 4 levels of accuracy:

- Level 1: burial site is within 5m of the survey point.
- Level 2: burial site is within 20m of the survey point.
- Level 3: the point taken is in the general area, but nothing more accurate can be provided.
- Level 4: no location could be found.

For the purposes of this project, only farms with a suitable location rating were considered, therefore only burial site locations with a rating of “1” and “2” were used here. After applying the rating system, 104 burial sites could be used for landscape analysis. A list of the located burial sites, with coordinates, is provided in Appendix I.

The majority of these burials were surveyed in 2001 using a standard handheld GPS unit receiving an average 5m accuracy, using WGS84 datum collected in decimal degrees. As much as possible, when weather conditions and satellite timing rendered poor quality coordinates, surveying was suspended until better conditions existed. (Maher 2002) Data collection during the survey focused first on the physical location of the burial, after which the surrounding landscape was noted and another GPS point was taken at either the visible farm mound or the modern farmhouse if no signs of an older occupation were present. These locations made up the data that have been rated (according to burial site). Other landscape data were incorporated with these to provide information about gender and age relations and the Viking perception of their surroundings.

#### **5.4. Farmhouses in the Record**

It then became relevant to this study to understand the relationship between the farmhouses and the burial sites with respect to both the vertical and horizontal distances between these two groups. Also relevant was the elevation of burial sites in relation to their surroundings and in the Icelandic geographic landscape. Many of the farmhouse locations were noted and recorded at the same time burial sites were recorded. The farmhouse was described as being either ‘Old’ with prominent ruins, an obvious farm mound, or even an excavated skáli (Viking period long house); ‘Modern’ where

contemporary structures were used as the main house (or recently abandoned structures); “Both” – a modern structure sitting atop an obvious farm mound (also considered to be the location of the farmhouse for many generations, probably back to the earliest settlement); or ‘Church’ – denoting a church which is now located on a farm believed to have been a settlement farm (and the church could more than likely be in the same location as the earlier structures). The farmhouses were also rated, as with all other data, and only those that were within a reasonable accuracy of distance were included here. In this case, the included ratings were ‘1’ (within a 5 m accuracy) and ‘2’ (within a 20 m accuracy); all other distances were excluded. Ninety-three farmhouses were associated with burial sites being included in this study. (See Appendix J, for the complete list of farmhouses matched to the 104 located Burial Sites used in this project.) There are thirty-nine farmhouses listed as Old, twenty-seven as Modern, twenty-two as Both and six are listed as Churches. This means that 65.6% of the farmhouses being considered in this study are likely to have a long occupation period, possibly back to the settlement period. Modern farmhouses represent 29.0% of the data and Churches 6.5%. The modern farms were recorded based on the premise that the majority of Icelandic farms have not been subject to drastic moves and changes, unless there was a clear reason such as sudden landscape changes – as when abandonment is brought on by various volcanic eruptions (AD 1104, Hekla) (Vésteinsson 1998, 2004; Vésteinsson, et al. 2002).

### **5.5. Distance**

Distance is a landscape feature that is being included here in order to understand the relationship between the farmhouses and the burial sites. A selected radius of 1 km was applied to the farmhouse dataset in order to obtain a reasonable measurement of

distance between a farmhouse and a burial site. Of the 93 farmhouses used in this portion of the analysis, 72.0% have burial sites within this range. The majority of the farmhouses with nearby burial sites (54.8%) are within a 0.5 km radius. With the majority of burial sites falling close to the farmhouse, it is clear that this practice was the norm during the study period. (See Map 6 for the distribution of these sites; and Appendix K for the located Burial Sites and their distances relative to the farmhouse.)

The farmhouses that were included in this range were mostly (70.1%) within the categories Old and Both. The remaining percentages are Modern farmhouses (25.4%) and Churches (4.5%). Therefore, it is believed that an argument can be made for a strong relationship between burial sites and related farmhouses.

There are a variety of reasons for burial sites falling outside of the arbitrary 1-kilometer radius: (i) the farm the burial was associated with is outside the range; (ii) there is no farm within any reasonable range with which this burial is associated; (iii) the likely farm associated with this burial has not yet been located, thus the particular area around the burial site would benefit from further investigation; and (iv) only a very modern farm can be located and no evidence of earlier structures in or around the area exist. Therefore, all that can be said about the burial sites outside the radius is that at this time, they have no farm associated with them.

## **5.6. Elevation**

Elevation is another landscape feature that seems to be significant. There are two main types of elevation that are relevant here. The first is the overall elevation of the located burial and farm sites geographically situated in Iceland. Such information aids in the general settlement choices during the period. These choices were more than likely

based on environment, wealth and opportunity and quantifying this information helps to explain site placement. The second is the elevation relationship between each farmhouse and its associated burial site. It is to be expected that the elevation of burial sites and farm elevations are correlated because the distances between the farmhouse and burial sites are close in range thereby making any drastic elevation highly unlikely. Thus, if a farm is at sea level or if it is 300 m above sea level, the burial site will be at similar elevations. The measurement of elevation in this portion of the study is concerned with the relationship between the burial site and the particular farmhouse that was recorded.

The 104 burial sites that could be located are mostly at elevations less than 42 m asl; and 73% of all the burial sites are below 95 m asl. (See Map 7 for an elevation map of the located Burial Sites.) Only a handful of burial sites are located between 205-391 m asl (6.7%), and two of these sites are outside of the one-kilometer radius from the farmhouse. Of the 68 burial sites with associated farmhouses, more than half are situated below the farmhouse (54.4%). Burial sites above the farmhouses make up 30.9% and those at a level with the farmhouses, 14.7%. (See Appendix K for a list of the Burial Sites relative to their associated farm houses; and Map 8 for a map of the Burial Site elevations relative to their associated farm house.)

### **5.7. Viking Period Environment**

There were 104 located burial sites that were used based on characteristics already outlined in Chapter 3. The first description was based on the Viking landscape and the likely environmental classifications of where the burial sites were placed. There were five classification groups that were applied to the data: Birch, Grasslands, Wetlands, Erosion and Water. Birch indicates the burial site was placed in an area that was

dominated by birch forest at the time of settlement. Grasslands are areas that were dominated by grasslands at the time of settlement. Wetlands refers to the more boggy areas of Iceland at the time of settlement. Erosion indicates that the area was rather dry and barren at the time of settlement. Water does not indicate the burial sites were actually in the water; it indicates burial sites located very near to water. It is important to note that this environmental data is an estimation of the Icelandic environment at the time of settlement. It does not consider any of the severe environmental changes that took place immediately after settlement began; however, it is a better estimation of the environment than contemporary landscape data. The environment changed quickly once settlers arrived. Birch forests were cleared for agricultural purposes and areas of grasslands were utilized for farming purposes. Wetlands were “farmed” for peat and eroded areas were not as barren or massive as they are today. (Einarsson 1991; McGovern, et al. 2007) (See Map 9 for the distribution of the burial sites in their estimated environment; and see Appendix L for their environment and feature classifications.)

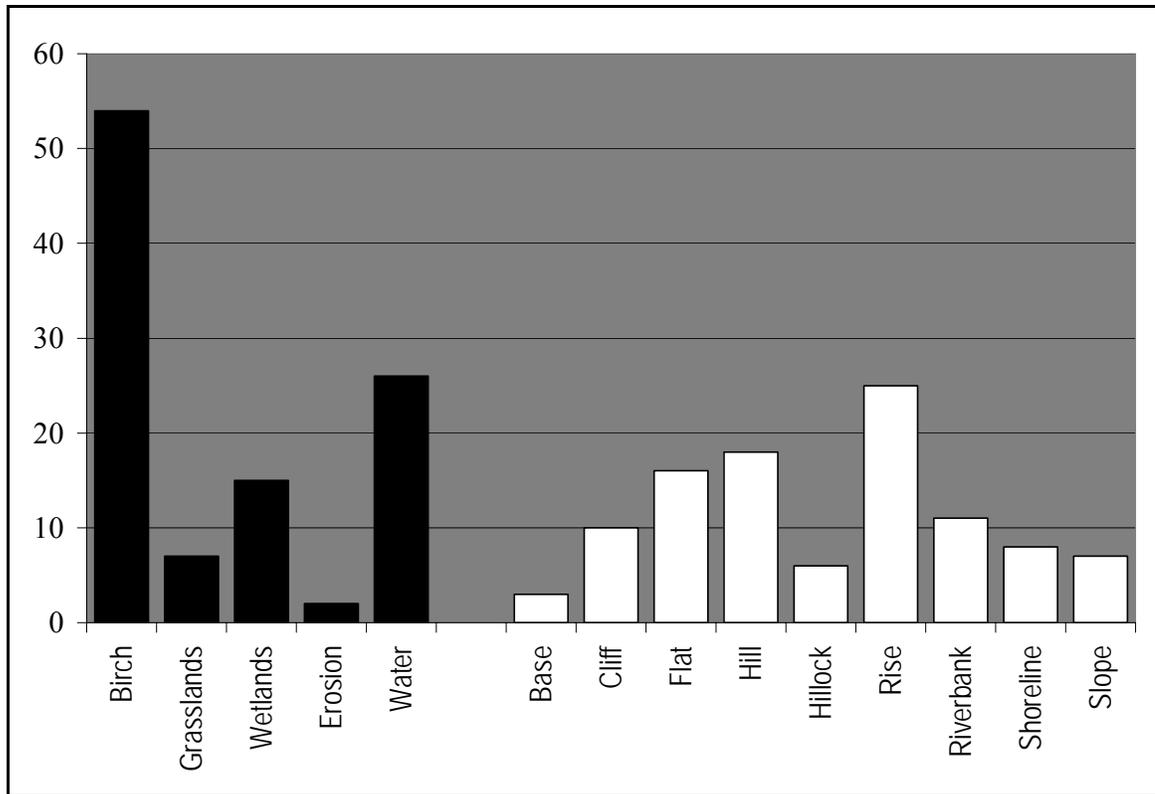


Fig. 5.1 The two landscape characteristics strongly featured in the analyses were environmental classifications (in black) and feature settings (in white). Some placement could be explained economically, particularly why so few were placed on grasslands; however, if the environmental characteristics are studied in relation to the features more is understood.

Overall, as can be seen in Fig. 5.1, birch classification is the most common (51.9%) environmental classification for the burial sites here. Placement near water is second (25.0%).

The majority of burial sites (73.1%) are placed at the edge between two classification types or, in some cases, overlooking another classification. By establishing the trends in this information, the data will provide an insight to the decision-making process of choosing burial site locations.

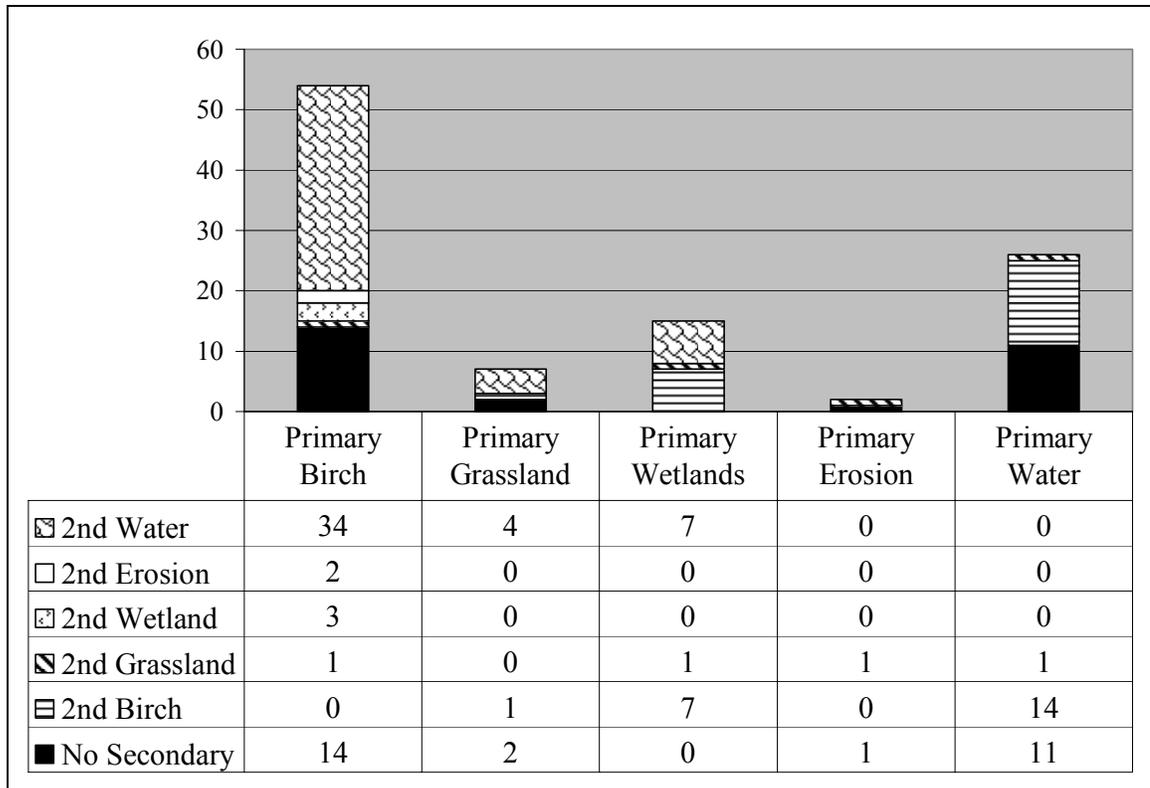


Fig. 5.2 Environmental classifications with secondary classification associations. Here it can be seen that areas of birch or water or both dominate as choices for burial placement.

Clearly, no classification had a majority of burial sites placed squarely within it.

The placement of burial sites in areas of erosion is atypical for this period, thus, although economics may play a certain role in location choice, the placement is not always based on economics. There were 54 burial sites placed into the birch category, with another 22 burial sites where birch was a secondary classification; thus 73.1% of the burial sites were connected to birch. There were twenty-six burial sites in the water category, with another 45 burial sites where water was a secondary classification; thus 68.3% of the burial sites had a connection with water. These were obviously two very important placement areas for the Vikings and it is even more obvious when looking at those two classifications together. The combination of birch/water or water/birch combined with those of the birch and water classifications without secondary classes makes up 70.2% of

this dataset. These appear to be the preferred environments for the placement of burial sites in Iceland during this period.

### **5.8. Burial Site Situation**

Not only is the environment in which the burial site was located important, but the situation of the burial site is as well. (See Appendix L) Here, this means the natural landscape features that framed each of the burial sites and made up their surroundings. The primary surroundings in which the 104 Icelandic pre-Christian burial sites were found are varied. Nine general groups are found: *Cliffs*, lands that are relatively *Flat*, *Hills*, *Hillocks*, a *Rise* (or ridge), *Riverbanks*, *Shorelines* (lakes or seas), *Slopes* and a *Base* (wherein the site is at the base of a major landscape feature, such as a mountain). As can be seen in Fig. 5.1 above, the majority (24.0%) of the sites were located on a Rise. Hills and burial sites that are found on relatively even, flat areas (15.4%) are the next most common situation (17.3%). Riverbanks and cliffs are similar, not only in percentages (10.6% and 9.6%, respectively) but also in their overall style. Many of the burial sites located along riverbanks are somewhat raised above the rivers, not necessarily on a cliff, but on a bank overhanging the river. Burial sites located on cliffs tend to overlook rivers, though elevation creates a considerable distance between the two. Burial sites located primarily on Slopes only make up about 7.7%, those located along Shorelines 6.7%, on Hillocks 5.8% and at Bases 2.9%. However, it is more revealing to view the data in groups. Elevated areas (Rise, Hills, Cliffs, and Hillocks) make up 56.7% of the dataset. Placement on a Slope could be perceived as either uphill or downhill. Flat areas and Bases were grouped together (18.3%) as are those areas situated with water, Riverbanks and Shorelines, (17.4%). It is clear that prominent features in the landscape

were contributing factors in burial placement.

There are twenty burial sites with secondary surroundings that describe the situation of the burial site further and aid in understanding why particular sites were chosen. Forty percent of these can be further described as being located near riverbanks.

<b>BR No</b>	<b>Primary Situation</b>	<b>Secondary Situation</b>	<b>Notes</b>
37	Shoreline	Lake	
38	Rise	Riverbank	
40	Rise	Shoreline	
44	Shoreline	Sandbank	At the sea
47	Cliff	Shoreline	On a rise
56	Shoreline	Riverbank	
68	Cliff	Riverbank	
69	Cliff	Shoreline	At the sea
76	Cliff	Riverbank	
80	Hill	Slope	
88	Flat	Shoreline	Near the seashore
98	Hill	Slope	
103	Cliff	Riverbank	
115	Hill	Shoreline	On a lake
127	Cliff	Shoreline	
133	Rise	Slope	
142	Slope	Hill	
144	Rise	Riverbank	
149	Rise	Riverbank	Where 2 water sources meet
159	Slope	Riverbank	On a mountain

Tab. 5.1 Table of burial sites with both primary and secondary situation classifications. Only those sites that are located at more than one situation are listed here.

From this table, it can be seen how significant water is as 80% of the burial sites with secondary characteristics are situated near various types of water. 17.4% of these are Riverbanks. Fifteen percent are situated near two types of water and 5% are physically located near two waters meeting at a primary situation.

Clearly landscape features played a part in position and being elevated in one's surroundings was desired. It is clear that being visible in the landscape had its meaning. More than likely to stand out in some way – even marginally as these were not grand

burial monuments in any way. Eleven of the elevated features (cliff (6), hill (1) and rise (4)) have secondary water features (i.e. riverbanks and shorelines); the flat surface was at a shoreline and one of the two slopes was on a riverbank. Thus, 30.8% of the located burial sites are found along waterways. Whether the connection to water was to strengthen networks, demarcate territory or show the deceased the path to the next world will be discussed further below.

### **5.9. The Combined Landscape**

The analyses based on distance from the associated farm mound as well as elevation relative to the farm mound were discussed above in the context of the analyzed human skeletal remains. In this section, the overall placement is considered, regardless of sex, age or gender using the 104 burial sites.

The burial sites locations were divided into three groups, the first were those located outside the 1.0-kilometer radius, the second were those positioned between 1.0 and 0.5 kilometers from their associated farm mounds, and the third fell within a 0.5-kilometer radius. The burial sites in these groups were reviewed with the information drawn from the previous subchapters to shed light on practices based on distance from the home base.

#### ***5.9.1. Group 1: Outside the Specified Radius***

There were thirty-six burial sites that were outside of the 1-kilometer range or for which an associated farm mound is not yet found. By combining the primary and secondary environments, about 77.8% were located in or near to the water environment and another 52.8% at a water feature. Thus, 83.3% were directly associated with water in one way or another. In comparison, 58.3% – almost 20% fewer – burial sites were located in or near to the birch environment was Approximately 41.7% were elevated

compared to their surroundings which is just over 10% fewer than those placed on a waterway.

### ***5.9.2. Group 2: Between 1.0 and 0.5 km***

Of the burial sites with associated farmhouses, there were only seventeen that were positioned more than 0.5 km from the farmhouse, but within 1 km. In this group, 88.2% were located in or near to the birch environment, while 70.6% were in or near to the water environment – almost 18% less. This is the reverse situation from Group 1. In this group, it is also seen that being on elevated ground was more desirable than being connected to a waterway. Here it is noticeable that 23.5% of these burial sites were in or near to the wetlands environment while in Group 1, there were only 5.5% in such an environment. The situation changed as the burial sites got closer to the farmhouse. There were more elevated burial sites (sites at a higher level than their immediate surroundings), 64.7% than in the previous group (52.8%) and the connection with the waterway decreases substantially.

Another way to consider the distance of a burial site from its likely associated farm mound was by using line of sight calculations. In this group it was revealed that only 23.5% of the burial sites would not be visible at all from the farmhouse. This number does not take into account physical obstructions like vegetation as it would be too subjective to attempt to draw conclusions about the state of the coverage at the time the sites were constructed. It should also be clear that the Icelandic burial mounds were not substantial monuments in the landscape and calculating a distance up to one-kilometer means that although line of sight is possible, the concept of social memory regarding the burial site is being applied. A particular location becomes memorable to the family and a point of reference is fixed in the mind. Therefore a person is able to look at a particular

area and pick out something “memorable” in the landscape which allows that person to directly reference the burial site if the site is not actually visible.

As expected, the views from both the burial sites and the farm sites overlap considerably. (See Map 10 (areas of overlap are purple.)) There are slightly more areas of Iceland that can only be seen from burial sites (2.9%) than there are areas than can only be seen from the farmhouses (2.6%).

### ***5.9.3. Group 3: Within 0.5 km***

The final group contains the burial sites within 0.5 km of the recorded farm mounds. Almost half of all the burial sites considered here (51) were found within this range. Since 65.6% of the farmhouses in this project were possibly in or about the same location as the earlier settlement farmhouses, there is a strong likelihood that the burial sites within such a short radius have a better chance of being correctly associated with their associated farmhouse.

The combined primary and secondary environments show that in Group 3, 78.4% were located on or near to the birch environment and 60.8% were located on or near to the water environment. In this case, water as a primary environment only represented about 15.7%, therefore it was much more important as a secondary feature rather than a primary one, while where in the previous two groups, birch and water were nearly equal in the primary environment. Wetlands represent more here with 21.6% of this group. The interesting turn is that for 46.2% of the sites, water becomes a key secondary feature closer to home. Also close to home, grasslands make an appearance with 13.7%. It is interesting that no burial sites in Group 2 were found on grasslands.

Consistent with Group 2, elevated burial sites were the usual with 64.7% of the burial sites close to the farmhouses, which is but relatively level burial sites increase to

19.6%, fewer than in Group 2 (23.5%). Burial sites associated with waterways, either at or overlooking such features represent 25.5%.

Line of sight calculations for this group show 100% visibility, again not taking into consideration vegetation growth that possibly could have obscured the feature at the time. This was to be expected with the two types of sites being within such close proximity.

### **5.10. Beyond the Grave**

As previously mentioned, from any one point outside of the burial area, there was only one view of the burial. However, from the burial site, there were many perceived spaces in its field of view. (See Map 11 for the typical viewsheds from each Burial Site.) It is clear in Sections 5.9.2 and 5.9.3 above, that having some visibility or frame of reference to the burial site from the farmhouse was desired and that from the burial site the farmhouse was also visible may have been desired as well. Nevertheless, what else might have been important in the burial site's field of view? Using viewshed analysis with each of the 104 burial sites, this question was addressed and the results bring this project to an entirely new area to be interpreted from the data – cosmology.

To do this, I first created a surface from a contour map of Iceland for the purpose of understanding the burial data in association with landscape form. By applying viewsheds to each of the known burial site locations, not only was the visible expanse from each burial site brought to light, but also the connection to the sea was made visible. The human eye's line of sight is limited to about 4 km at ground level, and this number increases when elevation increases; however, large objects such as mountains and oceans can obviously be seen at greater distances. Weather conditions also play a part in

visibility as it is possible, on the clearest days to see Snæfellsnes Glacier from Reykjavik – a distance of approximately 100 km. In addition, the human eye is not necessarily the point from which to measure; it is the view from the burial, a symbolic view, that carries the meaning here and this is the one considered. (See Map 12 for viewshed calculations based on optimal conditions from the Burial Sites.)

The viewsheds from the burial sites were broken down into three categories, based on natural breaks, by degree of visibility. (See Appendix M: Views from Burial Sites and Map 13) A view could be Vast, Moderate or Limited. Only 11.5% had a Vast view of their surroundings; 21.2% had a Moderate view of their surroundings; and 67.3% had a Limited view. Taking into consideration the view of the sea, the viewshed calculations show that 70.2% of the 104 burial sites potentially had a full or partial view of the sea during optimal weather conditions. (See Map 14) The 73 Burial Sites from which the sea was visible were then separated into three categories by degree of visibility. It could then be seen that the 12 with a Vast view all had a view of the sea, while 18 of the 22 with a Moderate view also had a view of the sea; and 43 of the 70 with a Limited view also had a view of the sea. From this, it can be seen that there is a common thread among the burials: whether the view is great or small, it is important to have a view of the sea.

### **5.11. Individuals in the Landscape**

As mentioned in 5.1, once the internal aspects of the grave were considered, the buried individual(s) could be placed back into their surroundings in order to present an argument for the connection of the landscape to the burial site. Here, they are now presented as social groups made up of individuals with group identities and perceived

notions of burial rites particular to the group with which they identify themselves. (Ingold 2000; Rajala 2004; Tilley 1994:16-18; Whitley 2004)

The individuals were placed into the landscape to explore associations between their gender and age and their surroundings. In combining the internal and external variables, questions regarding burial location and placement were answered, such as: whether differences in burial placement were based on age and/or sex; if such differences reflect the worldview of the society; and if the results support or refute the perceived social spheres in the ancient texts and in contemporary thought?

### ***5.11.1. A View of Skeletal Remains***

The first variable to merge with the landscape data comprises the analyzed human skeletal remains. There were 148 analyzed human skeletal remains combined with the 104 located burial sites, thereby leaving 133 individual graves for this analysis. See Appendix N for the full list of graves with analyzed human skeletal remains in the landscape. The two features of the analyzed human skeletal remains considered in connection with their surroundings are the sex and age of the individuals. Of the 133 skeletal remains, 83 were sexed and put into the categories noted earlier (62.4%), and 92 were aged according to the preset categories (69.2%).

In keeping with earlier established ratios, the male to female relationship continues to be male-dominant at 2.8:1. Of the 22 female/? graves, only 13.6% did not fall within the 1-kilometer radius and 68.1% were within the 0.5-kilometer radius. Males/?, on the other hand, had 31.1% outside of the 1-kilometer radius and 60.7% within the 0.5-kilometer radius. Clearly, females/? were less varied in their placement with respect to the farmhouse.

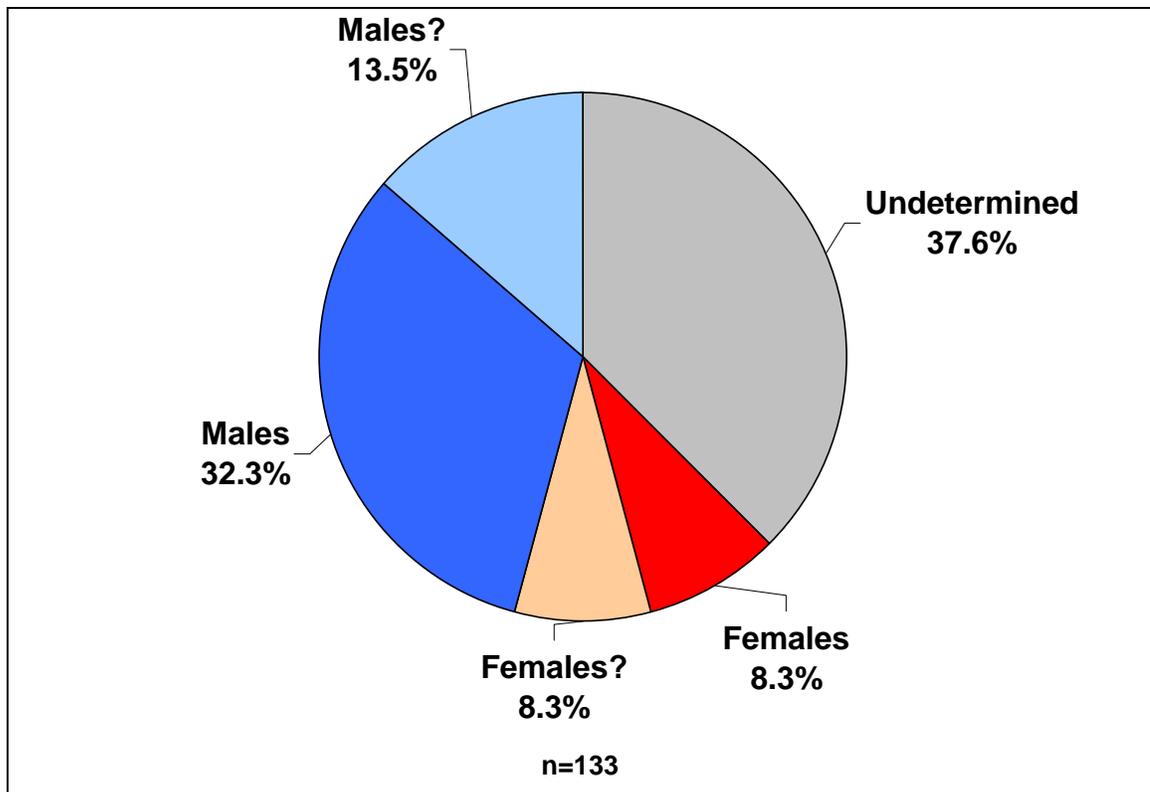


Fig. 5.3 Located analyzed human skeletal remains in the perceived landscape. Here it can be seen that the male to female ratio is similar to earlier ratios, however, it is also evident how many in this group are undetermined, which affects the dataset.

When it is possible to relate the elevation of the burial to the elevation of the farm mound, only 11.3% of the graves were at elevations slightly above that of their associated farms; and more than half of these were male/? (53.3%) while the rest were unidentified. Thus, there were no known females/? buried at elevations above the associated farm mounds. There were 16 considered equal to their associated farm mounds, the majority of which were of undetermined sex (68.8%); the remaining included two females/? and three males/?. The problem with the burials equal to the farm mound is whether or not they were truly meant to be such. Other factors could be contributing to this seeming parity, such as depth perception of the family members who chose the site or erosion and/or accumulation at either site over time. The others were clearly below or above the

farm mounds. The final 47.4% were located below the elevation of the associated farm mounds: 31.7% female/? and 49.2% male/?.

It appears that burials located below the level of the farm mound were more common and that males/? and females/? were likely to be placed in such a situation. However, it is also clear that the placement of males/? is more varied and only through continued analyses can likelihood become certainty.

Approximately 64% of the burials in this portion of the analyses were adults – individuals 18 or more years of age, while only 5.3% were under that age. Indeed, 48.1% were over the age of 35 years with OMA at 30.1% and MA at 18.0%. The majority of graves above the farm mound were adults, with the exception of Gr. no. 243 which was that of an older subadult. Both the ‘equal to’ and ‘below’ graves were too varied in age to form any clear patterns, thus making such a placement typical of all age groups. All graves outside the 1-kilometer radius which could be aged were adults. Thus, the majority of graves above their farmhouses were adults over 18 years of age and seven were 35+ years of age. All graves found equal to or below the farmhouses, whether male/? or female/? Are of varied status and age, while those above seem to be associated only with adult males/?.

#### ***5.11.2. Placement in the Landscape by Sex and Age***

Both males/? (77.2%) and females/? (80.0%) were more likely to be placed in birch or water environments, however, males/? exhibited somewhat more variability in where they were placed in the environment. Where the other 20.0% of females/? were located in the wetland environment, 8.8% of the males/? were buried in wetlands, 10.5% in grasslands and even 3.5% in areas of erosion. Approximately 45.0% of female/? burial sites were placed on elevated landscapes, but when primary and secondary features were

combined, clearly the preference for females is to overlook a waterway (55.0%). Males/? on the other hand reversed the pattern with 42.1% placed on waterways and 54.4% on elevated land. Interestingly, both sexes were rarely found on flat features (approximately 15% each). Clearly, placement on elevated land was more typical for both males and females, however, in lieu of elevated burial sites, females were more likely to be associated with waterways than their male counterparts.

When it comes to visibility, males/? and females/? were both as likely to have the same views. Males/? and females/? had an average 10.25% for a Vast view, 16.25% for a Moderate view, and 73.5% for a Limited view. Thus, it would appear there was no duality based on sex when it came to the overall view, however, approximately 85% of females/? had some view of the sea while males/? had only 73.2%. This is once again in line with the above idea where females were more likely to be associated with waterways. (See Map 15)

There was a division between the ages when considered with the landscape. Almost all the burials clearly followed similar patterns by age as by sex. However, for the most part, those between 18-35 do not fit the patterns. For instance, birch and water strongly dominate the dataset. For those over 35 years, there was an 85% mean. For those under 18, just under 60% and young adults are also about 66.7%. However, for young middle adults the mean is only 33.3%. Those over 35 tended to be elevated (mean 56%) but for being on waterways it is only a 38% mean. Those under 18 followed a similar pattern with 71.4% elevated and 42.9% on waterways. However, 50% of those in between 18 and 25 were elevated and 66.7% on waterways; and those between 25 and 35 had 55.6% elevated and 55.5% were on waterways. Once these differences are noted, the

rest of their situations are once again similar and follow the overall patterns where the majority (more than 80%) have a view of the sea and those with a limited viewshed represent the majority and those with a vast view the minority. (See Map 16)

The differences in age could be pointing to variation in the ability to achieve social standing. There may be a rite of passage that distinguishes groups based on whether or not they have performed such a passage. Those individuals in the YA category whose sex have been identified are male/?, while those in the YMA category are equally male/? and female/?. The young may adopt a burial ritual on par with their family since they had not had an opportunity to do so on their own. There may have been some point at which he or she was expected to earn his or her own standing and differentiation in burial placement was affected. Another explanation is that this is not a reflection of status, but cosmology. The YA category is mostly male. However, the individuals in the YA category were typically associated with waterways, which overall seems to be more typical of females. In this case, one cannot help but think that since they have not had an opportunity to reach a certain social position on their own, their placement in the landscape was chosen in the same style as was females', not to disgrace or dishonor the males, but as the position allotted to those males who had not achieved a level of status consistent with gender expectations. Similarly, in the next category, YMA, the males and females received the same treatment, but this is atypical of the remainder of the dataset.

Thus, there was likely a distinction in burial placement based on social standing in particular age groups, however, with this portion of the dataset being so small, it is difficult to make a strong connection. Similar to other parts of this data, we are left

wondering who is represented in the burials as there are so few. Where are all the other children who died during this pre-Christian period. Were there different burial practices for the younger individuals who did not achieve a certain level of status; or more likely, was there a different burial practice for all of the younger individuals and for some reason the individuals included here somehow had the right to this burial rite – whether ascribed or achieved. It would seem that had all those under 18 had the opportunity for similar burial rites as the adults, there would be a more representative sample than the one here.

### *5.11.3. Skeletons and Artifacts in the Landscape*

There were 133 located graves with analyzed human skeletal remains and 120 located graves with artifact inclusions. Combined, the dataset in this portion consists of 77 located graves containing both analyzed human skeletal remains and artifacts aggregating 1,602 items. See Appendix O for the full list of located graves with analyzed human skeletal remains and artifact inclusions in the landscape.

As can be seen in Tab. 5.2, there were 13 female/? graves. All of the aged individuals were adults and nine of the 13 were over the age of 35 years. All were situated below their associated farm mounds. The majority were located within a distance of 0.5 km from their associated farm mound, and two were not within the 1-kilometer radius. The most diverse graves had artifacts from four categories, and there were only two such graves and both contained prestigious grave goods, especially the whale-bone plaque which was used to cover the face of the deceased and the steatite bowl. The majority of those with artifacts from three categories were also quite impressive. The amount and quality of the grave goods seems to drop between those with three to four categories and those with one to two, indicating at least a two-tiered social position among the females of this society.

<b>FEMALE/? SKELETAL REMAINS IN THE LANDSCAPE WITH ARTIFACT INCLUSIONS</b>					
<b>Gr. No.</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Elev. to Farm</b>	<b>Dist. from Farm (km)</b>	<b>Artifact Categories</b>
46	F?	U	Below	<1.0	M
47	F?	OMA	Below	<1.0	ADM
59	F?	OMA	Below	<1.0	AM
68	F	OMA	Below	<0.5	ADMN
72	F	YMA	Below	<0.5	ADW
157	F?	OMA		>1.0	AHM
190	F?	OMA	Below	<0.5	ADHM
196	F?	YMA	Below	<0.5	DMN
212	F	OMA	Below	<0.5	ADM
220	F	OMA	Below	<0.5	A
296	F	MA		>1.0	ADM
299	F	YMA	Below	<0.5	AD
305	F?	OMA	Below	<0.5	AD

Tab. 5.2 Female/? skeletal remains in the landscape with artifacts. The artifact categories may indicate social stratification within the group.

As can be seen in Tab. 5.3, there were thirty-six male/? graves. Seventy-five percent of the male/? graves were over the age of 35 years and all of the aged individuals were adults – over the age of 18 years. There were five males/? situated above their associated farm mounds and all five were within a 0.5-km range; however, as also can be seen, their grave goods were not very impressive. Only one grave was equal to its associated farm mound and similarly, quite unimpressive. Twenty of the male/? burials were situated below the elevation of the farm mound and all but one were within a 0.5-kilometer range of the farm mound. As can be seen in Tab. 5.2 female/? graves generally had a very varied position in the landscape when it came to their surroundings; however, 66.7% of the male/? graves were elevated in their surroundings. Therefore they were placed on somewhat higher ground, regardless of their situation to the farm mound, making their placement slightly more prominent in the landscape.

<b>MALE/? SKELETAL REMAINS IN THE LANDSCAPE WITH ARTIFACT INCLUSIONS</b>					
<b>Gr. No.</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Elev. to Farm</b>	<b>Dist. from Farm (km)</b>	<b>Artifact Categories</b>
10	M	YMA	Equal	<1.0	M
26	M	MA		>1.0	CDFHMW
37	M	OMA		>1.0	ACDMW
70	M	OMA	Below	<0.5	DHMW
73	M	MA	Below	<0.5	W
81	M?	YA		>1.0	ADMW
131	M?	MA	Below	<0.5	B
137	M	MA	Above	<0.5	D
140	M	OMA		>1.0	AHM
159	M?	OMA	Below	<0.5	HM
186	M	MA	Below	<0.5	AM
187	M	MA	Below	<0.5	CDMW
188	M	OMA	Below	<0.5	CMW
197	M	YA	Below	<0.5	AM
200	M?	OMA	Below	<1.0	DM
210	M	OMA	Below	<0.5	DHMW
211	M	MA	Below	<0.5	ACDMW
213	M	OMA	Below	<0.5	CDHMW
215	M	U	Below	<0.5	DM
219	M?	OMA	Below	<0.5	W
223	M?	YMA	Below	<0.5	A
248	M	OMA	Below	<0.5	D
250	M?	MA	Below	<0.5	BMW
251	M?	U	Below	<0.5	DM
253	M	YA	Above	<0.5	DW
261	M?	OMA	Below	<0.5	D
262	M	MA	Above	<0.5	DM
267	M	OMA		>1.0	DM
286	M	OMA		>1.0	ACDHMW
288	M	OMA	Above	<0.5	DM
289	M	OMA	Below	<0.5	D
290	M	YA	Below	<0.5	DM
291	M	MA	Above	<0.5	CDW
322	M	OMA		>1.0	DMW
342	M	MA		>1.0	W
343	M	U		>1.0	B

Tab. 5.3 Male/? skeletal remains in the landscape with artifacts. Here, social stratification can also be seen within this group as well as between this group and those in Tab. 5.2.

The most diverse graves had artifacts from six categories, and there were only two such graves and another three graves had artifacts from five categories. Another significant difference is that in the male/? group, there were graves level with or above their associated farmhouses. In this case, five were above and one was equal. Interestingly, these graves do not have the status artifacts or the diversity of some of the other graves.

The amount and quality of the grave goods seems to drop between those with four to six categories and those with less, indicating at least a two-tiered social position – possibly three-tiers – among the males of this society.

As can be seen in Tab. 5.4 below, there were 28 graves which included individuals of undetermined sex. Approximately 60.7% of these individuals could not be aged. The remaining age range is from young subadults to mature adults – four under the age of 18 and seven over the age of 18. Nine of the 28 graves were not within the 1-kilometer radius and the remaining 19 were found at varying elevations with respect to the farm mound: three above, eight equal, and eight below and 84.2% of the graves within the range were within 0.5 km of the farm mound. However, as can also be seen in Tab. 5.4, one of the three individuals above the elevation of the farm mound was quite impressive. Similarly, one of the eight that are equal to the farm mound was extraordinary as well.

The most diverse graves had artifacts from six categories, and there was only one such grave and one other with five categories. However, in this section it can be seen that there were a few graves that had artifacts from a limited number of categories, however, those artifact assemblages were of a higher status. See, for instance, grave nos.

164 with its decorated bone, 260 with its sheer amount of artifacts in each category, 284 for its elevation as well as quantity and even 313 as it contained artifacts from only one category, however, the assemblage was impressive, nonetheless.

<b>UNDETERMINED SKELETAL REMAINS IN THE LANDSCAPE WITH ARTIFACT INCLUSIONS</b>					
<b>Gr. No.</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Elev. to Farm</b>	<b>Dist. from Farm (km)</b>	<b>Artifact Categories</b>
8	U	OSA	Equal	<0.5	ACDHMW
21	U	U	Above	<0.5	W
24	U	U	Below	<1.0	DH
41	U	OMA	Below	<1.0	M
43	U	U	Equal	<0.5	H
44	U	U	Equal	<0.5	DHUW
50	U	U	Below	<0.5	DH
58	U	MA			W
141	U	YA	Above	<0.5	M
144	U	U	Equal	<0.5	HM
161	U	U			HMW
162	U	U			D
163	U	U			CDW
164	U	U	Equal	<1.0	DMN
170	U	U			AHMW
171	U	U			HM
177	U	YSA	Below	<0.5	D
189	U	A?	Below	<0.5	BH
201	U	U			W
221	U	U	Equal	<0.5	DHW
225	U	U	Below	<0.5	W
260	U	MA			ADM
271	U	YSA	Equal	<0.5	BCDMW
276	U	U	Equal	<0.5	ADHM
284	U	U	Above	<0.5	ADM
303	U	U	Below	<0.5	CDM
312	U	OSA	Below	<0.5	ADHW
313	U	YA			A

Tab. 5.4 Undetermined sex skeletal remains in the landscape with artifacts.

From the analyses thus far, various patterns can be seen to emerge, especially when the focus is on the human skeletal remains combined with artifact inclusions. In both cases, with or without the landscape analysis, the society under study showed

differences when it came to age as well as sex.

#### ***5.11.4. Placement of Skeletons and Artifacts in the Landscape***

When the artifact types in connection with the skeletal remains were considered in the landscape, there were few patterns that presented themselves. The few cooking artifacts were all found in the water/birch combination, 40% were elevated while 100% were on waterways. The identified males/? were the only individuals on elevated ground. All are at waterways and 58.8% of the graves with weapons are at waterways. This latter pattern is somewhat contradictory because males tended to be elevated and a small percentage on waterways, but here, both elevation and waterways were equal. Again, another small artifact group is non-utility. They are both similarly situated – in the birch/water combination, on a waterway, within 0.5 km of their farm mound, both with a view of the sea and both part of a cemetery.

The final interesting outcome of placing this portion of the analysis into the landscape was that the two Older Subadults stood out as being different. First of all, these two individuals had relatively impressive inclusions for being under the age of 18 years old. One had four categories while the other six. Both included multiple weapons, one even had a sword. Both of these individuals were within 0.5-kilometers of the farm mound and had a view of the sea. Interestingly, one was placed on wetlands and the other on grassland, neither near a waterway and only the one with more artifact categories was placed on elevated land.

From this, it would seem that gender differentiation and social groups are indeed present in the burial ritual in both inclusions as well as placement in the landscape. However, social status presented in the form of grave goods was not differentiated in the landscape, although there may indeed have been very subtle differences between social

groups, the evidence leans more towards equality in burial placement with respect to wealth.

#### ***5.11.5. Skeletons, Artifacts and Animals in the Landscape***

In the final portion of this analysis, all of the variables were combined to create one final dataset. There were 133 located graves with analyzed human skeletal remains and 120 located graves with artifact inclusions and there were 75 located graves containing animal remains. Combined, the dataset in this portion consists of 34 located graves which contained all three variables. See Appendix P for the full list of located graves with analyzed human skeletal remains and artifact and animal inclusions in the landscape.

In this portion, half the dataset here is of undetermined sex, 41.2% were male/? and 8.8% were female/?. With respect to the ages of the individuals, 58.9% are adults over the age of 18 years, 38.2% are undetermined and there is only one individual under the age of 18 years. The majority (61.8%) of the graves are located within 0.5 km of the farm mound while 26.3% are beyond the 1-kilometer radius. As can be gleaned from this part of the description, already the general patterns are presenting themselves.

As expected, the majority of the graves here contain horse remains 70.6%; 17.6% had dog remains; and 11.8% had both dog and horse remains. Only one grave containing dog remains, either horse and dog or dog, was located outside the 1-kilometer radius, while all of the others were within the 0.5-kilometer radius. The position of those graves with only horse remains was much more varied and reflects the patterns of distribution generally seen in the other areas of analyses.

The graves that contained dog remains seem to have recognizable patterns. For instance, as can be seen in Fig. 5.4 below, those with only dog remains did not contain

artifacts from more than three categories and domestic and miscellaneous & fragments were the most common. Only one of these graves contained artifacts from the weapons category. These graves seem to have a home-based quality to them as they are mostly within the 0.5-km radius and there is not much variation between them in landscape properties. The artifacts too, seem to lean towards activities that might be done more at “home” – there is a spindle whorl, a wool comb and a sickle among this small group of graves; and, although gaming pieces can obviously be taken along on any journey to pass the time, there is also one grave here with 19 gaming pieces, which is also an activity to be done at home during those long winters.

Those graves that contained both horse and dog remains also had similarities. Artifacts from the weapon category were found in three of the four graves and for the most part these graves were not overly prestigious. With the exception of grave no. 70, even though a few had prestigious items and artifacts from up to four categories, these graves with both animal remains do not have any substantial wealth or other indicators of social position. The burials in this section are all within the 0.5-km radius and three of the four are situated below the farm mound elevation, while one is equal to the farm mound.

In these two divisions where dog remains are present, it can be seen that the burials are a bit low-keyed and close to home – physically and mentally.

Graves containing only horse remains present a very different picture. Approximately, 33.3% of these graves were located outside of the 1-kilometer radius, and another 16.7% were located between 0.5 and 1.0 kilometers away from the farm mound. Distance is more recognized with horse inclusions. Also, those individuals with only

horse remains also had artifacts from up to six categories. As expected, horse equipment was found in two-thirds of these graves. Artifacts of adornment and commerce are also present in these graves, but were oddly enough hardly present in those with dog remains.

Clearly there are very prestigious and probably high-ranking graves in this dataset without animal inclusions, however, there seems to be a scale when animals are considered as part of the assemblage and horse inclusions appear to be somewhat more prestigious than dog remains – since they are included in the more prestigious graves. Also, burials with horse remains seem to reflect mobility, during life and in death by having greater distances from farms, being part of more diverse assemblages which include commerce – an obvious connection with trade (local or abroad).

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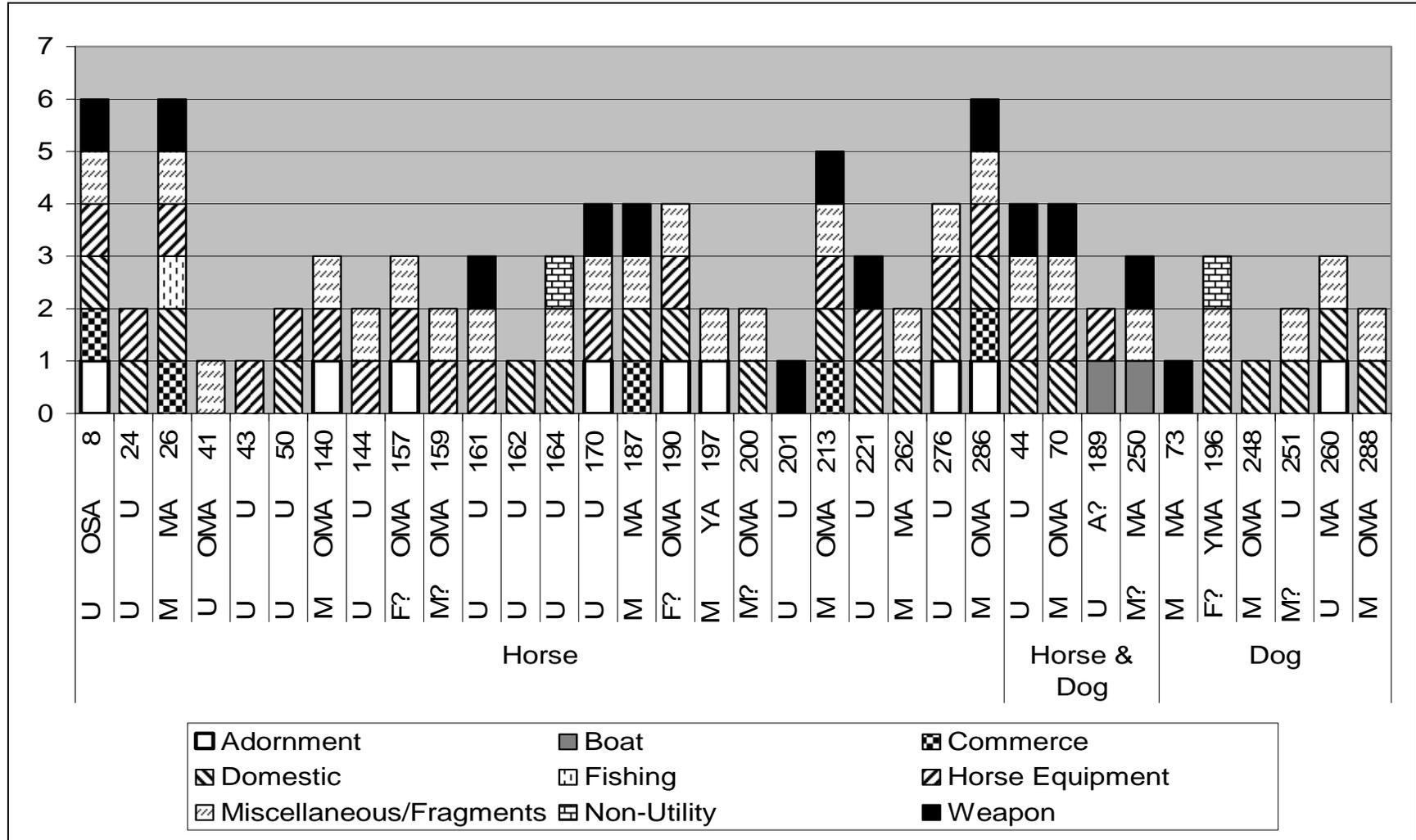


Fig. 5.4 Located analyzed human skeletal remains, artifact and animal inclusions using NAT values by category.

## **5.12. The View from Within**

In combining the landscape features discussed here and factoring in the information previously analyzed with respect to what was buried in the graves, the remainder of this chapter focuses on recreating the possible perception of the burial landscape in pre-Christian Viking Iceland. This was done by connecting these landscapes to the 104 burial sites and to the graves at each site so as to take into consideration the various internal qualities referred to in Chapter 4 and above.

When reintroducing the inclusions within the burial sites, it becomes necessary once again to indicate the difference between the individual graves and the burial sites. The 104 burial sites that were located were matched to specific grave data, thus providing 198 graves that could be used for analysis. As with earlier analyses, the total number of burial sites and graves change accordingly when combined with the skeletal remains, artifact inclusions and animal inclusions.

### ***5.12.1. The Placement of Grave Goods***

In this portion of the analyses, the artifacts which were associated with located graves were placed into the landscape to better understand whether or not the choice of burial placement had anything to do with artifact inclusions or, more specifically, the social position of the individuals in the graves. (See Map 17) It was expected that those perceived as being wealthy might have more Vast views, as they seem to be more prestigious or that they would oversee their holdings marking the boundary against newcomers. This last function is difficult to suggest since the general design of the Icelandic burials are not of imposing burial monuments, but rather less obtrusive memories in the landscape. One exception was the cremation burial in *Mosfellsbær* where the partially man-made large ship-shaped mound is indeed imposing.

The results were very different than expected. Although no overall pattern could be discerned, there were some discernable tendencies from group-to-group. The Vast view group (63.6%) was mostly found in the birch and water environments and had 90.9% of their individuals elevated and 45.5% near waterways. There were about 45.4% with barely any grave goods while only 36.4% had quality and quantity in the form of numerous articles of adornment (Gr. nos. 68 and 260) and weapons (Gr. nos. 70 and 81). Grave no. 260 also contained a wool comb, the only “labor” item found in this group. All of these individuals had a view of the sea.

The Moderate view group had 81.3% of their individuals located in the birch and water environments, 31.3% on elevated landscapes and 43.8% near waterways. In this group there were more individuals with multiple artifact categories, however, only 25% had somewhat prestigious inclusions. In this group, there are at least three graves with items of labor (Gr. nos. 26-fishing and vise, 47-sickle, 162-sickle). About 87.5% of these individuals had a view of the sea.

The Limited view group also had about 84.3% of their individuals located in the birch and water environments, 52.9% on elevated landscapes and 31.4% near waterways. There were individuals with one or only a few artifact categories as well as a few with five or six. However, almost 21.6% stood out with somewhat prestigious burials, especially in the number of boat burials in this group. Four of the eight recorded boat burials were found with a very limited view, two steatite vessels and 19 gaming pieces were in this group as well. There were five with labor items (Gr. nos. 24-weaving implement, 200-spit, 284-spindle whorl, 290-slag, 296-spit). Approximately 68.6% had a view of the sea.

Looking at the analyzed human skeletal remains in the landscape in Chapter 4 shed light on the sex-based duality of the Viking period in Iceland by enumerating characteristics which were potentially divided between the sexes. Also, the skeletal remains provided insight into the social groupings based on age. The artifacts, however, made it possible to shed light on social groupings within the society as well as burial customs that appear to be based on factors other than materiality alone. When brought into the landscape, the artifacts were able to shed light on the fact that position in the landscape more than likely serves the purpose of defining property, but that having a large, expansive view was not as important as having a view of the sea, which was a very desirable trait in burial positioning.

#### ***5.12.2. Site Placement, Gender and Age***

Despite very little prior research on this particular subject, it was hoped that including locational data for the burial sites would illuminate gender and age roles and household relations. It was believed that by comparing the elevations of the burial sites to the farm sites, differential treatment based on age or sex would come to light. With only the elevations noted, it seemed that this could be the case. (Maher 2007; Maher 2004a, 2004b) Preliminary results noted that males had a wider range of possible burial placement. They were found above, equal to or below the farmhouse. Females were located only at levels below the associated farmhouse. Those who could be aged and were buried either above or equal to the farmhouse were mostly adults. It was postulated that burial site elevation might reflect an individual's position within the hierarchy of the household. It was also thought that distance in the landscape might represent the distinctions between those individuals from the private sphere and those from the public sphere. Finally, it was considered whether or not these differences indicated binary

gender divisions or the overlapping of gender roles.

At the completion of the analysis, the image of the burials changed drastically. Burial elevation relative to farmhouse elevation did not appear to indicate social hierarchy or household position. There seems to have been a societal preference for having burial sites placed beneath the level of the associated farmhouse, though there were a number of individuals above or equal to it. What is particularly interesting is that the majority of those placed at elevations equal to or above the farmhouse elevation had very few inclusions. Nevertheless, there were six burial sites not below the farmhouse that were quite impressive, containing many artifacts, or artifacts of prestige, and animal inclusions. Only two were identifiable. One was an Older Sub-Adult and the other a Younger Sub-Adult. In the others both age and sex were undetermined.

Only six contained animals and the rest were quite unremarkable with only a few artifacts of necessity. Since the majority were unimpressive, it is possible that the burial site elevation was negatively correlated with social status so that an elevated position did not indicate power or status at all.

Although it might seem that this portion of the study yielded little or no information, this is not completely the case. The data on hand indicated that none of the identified females were buried at elevations equal to or above the farm house elevation while males were. This difference suggests there was a more constrained burial rite for females, regardless of their position within the community.

It is also worth noting that four of the six most impressive graves were located at elevations equal to the farmhouse. As previously discussed, the *equal to* designation may not carry any weight and may actually be a continuation of the below level category

while those at higher elevations were deliberately elevated. With this in mind, the two remaining graves with impressive grave goods were analyzed further. The first (Gr. no. 61) was discovered in 1876. It was eroded and there is no mention of skeletal remains in the report, only animal remains and a quantity of impressive artifacts were noted. Upon further investigation by Sigurður Vigfússon, it was suggested that there were actually two graves, a male and female, identified by artifact associations. (Friðriksson 2000:559) The other grave (Gr. no. 284) was excavated by Matthías Þórðarsson in 1938 and 1942. The burial was surrounded by a low, circular wall (18.5m D) and contained two oval brooches, a trefoil brooch, forty beads and bead fragments, a steatite spindle-whorl and other items. This was obviously the grave of one with an elevated social position.

This grave could have been an anomaly. Its construction was quite impressive and it contained quality grave goods, although, not necessarily in quantity. This person might have acquired a certain degree of respect which was reflected in the burial design and placement. As noted earlier in Chapter 2, the majority of Burial Sites were of very modest construction. It is just as likely that this burial site was not associated with the farmhouse recorded with it – it is within the one-kilometer range, but more than 500 meters from the presumed associated farmhouse so this may have belonged to a different farmhouse complex altogether, where it was not relatively elevated.

If the outlier is removed momentarily, the remainder of the graves located above the farm elevation are all unremarkable. The possibility of reverse social position could be postulated. There is also the option that this might indicate that the family preferred not to look upon such a burial, possibly indicating someone of lower social standing or even more likely a person who had shamed the family in some way. A person who had

lost his standing with the family, however, was still family. The burials had definite Norse qualities thereby dismissing the idea of their being slave burials, though not eliminating the possibility of their being servants.

There were noticeable differences in overall site location between the sexes. Males were more likely to be placed on features somewhat elevated in their surroundings and females were more likely to be placed along waterways. Such tendencies may reflect part of their worldview and possibly prepare the individuals for their final initiation through the burial ritual. Or, it is quite possible that there is a suggestion of male dominance represented in the male burials while female burials have a somewhat different symbolism.

What also came to light was the fact that when children were still under the care of their family, their burials reflected their low status in their lack of grave goods, but at the same time reflected their strong familial ties by being securely placed in containers within the “family” cemetery. Their rite of passage during the years between 13 and 25, was also revealed since afterwards they were regarded as adults who were expected to earn their own status. This was revealed not only by grave goods but also by the landscape associations in the burial rites of this society.

Clearly there was differential treatment based on both age and sex. Such differences were sometimes subtle in the Icelandic burial record, but were indeed present. The next step in this project was to leave the individuals behind and understand the societal cosmology as symbolized by how burial sites were incorporated into the Icelandic landscape. The overall patterns of site locations and artifact locations were able to provide a new set of possibilities for some of the open questions by using a

quantitative, processual approach.

From this, it would seem that gender differentiation and social groups are indeed present in the burial ritual in both inclusions as well as placement in the landscape. However, social status presented in the form of grave goods was not differentiated in the landscape, although there may indeed have been very subtle differences between social groups, the evidence leans more towards equality in burial placement with respect to wealth.

### **5.13. The Worldview of the Icelandic Pre-Christians**

*“He who does not know what the world is does not know where he is, and he who does not know for what purpose the world exists, does not know who he is, nor what the world is.”*

*(Aurelius 167:Book 8)*

Ideology as much designed as it is the designer. The Viking cosmology created a mirrored portal between Society and Mythology in that the behavior, skills, loyalties, bonds and good and bad qualities that are seen in the women and men of the society are also seen in the many gods and goddesses – in fact the gods and goddesses are simply larger-than-life individuals with larger-than-life human flaws. (Harrison 2000:21) Unlike the modern view that there is one perfect supreme being who created the world for humans to inhabit, and where humans will always be imperfect in comparison, the Viking cosmology was based on the belief that the gods had good qualities as well as faults, and both had a direct impact on the humans co-habiting with them. Humans admired the overblown strengths and weaknesses of their gods because they were guided by them in their own pursuit of life. The gods designed and created the world that humans now

inhabited and humans looked to the gods to protect that world as long as possible, knowing that one day not only would their own lives come to an end, but eventually, their universe would cease to exist in its current form and a rebirth would usher in a new cosmos. The Vikings knew what their world was and understood their own purpose in it. This understanding enabled them to live for the moment, seize opportunity and live for today as 'tomorrow they would die'. Their burial rituals belong to that category of rites about which all of society agrees to its meaning, in this case that the deceased were passing from one state to another. This belief is shared with most of the world. (Alekshin 1983:137) It is from this that we can understand the symbolic aspects of the burial record.

It is often argued that the cognitive and symbolic cannot be studied in archaeological terms due to their abstract nature. (for such arguments, see Binford 1983; Flannery and Marcus 1998; Hodder 1995; Hodder and Hutson 2004; Leone 1998; Trigger 1989; Whitley 1998b) The goal here was to connect the material remains to the ritual. Making that link depends not only on the placement of the individuals in their surroundings, but also on the myths and ancient texts where the symbolic meanings of the material remains were explained. It is in this way we discover that the burial mounds, with their artifacts and animal inclusions, are symbolically guiding the dead to the afterlife. (Hodder 1995) With the right tools, there is at least hope of providing insight into the mental processes behind the material remains that we study today. Symbolic and cognitive thought are visible in more than tool-making and craft activities. They are also very much a part of the ritual behavior of a society and determine the forms for developing, maintaining and practicing funerary rites. It was believed here, that by

understanding the burial sites in their perceived landscapes and seascapes, this study would be able to apply the data to a GIS to draw attention to possible interactions and connections between the cosmology of the society and the landscape.

The first connection brought to light during analysis was the possibility that a connection with the sea was symbolically created by certain aspects of the burial sites other than the artifact inclusions. Thus, the Icelandic worldview was embedded in the location of the sites and reflected ties not only to where the Icelanders came from, but also where they believed they would be going, thus closing their circle of life.

As described in Chapter 2, the Norse were masters of the sea and were quite talented at fishing as well. The sea was their life, even though they were also bound to the land. The sea provided opportunities to gain prestige, power and a reputation for generosity. The Icelanders, in particular, literally came from the sea; all the first settlers immigrated to Iceland by boat – making a perilous journey to a strange and uncertain new land by crossing the sea to a new life. Equally, in their worldview the way to their afterlife was by water. From the Prose Eddas scholars have interpreted many of these afterworldly places as being in the vicinity of water. Whether near a river or a sea, water was a common feature of the afterlife. (Anderson 1888; Cotterell 2000; Litchfield 1890; Young 1964)

## **5.14. Ships and Boats in Scandinavian Prehistory**

### ***5.14.1. The Study of the Ships and Boats***

Approximately 71% of the earth's surface is covered by water. Thus, it is not surprising that various cultures and societies through time and space have not only learned to navigate through the water, but also developed strong networks, both practical and symbolic, beyond the waterways during prehistory and history. (Haasum 1995) The

chronicles and research of such networks around the globe are too extensive to be recapitulated at this time, thus the focus here will be mostly on the Scandinavian region. One way to research the ties societies had with their watery surroundings is by understanding how they “conquered” or viewed water which will be approached here through the history of the boat or ship and their connection to burial rituals.

During the Mesolithic and Neolithic periods in this region, various images of boats were carved into rocks, a number of which also included figures of humans, animals and possible seasonal maps. Many of these carvings have been found near water, although some are located within burial cists and further inland. (Bradley, et al. 2002; Helskog 1999; Lahelma 2005) They have been connected to the cultures in the far north of Scandinavia as well as those further south in modern Denmark, southeast Norway and Sweden. Studies show that they are of a communicative nature and function as commonly accepted signs among people of a similar culture. (Kobylinski 1995) Also, they are believed to convey a shared cognitive map of a shared landscape. (Helskog 1999) The relationship seems to be with more than simply the visual symbolism as the connection with water evokes an auditory association which conveys symbolic power of the natural strengths and abilities of water. (Goldhahn 2002) Besides the rock art, there are instances where dug-out canoes were buried but whether these were proper burials or sacrifices cannot be determined. More than likely some were being used as a covering rather than a container as the canoes were upside-down. (Skaarup 1995:56)

Rock art was prevalent in the Bronze age throughout the region. A most impressive image in Rogaland, Southwest Norway, was carved into a cliff overlooking water where the natural contours of the rock created an image of the waves in the water

on which the boats were sailing. These boats were also symbolically sailing in and out of a large crevice in the rock and similar images with boats emerging or departing through crevices are found within burial cists. Thus there is a clear synergy between the ship and the dead. (Bradley, et al. 2002) Although the ship imagery in rock art continued in areas of Scandinavia throughout the Bronze age (Crumlin-Pedersen and Thye 1995; Østmo 1991), new methods of conveying this connection begin to appear. For instance there are more than 500 images preserved on bronzes, 350 at the National Museum of Denmark. Such images have been noted mostly on razors, but also on knives, tweezers, necklace pendants, swords and hanging bowls, among other things. (Kaul 1995:60, 2005) Runestones depicting ships during this period were another new method of conveying the symbolic and functional importance of these images. (Müller-Wille 1995:100-109) Finally, a very strong connection between the ship and burial can be seen when reviewing stone-ships or stone alignments in the shape of ships placed in the landscape over burials. There are at least 2000 examples in existence, but only a fraction have been investigated or properly surveyed and only about 35 can be attributed to the Bronze age, the rest belonging to the Iron age. (See, for example, Capelle 1995:73-74; Skoglund 2008)

At the beginning of the Iron age, the appearance of stone ships diminishes, but in some areas rock art continued until the pre-Roman Iron Age (500-1 BCE). However, during the first millenium, the stone ships and boats once again began to appear. (Crumlin-Pedersen 1995; Crumlin-Pedersen and Thye 1995; Kaul 2005) The majority of them can be placed between the 6th and 11th centuries. (Capelle 1995:74) The images found on the Gotland stones (Ellmers 1995) and the great and prestigious ship burials of Sutton Hoo, the Vendel cemetery, the Valsgarde, Ladby and Oseberg ships, among

others, usually lead people to believe that ships and boats were not as common or as important at other times. On the contrary, there were at least 43 boat graves from the Roman Iron Age at the Slusegaard cemetery (Crumlin-Pedersen 1995:87); and amazingly, boat carvings were etched onto the Medieval churches of Gotland nearest to the sea as a form of graffiti. (Haasum 1995:241-245) (See also the discussion on the subject in (Christensen 1995; le Bon 1995).

Clearly images of ships or boats from the Mesolithic through the Medieval period can be found in many contexts and in many forms throughout Scandinavia. Their meanings, symbology and use inarguably differed through space and time. However, there must have been both a functional and symbolic significance for each society at each time. The goal here is to present some possible meanings of the connections between ship, burial and water in the context of Viking period pre-Christian Icelandic society.

#### ***5.14.2. The Practical, the Political and the Symbolic***

These ship and boat burials can be divided into three categories of meaning: functional, political and symbolic. (Ballard, et al. 2003; Bradley, et al. 2002; Haasum 1995; Kaul 2005; Kobylinski 1995; Müller-Wille 1995) The functional is the use of a boat or ship in a burial setting solely for the purpose of being a container for the dead. In other words, the vessel was used in lieu of a proper coffin. The early Christian cemetery of Sebbesund in Denmark seems to present a good example of boats being used as containers; and particularly not as a mark of high social status. The boats in this case seemed, rather, to be a sign of the poor, especially when more than one individual shared a boat. The rest of the cemetery was Christian with uniform burials and no grave goods. (Birkedahl and Johansen 1995)

The political category is related to communication and transportation networks as

well as economic roles. Burials with boats or ships in this category were conveying power through their trade connections or through ownership of a vessel which indicated success in various networks. There are many examples indicating that the inclusion of a boat was clearly a sign of wealth and status as do the various ship burials of Ladby, Gokstad, Tune, in Scandinavia and the two very similar kingly burials of Hedeby and Sutton Hoo (mound 2) in Britain. (Carver 1995; Lincoln 1995; Wamers 1995) The Hedeby ship burial, was a display of status that went counter to religious practice as the lord or king was buried with retainers, including a cupbearer but in Norse belief as part of the Valhalla ritual, the dead warrior would be greeted at the great hall by a Valkyrie offering a cup to drench his thirst.

The symbolic meanings were easily recognized and understood by others within the same social sphere and these messages might have been cosmological or religious in nature. The symbols referred to conceptions of the afterlife or an affiliation with a religious cult. Although these arguments can be difficult to prove at times, they were clearly illustrated in the Gotland picture stones as well as on the various tapestries found within the Oseberg ship burial. (Crumlin-Pedersen 1995; Crumlin-Pedersen and Thye 1995; Ellmers 1995; Ingstad 1995)

More than likely the majority of the meanings of the vessels fell into all three categories, functional, political and symbolic, and even more likely these were inseparable in the minds of the group to which they belong. (Carver 1995; Crumlin-Pedersen 1995; Ellmers 1995; Kaul 2005; Müller-Wille 1995) Their long-standing separation has been a part of the archaeological interpretations of ships and seafaring for generations, where each seems mutually exclusive. (Ballard, et al. 2003:396)

When an actual ship (usually described as being at least 20m in length) was buried, it was clearly not functional as it takes so much manpower to dig a hole large enough to bury such a vessel that it became impractical. (Birkedahl and Johansen 1995) When the ship was set atop the burial chamber, it cannot be termed a “container” so there was nothing functional in that situation either. (Wamers 1995) Therefore, the majority of the Viking Age ships more than likely signified social standing and religious symbolism. In the later discussion on the Icelandic corpus, this will be reassessed with respect to boats, not ships, as none of the boat graves in Iceland contained ships.

### ***5.14.3. The Meaning of Water***

Discussing the vessels in relationship to the burials leaves out their purpose. What is a boat or a ship? First and foremost, it is indeed a vehicle for transportation. Whether seen as political or symbolic, once it was placed into a burial setting and removed from its intended use, it became a symbol. Whether that symbol meant social status or economic success, the vehicle to get to the otherworld or an affiliation with cult worship, it was conveying a message. (Kaul 1995; Kobylinski 1995; Müller-Wille 1995; Østmo 1991; Schjødt 1995; Varenius 1995; Wamers 1995) However, the vessel was not the only symbol being represented. Here we discuss putting water back into the burial ritual so that the larger picture may be better understood.

The placement of the Stone age rock art near water for the connection with the water as well as its sound (Bradley, et al. 2002; Goldhahn 2002; Helskog 1999), the various types of artifact offerings in lakes and bogs (Cooney 2003; Megaw and Megaw 1989; Rieck 1995; Wait 1995; Webster 1995), the various studies on the importance of seascapes (Bertelsen 1999; Cooney 2003; Cunliffe 2001; McNiven 2003; O’Sullivan 2003; Phillips 2003; Van de Noort 2003) and the numerous examples of boat and ship

graves already discussed above indicate that the significance was not just in the vessel, but in what the vessel was meant to do – cross water.

Water has played a part in the cosmology of many societies throughout history and prehistory. In the Bronze Age of England at Flag Fen, objects were placed into specific areas of the water as votive offerings. (Bradley 2000:49-60) Many of the most amazing Celtic artifacts were found as votive offerings in bodies of water across the Celtic world. (Megaw and Megaw 1989; Wait 1995; Webster 1995) Sea people form a subculture in seemingly similar societies because they have a very special relationship with and understanding of the sea and water. (McNiven 2003; Westerdahl 1995) These “saltwater people” know the power and strength of water, particularly the ocean with its many binary relationships: it gives life and it takes life away, it can turn an area to ruins and wash it clean, it is death and rebirth. As the Yoruba and Xhosa tribes of Africa know, water has healing powers and is a sign of fertility and life. (Lawuyi 1998)

The use of symbolism can be complicated if there is more than one system in place within a sociocultural group. As Kobylinski notes, to be relevant, research should come from a cultural context as close to the analyzed group as possible. (Kobylinski 1995:13-14) In the Viking context, the Gotland picture stones, the Oseberg tapestries and the Prose Edda remind us that to get to the otherworld, a boat is necessary. To get to Valhalla, the Thund River must be crossed; and to reach Hel, the Gjoll River must be crossed. (Ellmers 1995; Ingstad 1995; Kobylinski 1995; Young 1964) Water separates the world of the living from the world of the dead. In the crossing of such a river, the soul is in a transitional state, preparing for rebirth in the next stage of existence. For the deceased, this liminal state occurs during the journey. However, for the living, it is no

wonder that the shore or a place where the sea is visible brings together the two worlds. One of the Gotland picture stones presents the story of Sigmund and his son Sinfjötli. As Odin sails away with Sinfjötli towards Valhalla, Sigmund is left standing on the shoreline. All he could do was watch as his son sailed away and vanished into the otherworld. (Ellmers 1995:169-171; Morris and Magnusson 1888)

Throughout the Viking World, boats functioned to open up the communications network and were used for fishing activities. Also in many areas of Scandinavia, travel by sea was less time-consuming than travel over land. Thus, boats were an integral part of society. It is well-understood how such a sea-faring society was able to exploit these skills and develop various types of relationships with the east, south, west and north, particularly in their own lands. Their sea-faring adventures are well-documented in both the Icelandic Sagas, and historical documents, of which the accounts of Ibn Fadlan and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles are but two. Therefore, their ideological connection to the sea and boats is obvious.

In the political or economic sense, water represented the networks that helped to achieve and maintain social status in a society. Ships and seafaring have always been associated with social, economic and political factors. (Haasum 1995:145) In fact, boats and ships played a significant role in many societies in many time periods. The use of boats has created bonds between coastal communities, making them more similar to each other than to those communities further inland (Ballard, et al. 2003; Chapman and Gearey 2004; Haasum 1995; Johnstone 1989; Kobylinski 1995; McNiven 2003) “In some areas the sea is not just a means of contact but central to the human way of life.” (Parker Pearson 2001:323) Archaeologically, boats and ships have been shown to represent trade

and social networks on the one hand, but also ritual symbolism on the other. It is on this that the remainder of this research is focused. Thus an individual who had prospered by such networks could complete this connection by being able to continue this role in the afterlife.

In many of the examples here, we see the area between land and water as a liminal zone – where the dead pass from the land of the living to the land of the dead. The deceased though buried on land, were prepared to cross over the water, by either the boat, ship, stone ship or rock art within their burial chamber.

#### ***5.14.4. The Viking Cosmology Represented in Icelandic Burials***

My contention then, is that boat burials should be viewed not only materially, but that the image of the boat or ship represented more than a trading system. In the burial record, it deliberately represents the symbolic connection with Norse mythology and cosmology during the Viking period. (Adams 2001; Crumlin-Pedersen and Thye 1995; Müller-Wille 1995)

No ship graves are found in the Icelandic context as none of the boats are more than 20 m in length. The majority of the boats in the graves are at least 5 m in length indicating that they were not simply containers for the dead. As can be seen in Vol. II, Tab. 5.5, in Volume II, there are quite a few artifacts associated with the boat graves, with only one exception, Burial Site no. 88. (See Map 18 for boat burials in the Pre-Christian Icelandic landscape.)

None of the boat-graves in pre-Christian Iceland come close to the wealth or symbolism presented in the Oseberg ship grave. Although that grave more than likely contained a shaman and possibly a religious cult leader whose followers did not want to see her sail off because of her importance to the community (Ingstad 1995), there are no

burials anywhere close in scale or similarity in the Icelandic corpus. In Iceland, however, the placement of grave goods with the deceased did follow the ritual symbolism discussed above and clearly displayed the political, economical and spiritual meanings of these boat graves.

As briefly discussed in Chapter 2, boat burials do have prestigious qualities, however, their appearance in the burial record makes them symbolic as well. Since only a relatively small number of boat burials were found there, it is primarily in the surrounding landscapes that cosmological and religious connections can be discovered. Through the Icelandic burial record we can see that even though there were relatively few boat burials, it was their connection to water that was significant. Just as the boats indirectly evoked views of the sea, connection between burials and water was also indirect though a view of the sea was an essential element in the choice of position for the burial in the landscape rarely was a burial placed directly at or in the water. (Maher 2008) Although many of the boat burials were placed very near to water, not all were directly at the water feature. The boat burial at Litli-Nupar was not directly on the water. It was up a slope, in a valley with a large river down below, the river and the sea were seen clearly, but the burial cannot be described as being on the river. What came to light in this analysis is that not all were able to take part in the boat burial ritual. The reason for this is not addressed or considered here. What was considered is that regardless of one's position in this society, the belief in the otherworld and the journey from the land of the living to the land of the dead was indicated by the burial placement of all of the located graves. Although not all could enjoy the luxury of providing a vessel to the otherworld for the dead, they could point them into the right direction. However, by

analyzing viewsheds and burial placement, the specific cosmological connection emerges: the dead were shown the way to the watery path to their afterlife.

### **5.15. Conclusions**

Clearly the landscape plays a bigger role than previously considered in burial site placement during the pre-Christian Viking period in Iceland. Although these cannot be confirmed in other parts of the Viking World during this time, it is evident that in Iceland there were perceptible differences in the burial rites that were determined by age, gender roles and social spheres. They also reflect Viking cosmology and the differences in the cosmology as they pertained to the various age groups and the sexes. Adding the landscape into the burial record also reveals that although boat graves were few in Iceland, the symbolism was broader than that of the physical boat alone once its connection to water is better understood.