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[229] CHAPTER 20

‘WARRIOR GRAVES’? THE WEAPON BURIAL RITE IN VIKING AGE BRITAIN AND IRELAND

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In the winter of 1846–7, the Danish archaeologist J J A Worsaae was in Dublin. While he was unimpressed by the quality of much of the antiquarian research he found there (Henry 1995, 1, 13), he did have an opportunity to examine a remarkable assemblage of artefacts, principally weapons, which had been discovered during the recent excavation of a railway cutting at Kilmainham, then on the western edge of the city. When invited to address the Royal Irish Academy on the hotly debated ‘three age system’ (Rowley-Conwy 2007), Worsaae took the opportunity to expand his discussion of the Iron Age to include the Kilmainham assemblage and some related material. These artefacts, he asserted, were ‘Danish, or rather Norwegian’ in origin and ‘perhaps the very weapons by which Norsemen had shed Irish blood’. Their ‘buried owners’, in turn, could be equated with ‘a small number of vikings from Scandinavia’ (Worsaae 1847, 331–333).

Worsaae’s work was to have a profound influence on the study of the Viking Age not just in Ireland but across these islands, particularly after the publication of an English translation of his *Minder om de Danske og Normændene i England, Skotland og Irland* in 1852. While Worsaae went out of his way to stress some of the more positive aspects of the Scandinavian presence in Britain and Ireland, it is interesting to note that his few references to ‘Viking’ graves consistently stress their military character. Those buried with weapons, or indeed in mounds, in these islands were self-evidently ‘vikings’ and ‘warriors’ (Worsaae 1852, 242, 252, 328). In Ireland, these ‘Viking’ graves have been consistently interpreted as those of ‘warriors’ and as potential evidence for raiding activity ever since. By the early

20th century, this interpretative model had become so strong that it was even applied to women's graves (ie those containing oval brooches). Early discussion of the woman's grave found close to the beach at Ballyholme, Co. Down in 1903, for example, linked it to a raid on a nearby monastery at Bangor that was recorded in AD 824 (Cochrane 1906, 452). Despite a few dissenting voices, notably Sheehan (1988, 68–70), even some of the most recently discovered burials have been called 'warrior graves' and linked to a possible failed 'raiding party' (Simpson 2005, 53). This approach is in no way [229/300] confined to Ireland. Since the 1960s, those few 'Viking' graves which have been identified in eastern and southern England, from Repton, Derbyshire (Biddle and Kjølbye-Biddle 1992, 40), to Reading, Berkshire (Graham-Campbell 2001, 115), have been linked to the perambulations of the Great Army and the deaths of some of its less fortunate members. In Scotland, commentators have been a little more willing to acknowledge the relationship between burial and settlement, but the martial character of these graves has been emphasized by many commentators, beginning with Anderson (1874, 562) and continued by prominent figures such as Eldjárn (1984, 8), who suggested that the graves of the Western Isles at least represented 'real Vikings in the true sense of the word ... [unlikely] to stay in these small unassuming islands'. On the Isle of Man too, while many furnished burials have been linked to settlement rather than more transient activity, those with weapons are nonetheless seen as 'warrior's graves' (Bersu and Wilson 1966, xi).

For more than 150 years, antiquarians and archaeologists across these islands have based their interpretations both on the surviving historical record and on the empirical evidence provided by 'Viking' graves themselves. The various recensions of the Irish annals and the Anglo-Saxon chronicle record and arguably emphasize the military exploits of lay patrons and their opponents, and the compilers of the *Cogadh Gáedhel re Gallaibh* had even stronger motivations for emphasizing the military character of the Viking presence in these islands (Ní Mhaonaigh 2007, 66). In their graves too, these 'Vikings' seem to have left a tangible record of their militarism. Of the 379 potential Viking Age furnished burials which were identified in a recent study of Britain and Ireland, 200 contained weapons, and of the 1154 grave goods or artefact groups identified in the same study, 366 were weapons (Harrison 2008, 65, 105). Graves containing weapons outnumber those containing oval brooches or other 'female' artefacts by almost four to one, and weapons – swords, spearheads, axeheads, arrowheads and shield

bosses – outnumber every other category of artefacts found in these ‘Viking’ graves, including dress-fasteners and jewellery. Graves, too, provide some of the best evidence for the plundering of monasteries and the wealth of these islands, even if the majority of modified ecclesiastical artefacts come from women’s graves in Norway rather than ‘Viking’ (weapon) graves in Britain or Ireland (Wamers 1998, 42, 44). Nonetheless, a superficial examination of these graves suggests that these insular Scandinavians have been caught ‘red-handed’, buried with their plunder and the weapons with which they won it, having (according to documentary sources at least) terrorized entire indigenous populations in the process. To all too many commentators, these graves represent the dead of an essentially transient population who buried their fallen before moving on to pillage other unfortunate indigenous communities elsewhere.

There have, of course, been dissenting voices. As early as 1945, Shetelig (1945, 2) argued that the ‘Viking’ graves of Britain and Ireland were actually the remains of settlers rather than raiders, and represented the first generations of incoming population groups who thought themselves here to stay. This interpretation was entirely in keeping with contemporary Scandinavian interpretations of similar graves in Norway. There, too, weapons were frequent discoveries in graves, but their occupants were rarely, if ever, seen as ‘Vikings’. Instead, they were ‘peasants’ (*bønder*) or [300/301] perhaps more accurately ‘free farmers’ (Brøgger 1929, 11–13), and these weapon graves therefore represented the backbone of Viking Age Norwegian society. While these individuals clearly had the right to carry weapons, the ‘folk weapons’ (*folkvåpn*) of the rather later Norwegian laws, and to attend local weapon musters (Solberg 1985, 68–69), their military role was generally underemphasized. Far from being seen as in any way transient, those buried in these graves have consistently been seen as firmly fixed within the landscape, buried close to the places where they had lived and died (eg Skre 2001, 10–11). On occasion, the interpretation of these graves as the product of a more or less egalitarian society creaked under the strain: Brøgger (1929, 13, 20v), for example, explained the contents of a grave from Aamot, Hedmark purely in terms of the abundance of iron in the period. Equipped with a sword, two axeheads, a spearhead, a shield boss, multiple arrowheads, a penannular brooch, a bridle, a sickle and a cauldron, this grave was more richly furnished than any in Britain or Ireland, and comments such as this inevitably

set the tone for the interpretation of all insular ‘Viking’ graves as those of individuals of relatively modest status, albeit with some minor, often local, variations (Brøgger 1929, 126–127).

The interpretation of burials with weapons as part of a widespread ‘folk custom’ came under increasing assault in the 1980s. In a detailed study of furnished graves around Sognefjord, Dommasnes (1982, 71, 73) argued that the rite was confined to a relatively small proportion of the population. While increasing numbers of artefacts corresponded to individuals of progressively higher status, all furnished graves, however modest, corresponded to individuals of ‘relatively high rank’. In 1985, Solberg published a more wide-ranging study of ‘male’ and ‘female’ burial assemblages across much of central and southern Norway. Despite using very generous definitions, she identified no more than 4692 potential burial assemblages, 3796 of which contained at least one weapon, with the remaining 833 containing one or more ‘female’ artefacts (1985, 64–65). While Hagen (1967, 397) produced a slightly higher estimate of more than 7000 graves, and Stylegar (2010, 71fn) has recently suggested a little less than 8000, these figures remain exceptionally low. If it is assumed that approximately 7500 graves represent thirty-year generations spread over a four-hundred-year period, then the population represented at any one time is little more than 564 individuals, spread across an area some 1800km from north to south (Harrison 2008, 104). Furthermore, the fact that male graves outnumber those of women by a figure approaching five to one (Solberg 1985, 66, 67) is a statistic that, if these furnished graves represented entire population groups, would give an entirely new impetus to Viking Age expansion! These statistics are, of course, a gross oversimplification which ignores both regional and chronological variations in the record. These variations, however, provide further evidence that, even allowing for the fact that an unknown proportion of furnished graves remain undiscovered, only a fraction of the Norwegian population can have been buried in this way. Both Solberg (1985, 73–74) and Dommasnes (1982, 83) concluded that these graves represented individuals with a relatively high rank or status.

Solberg went on to argue that if graves containing weapons were expressions of rank, then the number and type of weapons placed in them might well reflect variations in status among those using this burial rite. Among her ‘group one’ graves [301/302] – those containing a single weapon – she argued that individuals buried with a sword were of a higher status than those buried with one of the other ‘folk weapons’ – the spear or axe. Those in her ‘group two’, buried with two weapons, represented a higher

status again, while ‘group three’ graves, which contained all three weapons – sword, spear and axe – represented individuals of the very highest status (Solberg 1985, 66). While there were some regional variations, graves with two weapons were consistently rarer than those with one, and group three burials were the rarest of all, statistics which supported the hypothesis that these graves represented individuals of the highest status (Figure 21.1). Although Solberg’s attempts to link her three burial groups to social groups described in the Norwegian law tracts were not particularly successful, her analysis indicated that the weapons placed in Norwegian graves could be interpreted as expressions of rank rather than simple military ability, and confirmed that all such graves represented individuals of some considerable standing.

If this is the case in Norway, then it is almost certainly true for Britain and Ireland as well. Far from being the graves of ‘ordinary’ Vikings, the two hundred weapon graves identified in these islands must represent the graves of a select group, presumably individuals of relatively high rank. There are, however, some intriguing differences between the numbers and types of weapons placed in insular Viking graves, and those groups which Solberg identified in Norway (Figure 21.1). Of the insular weapon graves, 186 were suitable for direct comparison with Solberg’s findings, with 104 (56%) corresponding to her group one, 65 (35%) to her group two, and 17 (9%)

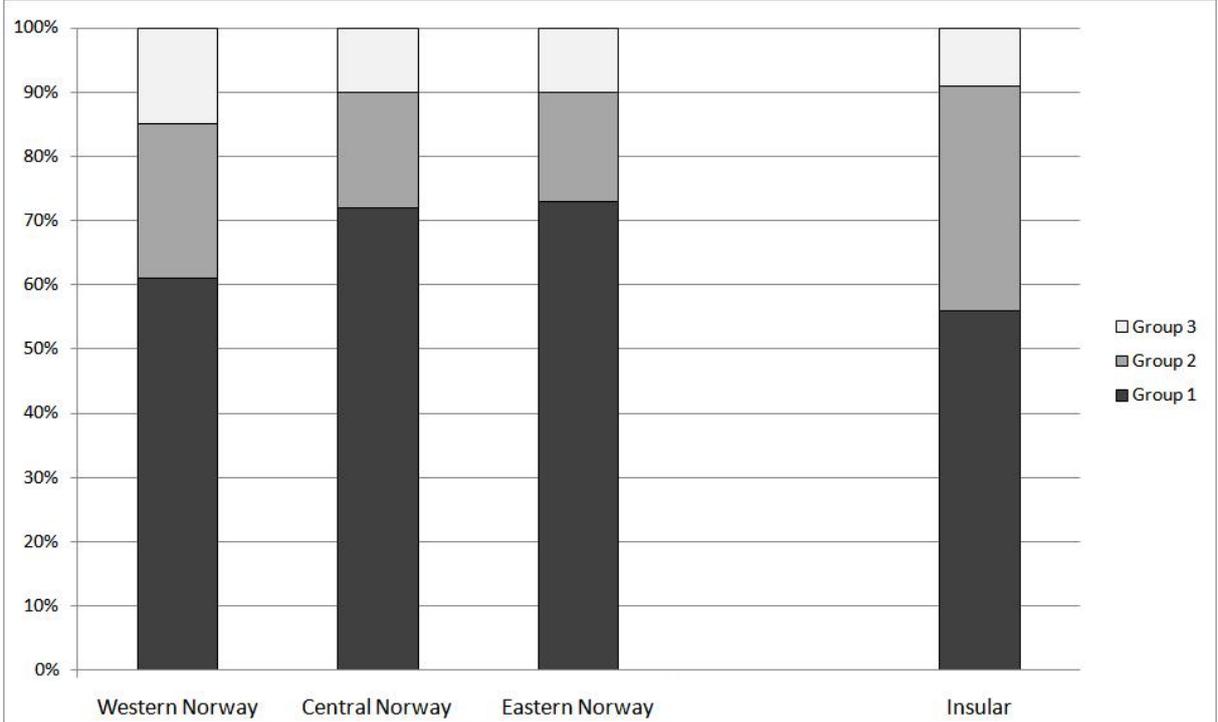


Figure 20.1 Proportions of Solberg's groups 1, 2 and 3 graves in western, central and eastern Norway, and in Britain and Ireland. Norwegian figures after Solberg (1985, figure 5)

[302/303] to her group three (Harrison 2008, 106). In Norway, on the other hand, group one graves formed somewhere between sixty-one and seventy-four percent of the total corpus, by region (Solberg 1985, 66). Individuals buried with weapons in Britain and Ireland were therefore more likely to be buried with multiple weapons than were their counterparts in Norway. There were also variations within group one. While in Norway, the majority of these graves contained an axe, and burials with swords were rarest, these statistics were completely reversed in insular contexts (Figure 21.2). Seventy-three (39% of the total) contained a single sword, while just eight (4%) contained a single axe. In Norway, the figures are 14–21% for single swords, and 28–32% for single axes (Solberg 1985, 66). As there is a general consensus that swords were the most prestigious of the early medieval weapon types (Davidson 1962, 10), these figures suggest one of two things. It may be that those whose social peers in Norway would have been buried with a single axe or spearhead, or indeed with a single weapon, were the first to abandon the weapon burial rite in Britain and Ireland. Those whose peers buried their dead with multiple weapons in Scandinavia, on the other hand, were perhaps the last to abandon the practice in these islands. Alternatively, those choosing to bury their dead with weapons in Britain and Ireland may have chosen to invest greater resources in individual burials, by depositing either more weapons or more prestigious weapons (the sword) in graves. In either case, it seems reasonable to infer that these weapon graves represent an even smaller proportion of the insular Scandinavian population than that of Norway itself.

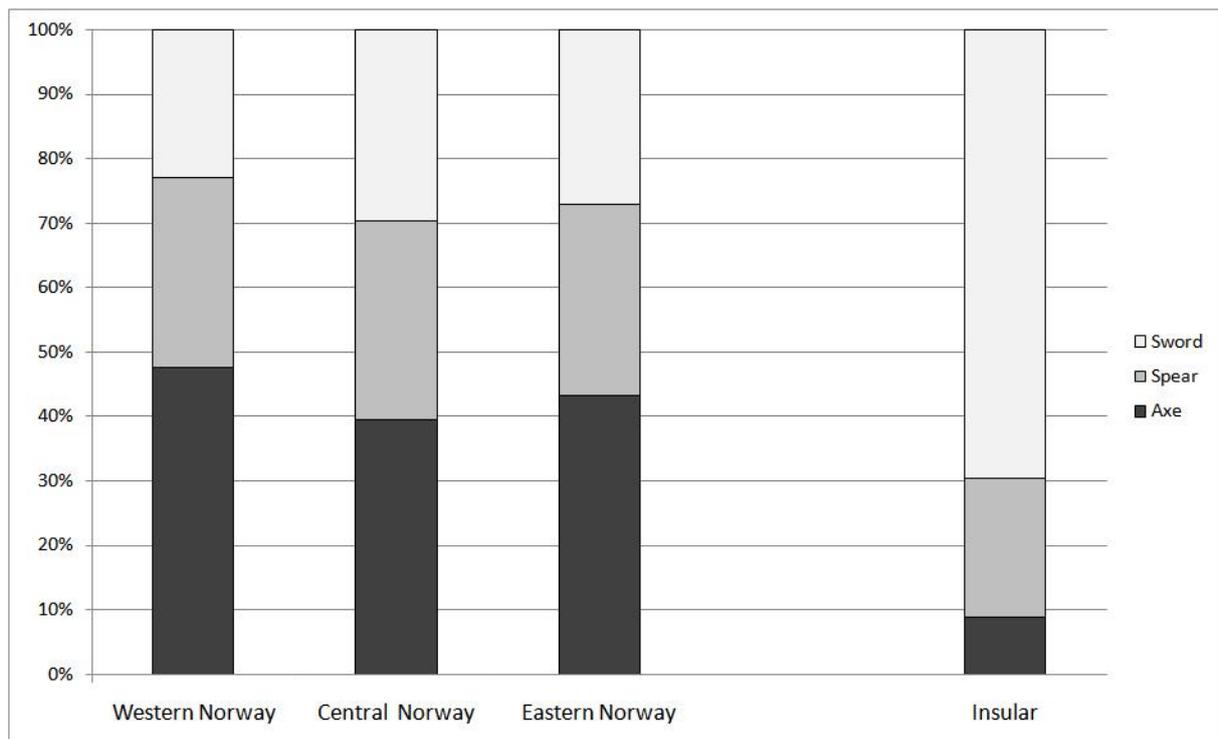


Figure 20.2 Proportions of graves containing single swords, spears and axeheads in western, central and eastern Norway, and in Britain and Ireland. Norwegian figures after Solberg (1985, table 1).

[303/304] Of course, the direct statistical comparison of such large areas represents the oversimplification of a much more complex evidence-base. Solberg's research clearly demonstrated strong regional variations within the Norwegian corpus, with the figures for western Norway being rather different to those of the two other regions which she studied. It also seems clear that more localized variations in the burial rite could and did occur (Price 2008). The dead, after all, do not bury themselves (Parker Pearson 1999, 3), and every burial involving the deposition of artefacts must have involved a subtle balance between prestige, pride and necessity. The relationship between perceived and actual status was further complicated by the fact that no artefact has an entirely 'fixed' value or meaning, but rather has meaning imposed upon it. While the widespread use of weapons clearly demonstrates some shared value across most of the Viking world, the perceived importance of individual graves must have been strongly influenced by the local burial tradition. There is certainly local variation in the insular burial rite. The evidence from the Kilmainham-Islandbridge burial complex at Dublin, for example, is notoriously difficult to interpret, but new research by the Irish Viking Graves Project, based at the

National Museum of Ireland, *suggests* that many of these graves contained multiple weapons. It is at the very least clear that the complex contains a remarkable number of graves with swords – forty-two at the most recent count – and the quality of their hilt decoration further demonstrates the importance of Dublin in the 9th and early 10th centuries (Harrison and Ó Floinn 2014, 75-93). The sheer quantity of graves may also reflect the role of competitive display within the population of what was almost certainly a nucleated settlement.

At the opposite extreme are those few weapon graves which have been identified within the former Danelaw. Weapon burials, like ‘Viking’ graves generally, are fundamentally a feature of the western seaboard, or more specifically northern and western Scotland and the Irish Sea basin. The paucity of Viking graves to the east of the Pennines has been recognized by many commentators, from Graham-Campbell (1980 379) to Richards (2000, 142). Using the most generous criteria possible, no more than twenty-nine graves with weapons can be identified in this area. Of these, nineteen (66%) contained just one weapon, and only one contained all three (Harrison 2008, 110). Thus, the Danelaw is characterized not just by fewer weapon burials, but also by the fact that those graves which do occur contain fewer weapons. For Scandinavians practising and witnessing the weapon burial rite in this area, the perceived value of individual weapons may well have been rather different to that at Dublin or elsewhere on the western seaboard.

These local variations also provide further evidence that while the weapon burial rite practised in Britain and Ireland was self-evidently related to that used in Scandinavia, it was not simply a passive reflection of that rite. Instead, the number and type of weapons incorporated within graves clearly altered to reflect local circumstances, situations and traditions. Much the same comments can be made about the Scandinavian furnished burial rite generally, both in Scandinavia and elsewhere. To many post-processualists, Solberg’s assumption of any constant relationship between the perceived value of artefacts is problematic, but the sheer scale of her research suggests that despite local variations, broad values underlay the [304/305] processes by which artefacts were selected for deposition in graves. Nonetheless, some aspects of her methodology are problematic. Leaving aside the identification of graves, her study considered just three weapons – the aforementioned sword, spear, and axe – largely ignoring shields, because they were not ‘offensive’ weapons, and entirely omitting arrowheads,

presumably because they were not part of the ‘folk weapon’ set. Nor did her methodology make allowance for the occurrence of multiple weapons of the same type in individual graves, even though this pattern clearly occurs in some Norwegian graves. A study of insular weapon graves which includes these five weapon types, and which treats groups of arrowheads as ‘single’ artefacts, reveals a pattern which closely reflects that established using Solberg’s methodology (Figure 21.3). The inclusion of shield bosses and multiple weapons, notably pairs of spears, reduced the figure for graves with single weapons further, to just under fifty percent of the corpus. It should be noted, however, that graves with four or five weapons remained rare, with just nine percent falling into this category (Harrison 2008, 109), and only one grave, a boat burial from Westness, Orkney, contained all five weapon types (Kaland 1995, 314–316). The distribution pattern confirms that graves with multiple weapons tend to focus in specific areas (Figure 21.4). Dublin has already been mentioned, but there are other concentrations in the Inner Hebrides, and on the Isle of Man. While allowing for regional variations and elements of competitive display, it

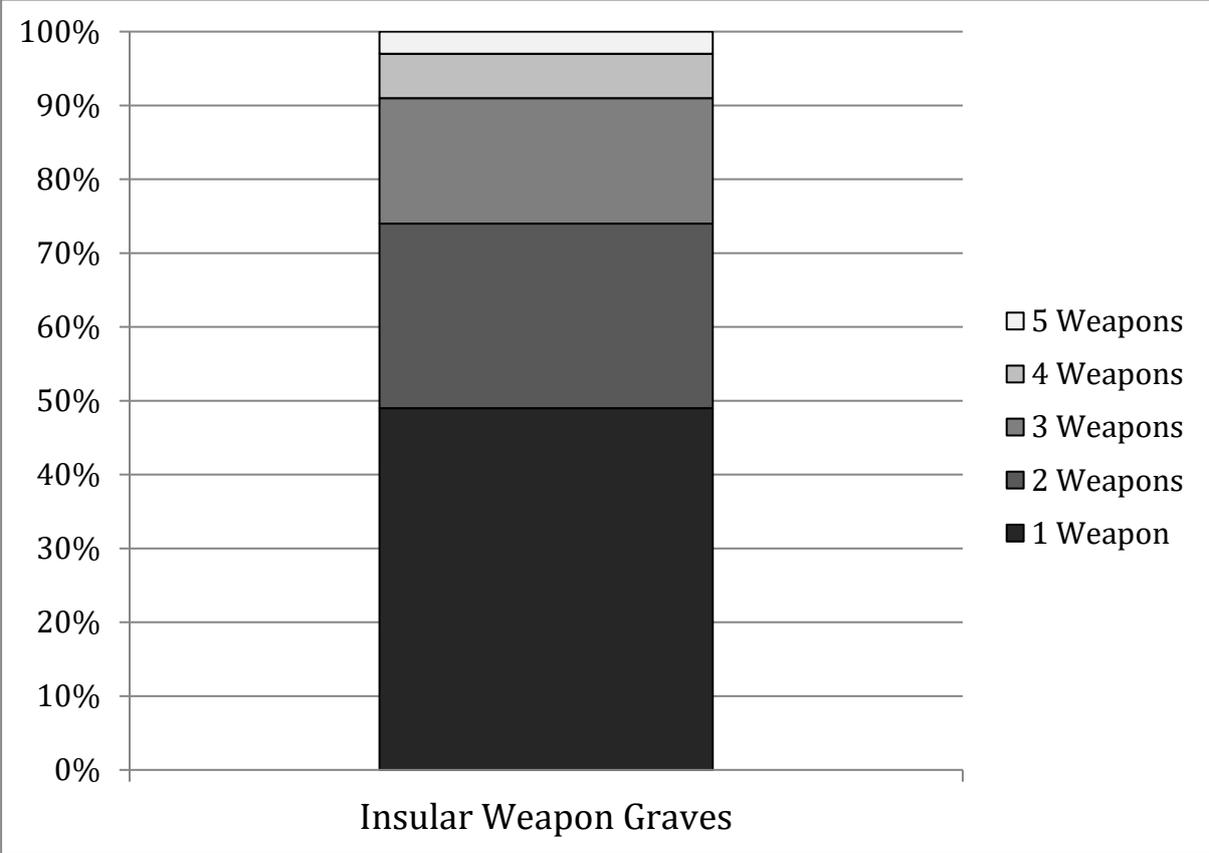


Figure 20.3. Proportions of Viking Age furnished graves containing one to five weapons in Britain and Ireland (S H Harrison) [305/306]



Figure 20.4 The distribution of insular 'Viking' graves containing one to five weapons, based on all possible weapon graves identified to date (S H Harrison)

remains very likely that these areas represent definite power foci in the period when furnished burial was in use.

By the time these graves were created, Scandinavian groups were the only ones in Britain and Ireland, and indeed northern Europe who still deposited weapons in graves. Nonetheless, it is important to realize that they were drawing on a far more widespread tradition which placed weapons at the centre of a complex symbolic web that went far beyond simple military function (Härke 1990, 42–43). In Anglo-Saxon England, swords in particular were clearly seen as suitable royal or noble gifts, bestowed on favourites and presented to peers (Davidson 1962, 110, 118–121). 'Lesser' weapons, notably spears and axes, although undoubtedly easier to manufacture and clearly more common, were expressions of the rank of other influential [306/307] members of society across Europe. Individuals had both the right and obligation to carry and potentially use weapons on certain occasions (Halsall 1998, 30–31). Shields, carefully decorated and visible from a considerable distance, could have been associated with specific individuals and groups long before the development of formal heraldry (Harrison 1995, 137–138, 141–143). All weapons, not just swords, were potentially 'both a symbol of power and a means of acquiring that power' (Walsh 1995, 37).

Weapons could also represent other aspects of social identity, however. Archaeologists have consistently associated them with a specifically male identity, and while the precise relationship between grave goods and biological sex has been questioned by some (Hadley and Moore 1999, 28–30), the relationship between weapons and masculinity was clearly close, at least in the Viking Age. In Britain and Ireland, all extant skeletal material which can be associated with weapon graves has proved to be male (Harrison 2008, 102). It is also striking that while Viking Age women could apparently be represented by a range of artefact forms, all insular graves containing any artefacts conventionally linked to men also contained at least one weapon. Smith's tools, for example, have always been found with

weapons rather than in specific ‘smith’s graves’, a situation which can be contrasted with the evidence from Anglo-Saxon England, such as Tattershall Thorpe, Lincolnshire (Hinton 2000).

Research by Härke (1989, 146–147) has further demonstrated that Anglo-Saxon knives could function as statements of male identity, and potentially as symbols of social maturity. In Viking Age Britain and Ireland, new evidence from Balnakeil, Caithness, points to the complexity of social identity in this later period. Here an individual aged between 8 and 13 and no more than 1.52m tall was buried with a sword, spear and shield, even though there is some debate as to whether or not he could have wielded the sword which was buried with him (Batey 1995, 157–158). This burial in particular raises a whole series of questions about the nature of social identity and inherited rank. While it is often assumed that the period was one of great social instability, with documentary sources making it clear that social ranks could be transformed as a result of single military encounters, the Balnakeil burial suggests that social power could be successfully transferred from one generation to the next, and implies at least some degree of familial or societal stability.

The selection of specific weapons for burial may also reflect concerns that go beyond simple numerical counts and which take account of local usages and practices. The increasing prominence of swords in the insular burial rite has already been noted, and may reflect the concerns of individuals who sought to maintain a distinct identity at least in part through burial rituals. Of all the various ‘Viking’ weapon forms classified by Petersen in 1919, swords, or perhaps more specifically sword hilts, have the widest geographical distribution. The repeated occurrence of specific ‘Scandinavian’ hilt types, perhaps most obviously Petersen’s type H, in graves across the Viking world gives an impression of cultural homogeneity (e.g. Walsh 1998, 229–230) and suggests that those burying their dead outside Scandinavia were choosing a specifically Scandinavian artefact type as a grave good. The reality is, of course, more complex, as by no means all of the hilt types which Petersen identified were necessarily of Scandinavian origin, or even manufacture. Petersen’s type K, for example, is [307/308] of Frankish origin (Walsh 1998, 230), and there is no particular reason to believe those examples found in Britain and Ireland had arrived *via* Scandinavia (Harrison and Ó Floinn 2014, 90-1). Similarly, type L swords are usually seen as Anglo-Saxon (but see Pierce 2002, 74–82), while the later type X is a common ‘Germanic’ form (Petersen 1919, 167). If there are few appreciable differences between the sword hilts found in insular

and Norwegian contexts, this is perhaps as much a reflection of the scale of imports to Norway as the export of Norwegian swords elsewhere. It is the funerary context of these swords, not their origin, which makes them ‘Scandinavian’, and while the absence of an indigenous Irish furnished burial tradition makes it difficult to draw direct comparisons, finds such as the exceptional Petersen type K sword found at Ballinderry crannog 1, Co. Westmeath (Wallace 2002, 228), strongly suggest that these artefacts were potent symbols of aristocratic power that crossed social and cultural boundaries, from Frankish manufacturers to Scandinavian importers, and Irish users – all terms which simplify the complexity of ethnic identities in this period.

If, however, swords enjoyed near-universal prestige, the same cannot be said of all ‘Viking’ weapon types. Perhaps the single most striking difference between contemporary weapon assemblages in insular and Norwegian graves is the almost total absence of axeheads in Britain and Ireland. Just thirty-five examples have been recorded in the latter context, spread between thirty-four graves, or seventeen percent of the total. In Norway, Solberg’s research indicates that somewhere between forty-eight and sixty-three percent of weapon graves, by region, contained axeheads (1985, 66). It is the rarity of axeheads that makes Solberg’s group 3 graves (those with all three ‘folk weapons’) relatively uncommon in insular contexts (above). In 1852, the Irish antiquarian George Petrie noted that he had been forced to ‘withdraw’ an iron axe from his collection because of ‘the ridicule it created’ (Anon 1852, 242). While this may go some way towards explaining the rarity of axeheads at Dublin, it is difficult to believe that such selective preservation could have influenced the occurrence of axeheads across such broad geographical areas. There is no particular reason to suggest that most insular antiquarians collected ‘different’ weapons to their Norwegian counterparts, and consequently this pattern must reflect actual deposition patterns in the Viking Age. This pattern is particularly puzzling because the 12th-century writer Giraldus Cambrensis (Gerald of Wales) recorded a tradition that the use of the axe in Irish warfare was a practice which had been introduced by the Ostmen – the Hiberno-Norse descendants of the first Scandinavian settlers in these islands (O’Meara 1982, 122). Nonetheless, it seems clear that their 9th- and early 10th-century antecedents chose only occasionally to include axeheads in their burial rites, and while this does not necessarily mean that these artefacts were not then in use, it does suggest that they were relatively rare. Given that the axe was the one ‘Viking’ weapon which seems to have

been unknown to insular groups before the arrival of Scandinavian groups, it is tempting to link the rarity of axes in Viking graves to some early, local influence, but this possibility cannot be demonstrated conclusively.

There is, however, conclusive evidence for local influence on other ‘Scandinavian’ weapon forms, or rather weapons placed in insular Scandinavian graves. Across Scotland, the Isle of Man, and northwest England, for example, the [308/309] overwhelming majority of spearheads from Viking graves appear to correspond to ‘standard’ Petersen types. In Dublin, however, a completely different spearhead type is found. Characteristically smaller than most Scandinavian types, many examples of this ‘Dublin Type’ were secured to their shafts using a series of copper pins which were clearly decorative as well as functional (Bøe 1940, 26). These spearheads are little studied (but see Harrison and Ó Floinn 2014, 102-10) and are only sporadically noted outside the Dublin area (e.g. Wilson 2008, 31, 37), but presumably reflect an insular manufacturing tradition. A few examples have been found at crannog sites such as Lagore, Co. Meath (Hencken 1950, 94–98), but these artefacts (like the Ballinderry sword) may represent a ‘Viking’ influence on these royal sites rather than an insular development. Whatever their precise origin, the quantity of such ‘local’ spearheads in insular Viking graves is almost certainly underestimated by archaeologists. During the last systematic study of these burials (Shetelig 1940), Grieg (1940) and Bjørn (Bjørn & Shetelig 1940) *expected* to find Scandinavian spearhead types, and it was only the sheer quantity of these spearheads at Dublin which forced Grieg to consider the possibility of local influences and origins. Similar, local spearheads may well lie unrecognized in English as well as Scottish and Manx collections.

In addition to these ‘Dublin Type’ spearheads, the shield bosses recovered from the Kilmainham-Islandbridge burial complex in particular are very different to those found elsewhere in the Viking world (Harrison and Ó Floinn 2014, 122-5). Small and conical rather than large and hemispherical, these bosses seem to represent the effective fusion of an Irish tradition of small shield bosses with an ongoing Anglo-Saxon tradition of conical forms (Harrison 1995, 116). Unlike the spearheads, no boss of this type has ever been found on an Irish settlement site, or any other ‘indigenous’ context – indeed, only three definite examples have been found outside Dublin. At Dublin, and particularly within the Kilmainham-Islandbridge complex, however, these ‘Dublin type’ bosses are

entirely dominant, with only a handful of the larger Scandinavian and Irish Sea types known (Bøe 1940, 33–38). This geographical focus, coupled with the remarkably consistent size and shape of these artefacts, suggests a local point of manufacture and perhaps even a single workshop. Far less clear, however, are the reasons why the inhabitants of 9th-century Dublin chose to develop this boss type, let alone to bury their dead with it. Shields were presumably replaced far more frequently than swords, but this does not in itself explain the development of an entirely new boss type. Military considerations are perhaps the most obvious explanation, and Dublin's population may have been responding to the same tactics which led the Irish aristocracy to use equally small shield bosses (Harrison 1995, 34–44). Nonetheless, it is difficult to imagine any specific factors which could have affected the population of Dublin so deeply, while apparently having almost no impact on other insular Scandinavian groups. The possibility of more subtle local influences must therefore be considered. Whatever the precise explanation for the adoption of these bosses (and indeed spearheads), the end result was that many of Dublin's leading figures were buried with weapons which are specifically linked to the local area. If these artefacts were also used in daily life – and there is no reason to believe they were not – then Dublin's male elite were equipped with shields and spearheads which were used at that settlement and almost nowhere else. Weapons, it would [309/310] seem, could be used to express a distinct, local identity, even when incorporated within what had originally been a Scandinavian burial rite.

The evidence from Dublin also suggests that such local identities could and did exist, and that many of those buried with weapons were actually members of more or less permanently established communities and groups. Duffy (1999, 5) and others have argued that the populations of military bases such as Dublin were relatively transient, with the arrival of substantial fleets often balanced by heavy losses in the field. The evidence from Dublin's graves, however, would suggest that these newly-arrived groups were rarely buried with artefacts, let alone weapons. Instead, the preponderance of Dublin-type spearheads and shield bosses would suggest that those buried with these artefacts at Kilmainham-Islandbridge and at other sites around Dublin were those with some extended association with the settlement – or, at the very least, that those controlling the burial ceremony wishes observers to think this. In the midst of short-term influxes, an elite group or groups more or less permanently established at Dublin sought to control the settlement. The weapon burial rite seems to have been an important

mechanism by which this was achieved. If this was true of Dublin, then it may equally have been true of the individuals buried in the much smaller cemeteries and single graves which are scattered around the western littoral of Britain and Ireland. The fact that many of these burials are coastal and situated close to sheltered, if shallow, bays and inlets (Harrison 2007, 176) does not necessarily mean that the individuals buried in them were part of an entirely transient population who simply rowed ashore to bury their dead. While this model has been applied to graves in regions as diverse as Talacre, Wales (Smith 1933, 48), Eyrephort, Co. Galway (Raftery 1960, 5–6), and Sonning, Berkshire (Evison 1969, 342), weapon graves, which represent a considerable sacrifice for those involved with the funerary rite, are far more likely to represent the leaders of families, kin-groups and communities who had strong vested interests in creating these memorials, and who sought to establish a permanent presence in these areas.

In recent years, much has been made of the social importance of early medieval burial mounds, which could function not just as expressions of status (Solberg 1985, 66) and land ownership (Wilson 2008, 55), but also as statements of ‘pagan’ identity (van de Noort 1993, 70) and foci for local expressions of ritual practice (Price 2010). Fundamentally, these monuments had a permanent impact on the landscape and served as a reminder of the (ancestral) dead beneath them. In insular contexts, the evidence for mounds is much more limited than is the case in Norway, a statistic which may represent an early Christian (or at least indigenous) influence on burial practices (Harrison 2008, 200–201). Nonetheless, it seems clear that weapon graves, and indeed most Viking Age furnished burials in Britain and Ireland, were marked on the surface in some way. Viking graves seem rarely, if ever, to have intercut each other, even in cemeteries where graves were relatively close together, and this phenomenon can only be explained if each grave were marked in some way. As well as extant mounds, such as Ballateare, Man (Bersu and Wilson 1966, 46–48) and the kerbstones which surrounded others, as at Kneep (or Cnip), Lewis (Dunwell *et al* 1995, 731), graves could be marked by individual stones, as at Westness, Orkney (Kaland 1995, 312); cairns, as at Woodstown, Co. Waterford (Russell and Harrison [310/311] 2011, 66); wooden posts, as apparently occurred at Repton (Biddle and Kjølbye-Biddle 1992, 41); or a combination of these elements. With or without associated mounds, the sites of these graves were clearly remembered long after the funeral ceremony itself.

When discussing burial mounds at Norwegian farm sites, Skre (2001, 10) has argued that the creation of a mound, an event which occurred roughly once every generation, was not simply part of the funeral ceremony, but a physical symbol of the inheritance process – a means of demonstrating the new-found authority of the heir through actions which physically displayed the perceived status of the deceased. Many of these Norwegian mounds seem to have covered furnished burials. Is it not therefore possible that the formal deposition of artefacts within the grave pit or chamber formed an equally important part of this inheritance process? While the pit or chamber was ultimately backfilled, vanishing from public view, some memory of the artefacts involved must have remained. In Anglo-Saxon England, it has been argued that the key point of a high-status funeral involving grave-goods was the display of a ‘tableau’: the deceased surrounded by artefacts which represented his role and status within a given community (Geake 2003, 260). Given the comparable care with which artefacts were deposited in Viking Age graves, it seems entirely reasonable to suggest that weapons formed a key part of that tableau, at least in the case of high-status males.

Despite having evidence for some two hundred insular weapon graves, the precise deposition of grave-goods is recorded in only a handful of cases and even fewer have been professionally excavated. In general, however, it would seem that weapons were placed in prominent positions around the body. The sword was generally placed to one side, point down, with the hilt positioned either at the hip, as in the case of a grave found at Ballinaby, Islay in 1932 (Edwards 1934, 75) and allegedly at Eyrephort, Co. Galway (Raftery 1960, 3), or the shoulder, as was the case with a grave found at Inchicore, Dublin, in 1934 (Bøe 1940, 60–62), and apparently at Cronk Moar, Man (Bersu and Wilson 1966, 69). At Larne, Co. Antrim, on the other hand, the sword is said to have been placed across the skeleton’s breast, with the hilt towards the right hand (Smith 1840, 42). The position of spearheads is rarely recorded, but in the case of graves with multiple weapons, they seem often to have been placed on the opposite side of the body to the sword, as in the coffin or chamber at Ballateare, Man (Bersu and Wilson 1966, 50). However, a position at the hip is only noted in the aforementioned graves at Eyrephort and Inchicore, and this may be the result of their excavators mistaking these spear blades for ‘daggers’. Only three axeheads have had their positions within the grave recorded. In the 1932 Ballinaby find, the axehead was placed opposite the sword, close to the ‘right elbow’ (Edwards 1934, 75), in a grave found

at Reay, Caithness, in 1926, it was positioned at the left knee (Edwards 1927, 203), and in the grave found at Woodstown, Waterford, in 2004, it was found in a disturbed area close to the body's feet (Harrison and Ó Floinn 2014, 666). Shield bosses could be placed across the feet, as at Eyrephort (Raftery 1960, 3), or on the chest, as was the case with the aforementioned Reay burial (Edwards 1927, 203), as well as a more recent discovery at South Great George's Street, Dublin (Simpson 2005, 39–40). In all cases, it will be noted that these weapons were placed around [311/312] the corpse, rather than 'worn' by it. This positioning is perhaps best explained by considering these artefacts as part of Geake's 'tableau', displayed for the benefit of observers (Harrison and Ó Floinn 2014, 280-2).

An interesting local variation seems to have occurred on the Isle of Man, where in at least two cases weapons were placed on or beside the coffin or chamber, rather than beside the corpse itself. At Ballateare, while a sword and spearhead were placed beside the body, two more spears were placed on top of the 'coffin' and a shield was placed beside it (Bersu and Wilson 1966, 50). At Cronk Moar, while a sword seems to have been placed inside the 'coffin', a spear and shield were placed on top of it (Bersu and Wilson 1966, 67–68). The original report argues that these large artefacts were left outside the coffin/chamber because they were too large to fit inside it, but the labour investment involved in the creation of these graves and their associated mounds was such that the construction of slightly larger chambers can hardly have been a concern. The positioning of these artefacts outside the coffin/chamber would, however, have meant that they remained visible until the point when backfilling began. Whether inside or outside the chamber, witnesses could potentially have remembered the positioning of these artefacts within the tableau for years after the funeral itself (Williams 2010, 118-21). Even if precise details became blurred with time, it should also be remembered that this formal display occurred at precisely that time when, according to Skre's inheritance model, the heir first established and demonstrated his authority – a process which may at least occasionally have involved the use of artefacts very similar to those deposited alongside his predecessor.

A model which emphasizes the importance of furnished graves in general, and burials with weapons in particular, to the process of inheritance is, of course, particularly relevant to the environment within which insular Scandinavian burials were created. It has long been accepted that 'Viking' graves represent only the first generations of Scandinavians active in these islands (Shetelig 1945, 23–24, 36).

These graves were created over a period of no more than 150 years, between *c* AD 800 and AD 950 and there is no typological reason why these graves could not have been created within a century of each other (Harrison 2008, 79). Furthermore, individual burial sites rarely contain graves which are significantly older or younger than their peers, a detail which suggests that at specific sites, no more than a single generation was buried in this way. It would be wrong, however, to assume that these graves are a simple, passive reflection of a folk tradition to which these settlers clung. Instead, they represent the efforts of the first insular Scandinavian generation inheriting land to establish and affirm their rights to that inheritance. In this context, the creation of these graves may well have taken on a particular urgency. While it is generally acknowledged that most insular graves are less well-furnished than their Norwegian counterparts (Wilson 1976, 99), the increased deposition of weapons identified in the present paper may reflect a need to demonstrate legitimacy, perhaps by emphasizing the military ability of the original ‘conqueror’. Burial sites with multiple weapon graves of approximately the same date, such as Ballinaby, Islay (Graham-Campbell and Batey 1998, 122–125), Westness, Orkney (Kaland 1995, 312–316), and/or the more recent finds at Cumwhitton, Cumbria (Paterson *et al* 2014), may well represent family (or at least kin-) groups, but the frequency of furnished burial rites at these [312/313] sites also suggests particularly troubled inheritance processes, or at least the regular transfer of land during the period when furnished burials were in vogue. A link between burial and inheritance also provides a new perspective on the abandonment of the furnished burial ritual. While it would be foolish to deny the influence of Christian (or at least indigenous) burial practices on this process, an emphasis on the social rather than the religious significance of the rite provides a new perspective on furnished burial. In many cases, a single grave could have provided sufficient connection between a kin-group and a given landholding. Later generations may not have had the same need to create these burials, and may therefore have adopted other (unfurnished) burial practices more easily.

The more sceptical may argue that this ‘inheritance’ model is unduly mechanistic, and reduces what was undoubtedly a complex process of evaluation and selection on the part of those preparing the grave to a single over-arching social concern. It may also be suggested that a model emphasizing the inheritance of land seems to break down in the case of larger cemeteries such as Pierowall, Orkney (Thorsteinsson 1968), and of course the Kilmainham-Islandbridge burial complex at Dublin (Harrison

and Ó Floinn 2014, 242-66). At the latter site in particular, there are simply too many graves to represent individual landowners, and their focus at a single site seems to reduce any potential associations with specific landholdings. Nonetheless, the graves at this site remained the preserve of a limited proportion of the population, and these may have had a social role which was closely related to furnished burials elsewhere in these islands. Throughout the 9th and early 10th century, Dublin had a ruling elite that not infrequently divided into distinct factions (Downham 2007, 17–27). While documentary evidence is lacking, it may be assumed that each pretender to the rule of Dublin was surrounded by followers of comparable, if not equal, social rank. Like their rural counterparts, these individuals controlled resources of some kind, and their deaths would have necessitated the renegotiation of social relationships. The control of a specific funerary ceremony may have provided an immediate advantage to specific groups, and provided an ideal arena for the display of wealth and power. Dublin's graves are exceptionally well-furnished not just because the settlement was wealthy in this period, but because its leaders chose to commit particularly elaborate artefacts and many weapons to these graves. This process was undoubtedly influenced by competitive display, and Dublin's graves consequently represent a local variation in the broader pattern of isolated burials and small cemeteries which are characteristic of areas of insular Scandinavian settlement at this time.

Similar patterns may also be seen in areas with concentrations of furnished graves, and weapon burials in particular. The graves in the southern part of the Western Isles, particularly Colonsay, Oronsay and western Islay, where there is a definite focus of Viking graves (Figure 21.3), and numerous examples of multiple weapons in burials, may have been at least partially driven by a similar impetus. As a result, these concentrations do not necessarily correspond to areas of more intensive settlement, but rather to areas with particularly intense social rivalries. In order for these rivalries to develop, however, those using furnished burial must have been established in these areas for some time. **[313/314]**

The one obvious exception to this rule is, of course, Repton, Derbyshire, where it is argued that all five graves containing weapons (and indeed several other furnished burials) can be linked to the overwintering of the 'Great Army' at the site in AD 873–4 (Biddle & Kjølbye-Biddle 1992, 40). By AD 873, the Great Army had been active in England for some eight years. Given its (relatively) large size and longevity, its internal politics were undoubtedly complex, and it may be that furnished burial at

Repton, as at Dublin, was a means of reinforcing social order within this group. It should perhaps be pointed out, however, that Repton also lies close to the western boundary of the Danelaw as it was defined at a slightly later date, and remained a site of considerable strategic and political importance throughout the Viking Age (Richards 2003, 387, 390). As such, it could also have provided a suitable location for furnished burial by a locally-based group or groups at some point soon *after* the enclosure at the site had been abandoned by the Great Army. The Repton graves would then form part of the general pattern of furnished 'weapon' burial across these islands, being associated with a settled rather than a transient community. Similar interpretations can be proposed for the furnished buried found at or near other overwintering sites such as Reading and Nottingham (Graham-Campbell 2001, 106, 115). The Great Army, however, represented an exceptional gathering in the context of 9th-century England, and it should be remembered that the furnished burial rite was clearly characterized as much by flexibility and adaptation as by any inherent conservatism. These burials could therefore represent a specific adaptation to a set of unusual social stresses associated with this military enterprise.

Even at Repton, it is clear that Viking graves containing weapons are far from 'simple' interments and contain the remains of individuals who were much more than simple 'warriors'. More generally, there is strong evidence to suggest that furnished burials in insular contexts, as the deliberate creations of families, kin-groups and/or communities who had established themselves in the local area, represent efforts to manipulate social perceptions, very often in the context of inheritance or the transfer of power from one generation to the next. By establishing a physical link between these groups and the local area, these 'Viking' graves anchored them within the local context (Harrison 2007, 179–180). In the case of the most elaborately furnished burials in particular, this process may have gone beyond local groups, 'establish[ing] a presence in the landscape of Norse-dominated territories, from which ... the living population could derive a sense of the historical legitimacy of their leaders' power (Griffiths 2004, 127). Fundamentally, these burials represent a belief in a long-term presence in the local area, even if they were not in themselves a guarantee of success.

It is also important to realize that while the use of weapons in graves is highly visible in archaeological terms, the practice was almost by definition restricted to a limited segment of the population, and was by no means the only high-status burial rite, let alone burial form, practised by

insular Scandinavian groups. Space does not allow discussion of the closely related group of elaborately furnished 'female' graves, dominated by examples containing oval brooches, although it should be noted that there is considerable evidence for overlap with the present argument. Then there is the range of more poorly furnished Viking Age graves, with neither brooches nor [314/315] weapons, which are so little studied that almost no definite comments can be made (Harrison 2008, 166–190). At present, too, the cremation cemetery at Heath Wood, Derbyshire, occupies a unique position in insular contexts (Richards 2004). Again associated with the Great Army's camp at Repton in AD 873–4, it is entirely possible that cemeteries containing similar burials and monument forms exist in other parts of these islands but have not yet been recognized as such. It would be foolhardy in the extreme to suggest that these variations in the 'Scandinavian' burial rite are attributable to simple status issues, particularly as it is clear that by no means all members of the insular Scandinavian elite made use of the furnished burial rite, let alone the weapon burial rite in particular. Across Man (Wilson 2008, 57–86), Cumbria, the Danelaw (Bailey 1980) and even parts of Scotland (Lang 1976), the erection of stone monuments provided an alternative mechanism for marking high-status graves, albeit at a slightly later date, although there is increasing evidence for some chronological overlap (Griffiths 2004, 133). Other 9th- and 10th-century insular Scandinavian groups may have forgone high-status burial rites entirely, for reasons more complex than simple poverty. Whatever the reasons for the process, it is clear that all insular Scandinavian graves merged into the broader background of indigenous burial practices, very often within a single generation. The distribution of weapon graves provides at best a partial picture of Scandinavian activity in these islands. Nonetheless, as a relatively common burial rite, they provide a useful evidence source which is in urgent need of review.

Some commentators will argue that the interpretation presented here forms part of a general tendency to 'sanitize' the Viking Age by removing as many elements of its inherent violence as possible, explaining weapons largely in terms of social prestige. This is unintentional. The Viking Age was inherently violent, and the fact that weapons seem to have functioned as one of the most important status symbols for men in this period is by no means coincidental (Halsall 1998, 3-4). Osteological evidence from Viking weapon graves is surprisingly limited, but of the thirteen skeletons which have been scientifically examined, two produced evidence that they met violent deaths. One of these, 'hit on the

head and then killed by a massive cut into the head of the left femur' came from Repton (Biddle and Kjølbye-Biddle 2001, 61) The other 'shot by four arrows in his back, arm, belly and thighbone', was buried at Westness, Orkney, one of the few Viking burial sites to be consistently interpreted as a 'family' cemetery (Kaland 1995, 316). With the arguable exception of the burial at Balnakeil (above), there can be little doubt that those buried with weapons had access to them, or that they were prepared to use them on occasion. Whatever the evidence from Copeland, Cumbria (Griffiths 2004, 129), there can be little doubt that most 'Vikings' inheriting land or authority in this period acquired it from individuals who had themselves won it using at the very least the threat of violence. Nonetheless, the view that these individuals were primarily, let alone exclusively, 'warriors' needs to be called into question. Weapons were incorporated within their burial rituals, just as they were carved on the Middleton Cross at a slightly later date, because they were symbols of authority (Bailey 1980, 209–14). Broader arguments about perceptions of the afterlife and religious belief are perhaps best left to another occasion, although it [315/316] should be pointed out that the interpretation offered here does not in itself negate such beliefs, or their importance to the construction of burial assemblages and graves (Price 2010).

Fundamentally, it is time to reconsider the significance of these 'Viking' graves. The limited number of graves containing weapons indicates that only a fraction of the population was buried in this way. Moreover, they represent a response to local insular conditions in terms of the number and type of weapons which they contain. It seems very likely that most, if not all, are in some way related to the transfer of property or power from one generation to the next, and at some level served as a mechanism to ensure social stability. As such they were created by individuals, kin-groups or communities who had vested local interests, and who used the furnished burial rite as a means to further these interests. If these are 'Viking' graves, then these 'Vikings' were here to stay.

NOTE

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FIGURE CAPTIONS