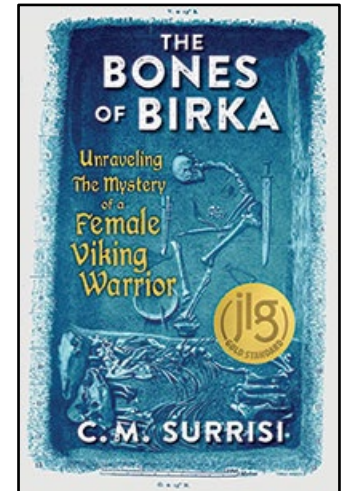


The Bones of Birka: Unraveling the Mystery of a Female Viking Warrior

When archaeologists Dr. Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson discovers that the bones contained in the most significant Viking warrior grave ever opened are, in fact, female, she and her team upend centuries of historically accepted conclusions and ignite a furious debate around the reality of female Viking warriors and the role of gender in both ancient and modern times.

In *The Bones of Birka*, author C.M. Surrisi introduces readers to the events that led up to this discovery and the impact it has had on scientists' and historians' views of gender roles in ancient societies and today. This is the inside account of the Birka warrior grave Bj 581 archaeological endeavor, including all of the dreams, setbacks, frustrations, excitement, politics, and personalities that went into this history-changing discovery. The finding has raised crucial questions about research bias, academic dialogue, and gender identity.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Stolpe was clearly a smart guy, and to his credit he brought stratigraphy to Scandinavian archaeology. Nonetheless, he suffered criticism from the Antiquities Academy for not being an archaeologist when the excavation began and was ridiculed for using one wrong word, “kitchen midden” (*kjökkenmödding*), when he meant garbage dump (*avskrädeshög*). Do you think his critics were justified in judging him so harshly? Why or why not?
2. When Stolpe opened a grave with substantial weapons and no “feminine” objects such as jewelry, he labeled it a “warrior grave.” Today, archaeologists do not automatically assume a grave with weapons is a warrior. They label the grave a “weapons grave” until the full nature of the weapons and context can be explored. Do you agree or disagree with this change, and why? For what reasons other than warring might a person be buried with weapons?
3. Stolpe’s records indicate that he used the term *he* or *male* to refer to the warrior in grave Bj 581. Price says, “I don’t think he [Stolpe] ever really ‘assessed’ the sex. I don’t think it was a decision at all. I don’t think it occurred to anyone of that time that a person with those grave goods could be anything other than male.” Do you think it was reasonable for Stolpe to assume the warrior was male, and if so, why do you think he did so?

4. Vikings are notoriously pictured in contemporary images wearing horned helmets. Scholars are unanimous in their view that Viking helmets did not have horns. What else can you think of in our culture today that misrepresents the Viking Age?
5. After performing morphological examinations on the bones from Bj 581, four separate, independent osteologists interpreted the person to be “very highly likely female” rather than merely “female.” Why didn’t they just say the person “is female”?
6. The field of archaeology has an established practice of announcing and commenting on research results through the peer-review process. Yet, many scholars in 2017 and 2019 chose to comment informally and through blog posts and other social media formats. Should they have taken the time and effort to write a peer-reviewed article? Would that have made their criticism more credible? What impact do you think social media is having on the scientific process? Is it good, bad, neither, or the wave of the future? What are the benefits of the peer-review process?
7. One of the criticisms of the team’s research was that it set out to prove the person in Bj 581 was female. Anna Kjellström, Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson, and Neil Price vigorously disagreed. Price responded, “Were we interested? Of course. We’re scientists. But one can’t test DNA in such a way as to produce a desired result. It is what it is. We followed the trail of data and analysis.” What do you think causes people to deny scientific facts, such as DNA results?
8. As it is often said by archaeologists, “The dead don’t bury themselves.” Thus, for the purpose of knowledge, archaeologists work with artifacts and settings that the deceased may not have selected and did not arrange. How do you imagine the survivors chose the grave goods?
9. Leszek Gardela wrote that it was possible to access chamber graves long after the funeral, and this would have created opportunities for all kind of interactions between the living and the dead. It could include the removal, displacement, and even destruction of objects and bodies. Sometimes experts speculate that it was to establish supernatural contact with the deceased, to take out enchanted items such as family heirlooms, to bargain with the deceased to stay dead, or to perform magic or maim the dead – among other reasons. Why do you think Viking funerals and postdeath interactions were so intense?

10. Gender archaeologist Marianne Moen says, “We need to start thinking about [gender roles] as a bit more fluid and less strict and stop talking about men and women in different ways when they are buried the same way.” What do you think she means when she says gender roles should be thought of as a bit more fluid? Why do you think she suggests this?
11. Price and Moen suggest that the Vikings may have been gender fluid. What does this mean, and why might critics suggest this is at odds with other things we know about Viking culture?
12. In the Victorian period, archaeologists were biased in their beliefs about male and female gender roles and applied that bias to the Vikings. Today, scientists have DNA testing, and they know more about human karyotypes, intersex, transsexuality, and gender. When today’s archaeologists say that the Vikings may have had a gender-fluid society, are they, like the Victorians biased by current understandings? Is today’s bias more defensible? Why or why not?
13. Assuming the team is correct that the person in Bj 581 presented as she/her on the gender spectrum, what might have caused her to live the life suggested by her grave goods?
14. What is your cultural bias? Do you think people of the Vikings Age had the same social and cultural perspective that you do? In what way?
15. Assuming there are two archaeologists today from different cultures and they assess a Viking grave with different conclusions, do those conclusions have to be reconciled?
16. Our culture has exploded with images and characters based on Viking warrior women (shield-maidens). Why do you think female Viking warriors are so popular?