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

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Anthropology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2009
This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Anthropology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

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The pre-Christian period in Iceland dates from the settlement in the latter half of the 9th century to about the year 1000 C.E. The burials from that time are found across Iceland, singly or in group cemeteries. Prior research on the burials has ranged from surveying, excavating and cataloging them, to comparative analyses of the grave designs and grave inclusions with respect to other contemporary areas of the Viking World. Separately, various types of skeletal analyses have been conducted to assess the sex, age and pathology of the individuals; and also a focus on the origins of the individuals is in progress through the use of strontium isotope analysis. However, little attention has been paid to accumulating the various data sets on the subject and interpreting them in an anthropological context in order to provide an image of the society who created the data in the first place. Such a study yields information regarding differences based on gender and age. Even less has been done with respect to understanding the role that the landscape and seascape played in burial placement and its relationship to cosmology. By reevaluating the grave inclusions, skeletal remains, artifact and animal inclusions, and considering the landscape in which they were originally placed, this study was able to
recognize social positions based on gender and age within and between the burials, and also revealed the significance in the placement of the graves. The gender and age differences led to understanding the social dimensions in Iceland during this time; while placement shed light on the cosmology of the society. All of this underscored the fact that Iceland was indeed a ‘new land.’
This work is dedicated to:

My dad, Charlie Maher, 
you waited so long for this, I wish you 
were here to celebrate with me.

And, to my son, Kjartan, 
who gave me the oomph to move forward.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Since the beginning of this endeavor, I have had an enormous amount of support from colleagues, peers, family and friends, not to mention the many individuals along the way who offered help and the many funding agencies. My committee was made up of many individuals who over the years have provided me with the skills, intellectual stimulation and constructive criticism to accomplish this feat. Greg Johnson found a way to calm me down for my second examination and I have been able to keep my head in that space since that time. Tom McGovern gave me my start in Icelandic archaeology and has been a major influence on subsequent projects, contacts and grants. Sophia Perdikaris has guided me through the long dissertation process and has been an inspiration in making family and research compatible. If it were not for Christian Keller’s very constructive and supportive, yet hard-hitting and expert criticism, my dissertation would still be in the writing stage. As you said, it was the hardest thing to let go of some of the work and weed out the garden, but it worked and brought up the quality and focus. And, Julie Bond and Steve Dockrill, who over the years have been my biggest supporters and friends. I have learned so much from both of you – in the field, about archaeology and in conducting research.

I need to thank Mjöll Snaesdóttir for her friendship and support. Without her basement, her substantial knowledge on Icelandic archaeology and history and her patience in helping me with Icelandic, I would not have come this far. Of course, I must also thank Fornleifastofnun Íslands and everyone at the Institute. Not only have you become family, but a rich source of excellent, high quality archaeological data. Hildur has been especially helpful for all her help with the skeletal material, Guðrún with the...
artifacts, Howell, Oscar and Gavin have always provided insightful conversation and
discussions on the archaeology and landscape of Iceland. I learned a lot about Viking
beads from Elín, Oddgeir for countless discussions on databases and organization, Ólóf
for making every trip possible; and I will always remember the parts of my burial survey
trip when Adolf and I worked closely together, those times were the most enjoyable part
of the survey. I thank Orri for his input on my background and theory chapters. Also, all
of the many wonderful people who I met and worked with through the Institute who have
helped to make this possible – Garðar, Birna, Sirry, Ágústa – everyone! A special thanks
to Ellen DeRiso for all her help and guidance throughout my graduate studies. Thank
you Guðmundur Ólafsson of the National Museum of Iceland for both access and
assistance with locating the original burial site records. As well as the many farmers who
allowed me to survey their lands and took the time to explain their farm, the history of it
and the burial sites on their farms over excellent cups of kaffé.

The American Scandinavian Foundation provided me with the best opportunity to
collect data, conduct research and better understand the Icelandic society by providing
me with the funding to remain in Iceland for a year. I also would like to thank Ævar
Pétursen and Guðmundur Guðjónsson of Nátturufraðistofnun Íslands for providing me
with contemporary landscape data as well as the estimated landscape created by Eyþór
Einarsson and Einar Gíslason in 2001. Also, to Sigmar Metusalemmsson and Einar
Gétarsson from RALA (Soil Conservation Service Agricultural Research Institute) for
their assistance with my goals for GIS and for providing me with many coverages useful
to my landscape research. I also thank Nátturstofa Vestfirðir which provided me with
numerous opportunities to better understand the archaeology and landscape of the
Northwest and Ragnar Edvardsson for bringing me back to Iceland over and over. Finally, I must thank the North Atlantic Biocultural Organization (NABO), CUNY and the Leverheulme Trust for providing funding over the years and including me in the many projects taking place in the North Atlantic region which have provided me the opportunity to gain experience and knowledge of the Viking World.

A very special thank you must go to Bernice Kurchin for her endless hours of emotional and intellectual support as a proofreader, editor, organizer, intellectual sounding board, mentor and most importantly as a friend. This was a long time coming and you certainly contributed your share. I will never forget that.

Finally, for the endless and unconditional support from my parents, Charlie and Peggy, and my sister Barbara and Joe too, who have believed in me this entire time and have put up with my crazy schedule; and to my son, Kjartan Cuinn, who has had to share his mom with a computer and a giant albatross – I thank you from the bottom of my heart. I also thank my friends, who are still my friends after all these years of a crazy schedule in the graduate program: Chelsea, Dave, Resa, Jen, Ramona, Debbie and the Geeks and Lizzie as well as countless other friends who have always been proud and supportive. To those many whom are not mentioned here, your help is not forgotten and is greatly appreciated.
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