



The Oseberg ship on display in The Viking Ship Museum. Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo

## Queen(s) of the Viking Age

The ornate burials of two women within the Oseberg ship reveals the prominent status that women could achieve in the Viking Age.

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Imagine a Viking ship burial and you probably think of a fearsome warrior killed in battle and sent on his journey to Valhöll. However, the grandest ship burial ever discovered—the Oseberg burial near Oslo—is not a monument to a man but rather to two women who were buried with more wealth and honour than any known warrior burial. Since the burial was uncovered more than a century ago, historians and archaeologists have tried to answer key questions: who were these women, how did they achieve such prominence, and what do they tell us about women's lives in this time? This article will explore current understandings of the lives and deaths of the Oseberg women, and the privileged position they held in their society.

Women of the Viking Age seem to be reinvented every few decades to meet the current demands of pop culture. The busty Wagnerian Valkyries belting out the Ring Cycle gradually gave way to a 'Barbie' Viking Princess aesthetic that has now been replaced by leather-clad warrior women with extreme eye-makeup. These various stereotypes obscure the complex picture that emerges from the manuscripts, runestones, artefacts,

homesteads and burials that tell the stories of the real women of the Viking Age. The Oseberg burial, which richly documents the lives of two unnamed but storied women, lets us glimpse the real world of these women, not the imaginings of medieval chroniclers or modern film-makers.

### The Ship Burial

Dotted around Scandinavia are hundreds of earth mounds, mostly unexcavated and mainly presumed to be burials. The Oseberg mound was excavated in 1904, revealing that the site's unusual blue clay had perfectly preserved wood, textiles, metal and bone. Within the mound, archaeologists found a carved oak ship carrying a tent-like wooden burial chamber containing the remains of two richly dressed women accompanied by an extensive collection of goods. Within a few decades of its burial it had been disturbed by grave robbers, an act dated by dendrochronology (tree-ring dating) of the wooden shovels they left behind to between 953 and 990 CE.<sup>1</sup> The robbers disturbed the women's skeletal remains and likely removed jewellery and precious metals, which are conspicuously absent in this otherwise sumptuous burial.



Artefacts retrieved included boots, a cart, sleigh and cradle. Kulturhistorisk Museum, UiO (CC BY SA 4.0)

- 1 Jan Bill and Aoife Daly, 'The Plundering of the Ship Graves from Oseberg and Gokstad: An Example of Power Politics?', *Antiquity* 86: 333 (September 2012): 808–824, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003598X00047931>.
- 2 Vibeke Bischoff, 'New Oseberg Ship, Reconstruction of the Hull Form,' *Vikingskibsmuseet i Roskilde*, <https://www.vikingskibsmuseet.dk/en/professions/boatyard/building-projects/the-oseberg-ship>; Niels Bonde and Arne Emil Christensen, 'Dendrochronological Dating of the Viking Age Ship Burials at Oseberg, Gokstad and Tune, Norway', *Antiquity* 67:256 (September 1993): 575–583, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003598X00045774>.
- 3 Bischoff, 'New Oseberg Ship'.
- 4 Vikingskibsmuseet i Roskilde, 'The Viking Ship That Couldn't Sail Is Headed for Roskilde,' <https://www.vikingskibsmuseet.dk/en/news/the-viking-ship-that-couldnt-sail-is-headed-for-roskilde>.
- 5 The Norwegian Museum of Cultural History has published a complete list of goods at <https://www.khm.uio.no/english/visit-us/viking-ship-museum/exhibitions/oseberg/the-women-in-the-oseberg-burial/documents/in-the-grave.pdf>.

**The Ship**

The Oseberg ship itself is more than 20 metres long and 5 metres wide. Dendrochronological analysis of the wood dates the ship to 820 CE, fourteen years before the burial itself in 834 CE.<sup>2</sup> The ship was a sailing vessel with a mast, although it could also accommodate fifteen pairs of rowers. The prow and stern are richly ornamented with detailed wood carvings that represent a massive investment of time and expertise.

When the Oseberg ship was excavated and reconstructed, its proportions suggested that it was not particularly seaworthy, and a reconstruction built in 1987 sank within seconds. Scientific views can be skewed by unconscious gender bias, and the assumption that the Oseberg ship was a vessel built for decorative posturing, not actual sailing, would probably never have been made if it had housed the remains of men. Rather than assuming that such skilful shipbuilders invested time and timber to make an unseaworthy ship, a more reasonable conclusion is that the archaeologists erred in the reconstruction. When the ship was re-examined in 2006, maritime archaeologist Vibeke Bischoff, herself a shipwright and

sailor, identified flaws in the reconstruction and a revised model was created.<sup>3</sup> The new replica built following her advice sailed perfectly, proving that the women's ship was a useful and practical as any other.<sup>4</sup>

**The Artefacts**

The ship was accompanied by hundreds of artefacts, from a decorated wagon to six beds and a fancy eiderdown quilt, clothing, an elaborate tapestry, a loom and numerous textile pieces and tools, pots of food, and skeletons of animals (fifteen horses, two cows and six dogs).<sup>5</sup> The extensive collection of items in the burial suggests a belief that the dead needed the trappings of the living in their new world—a custom familiar from the Egyptian pyramids, for example.

Even the simplest items indicated wealth and status, such as a well-made wooden bucket that features a little anthropomorphic ornament, usually described as a Buddha but almost certainly of Irish origin. Items such as this are tantalising reminders of how fragmentary our knowledge is. Although the internet is rife with speculation, most of it unhelpful, there is simply no way to determine if this bucket was just a basic

domestic article or was, for example, an essential part of a religious ritual.

Coarse and fine woollens and sixteen different types of silk were found in articles ranging from clothing to drapery to embroidery.<sup>6</sup> While the wool would have been produced locally, the silk hints at extensive trade networks connecting with the Silk Road. Again, this affirms the wealth and importance of these women.

### The Women of Oseberg

The biggest question relating to the burial is the identity of the two women of the Oseberg ship. Unfortunately it has not proven possible to link them with any known historical figures, but clearly they were powerful, important, wealthy and respected. The Vestfold region where the burial is located was the political powerhouse of early Norway, giving rise to the dynasty of its first kings. An association between these women and local families seems inevitable, and the grandeur of the burial implies that the women themselves held power rather than simply being the wives, mothers or daughters of powerful men.

Other ship burials such as the male warrior of the Gokstad ship remain anonymous, but a popular theory was that 'Oseberg' meant 'the rock/hillock/mound of Ása'—the burial place of the mother of an early Norwegian king. Not only is this disproved by the dates but it downplays the female power held by these women, and:

pushes the Oseberg lady into the margins by making her the wife of a Viking, and mother of another one—it removes her identity and defines her in terms of her male relations in a way which detracts from the obvious display of power so clearly manifested by the grave.<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, some scholars have suggested that the women may owe their high status to a religious role, perhaps as priestesses of the Norse goddess Freyja, although the only evidence for this seems to be the assumption that women could not have held secular power. Other significant male burial mounds are accepted as representing social and



**A brass and cloisonné enamel ornament at the handle of the 'Buddha bucket' found with the Oseberg ship burial (c. 800 CE).**

Av Eirik Irgens Johnsen/Kulturhistorisk Museum, UiO (CC BY SA 4.0)

political power. The only reason to assume otherwise for these two women is gender bias.

Tantalisingly, the only hint of a name for one of the women is in a runic carving on the 'Buddha bucket' that reads: 'Sigrid owns [me]!' Ownership carvings have been found on many everyday Viking Age artefacts, from combs to swords. The most obvious but unprovable explanation for this carving is that one of the women was called Sigrid and she did not want anyone pilfering her elaborate bucket.

The next question to ponder is why there are two women in one burial mound. The original hypothesis was that the more important

6 Marianne Vedeler, 'The Textiles among the Oseberg Finds Museum of Cultural History,' Museum of Cultural History, 2016. <https://www.khm.uio.no/english/visit-us/viking-ship-museum/exhibitions/oseberg/the-textiles-among-the-oseberg-finds/index.html>.

7 Marianne Moen, *The Gendered Landscape: A Discussion on Gender, Status and Power Expressed in the Viking Age Mortuary Landscape* (Oslo: University of Oslo, 2010), 44, <https://www.duo.uio.no/bitstream/handle/123456789/23050/TheGenderedLandscape.pdf>.



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woman had died of natural causes and the other was a slave sacrificed to accompany her to the next world, a practice attested in an account of a warrior burial.<sup>8</sup> There is an age difference between them, with the older woman probably in her seventies or eighties, and the younger in her fifties, but they show similar levels of nutrition, with meat rather than fish their main protein—a marker of wealth. Both women are dressed in expensive clothing, although the younger woman's clothes are of finer material. Neither skeleton shows clear signs of violence. There is nothing that clearly indicates one or other of the women was more important, or that either of them was a ritual sacrifice.

The bones of the older women show possible traces of childhood meningitis, a serious disease that even today can be fatal. Her survival suggests that both care and resources were available to her. While DNA testing of her remains has been inconclusive, X-rays have revealed that in her later years she suffered from arthritis and wore shoes specially shaped for her arthritic feet. She also had advanced breast cancer, which may have been the cause of her death.<sup>9</sup> Both these conditions would have been painful and might account for the small pouch of cannabis found with the women, although equally this could have been used for religious or recreational purposes. While her name is not known, her bones document a powerful, determined woman who survived one serious illness, endured others, and lived to an age far beyond most people of her time.

The younger woman, once dismissed as a hapless slave murdered as an adjunct to a powerful mistress, is now recognised as at least equally important in her own right. DNA analysis yielded the unexpected result that her ancestors hailed from the region of the Black Sea, perhaps Iran, although other scientists dispute this finding.<sup>10</sup> Scandinavian voyages to the Near East are documented, so this is certainly possible, but there is no indication of how long she and her forebears may have been in Scandinavia or how they arrived there.

While the age gap between the women would fit with them being mother and daughter, this cannot be confirmed by DNA. Whether these women died at the same time, or were shifted from separate burials to be grandly interred together in the Oseberg mound, is unclear but their positioning together in a common grave certainly suggests a deep connection between them—whether as close allies, blood kin or a same-sex power couple.

### Women's Work and Power

From the extensive material found in the Oseberg mound, and through written sources from the Viking Age and later, plausible interpretations of women's lives and work can be suggested.

Women's work depended on their social status and the wealth and holdings of their family. A *húswife*, the female leader of a household, was essentially the chief operating officer of a significant enterprise. Most households were centred around a married couple and their children, while some were multi-generational and the most prosperous households could have forty or more people, including slaves, free workers and various hangers-on. The head woman was responsible for organising seasonal labour, budgeting, maintaining food supplies, influencing alliances or feuds with other households, and probably helping lead pagan religious practice.

The grave goods in the burial show strong links to textile production, particularly woollen cloth. Before the invention of the spinning wheel, fibres such as wool and linen had to be hand-twisted into threads before they could then be hand-woven on looms. Textile production was essential work, not just for clothing but for the sails that gave Viking ships their power. It was also incredibly time-consuming. A sail for an average ship would take the equivalent of two-and-a-half working years, far more than the time needed to build the actual ship, so the ships of the Viking Age were heavily dependent on women's work.<sup>11</sup> The quantity of textiles in the Oseberg burial, and of tools and equipment associated with textile

8 For Ibn Fadlan's account of the burial of a warrior chieftain, see James E. Montgomery, 'Ibn Fadlan and the Rusiyah,' *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 3 (2000): 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.5617/jais.4553>.

9 Museum of Cultural History, 'Two Wealthy Women,' UiO: Museum of Cultural History, <https://www.khm.uio.no/english/visit-us/viking-ship-museum/exhibitions/oseberg/two-wealthy-women/index.html>.

10 Per Holck, 'The Oseberg Ship Burial, Norway: New Thoughts on the Skeletons from the Grave Mound,' *European Journal of Archaeology* 9:2/3 (August 2006): 185–210, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461957107086123>.



Archaeologist Gabriel Gustafson and his team during the excavation of the Oseberg ship. Kulturhistorisk Museum, UiO (CC BY SA 4.0)

production, suggest a strong connection between the Oseberg women and this kind of work.

Marriage was the usual expectation for most high-status people, male or female, with marriages used to build alliances and repair rifts. Families were the main source of power, and it is unlikely that either or both women could have risen to prominence without strong family connections by birth, marriage or both. In all probability, the Oseberg women were or had been married to men at some point. Indeed their clothing included the white linen headdress traditionally associated with married women.<sup>12</sup>

For women in early Scandinavia, marriage was not a passive transfer from the authority of a father to a husband. The Icelandic sagas—written long after the Viking Age but generally considered useful as evidence of cultural patterns—depict numerous marriage negotiations in which women, particularly widows, are given a say in their choice of husband. If the woman was not

consulted, the marriage would often fail. While some women depicted in the sagas used a henchman with an axe to rid them of an unwanted husband, the less drastic option of divorce was readily available. Both women and men had the right to ask for divorce if they were emotionally, sexually or financially unsatisfied in their relationship, or if their spouse transgressed gender boundaries by cross-dressing. In *Laxdæla Saga*, a woman made her husband a feminine low-cut shirt then divorced him for wearing it and claimed half their joint estate.

There is no evidence that either Oseberg woman was divorced, but widowhood seems probable, particularly for the older woman. Numerous Scandinavian sources, including runestones and law codes, show that widows, particularly women with wealth and family connections, could often achieve more independence and influence than their married sisters.

Although the Oseberg women may have achieved some prominence through

- 11 Amy Lightfoot, 'From Heather Clad Hills to the Roof of a Medieval Church ... The Story of a Woollen Sail,' *Norwegian Textile Letter* 2:3 (May 1996): 1–12; Lise Bender Jørgensen, 'The Introduction of Sails to Scandinavia: Raw Materials, Labour and Land,' in *N-Tag-Ten: Proceedings of the 10th Nordic TAG Conference at Stiklestad, Norway 2009*, eds. Ragnhild Berge, Marek E. Jasinski and Kalle Sognnes (Oxford: Archaeopress 2012), 173–184
- 12 Peter Foote and David M. Wilson, *The Viking Achievement: The Society and Culture of Early Medieval Scandinavia* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1970), 174.

... it is most likely that the women achieved prominence through political influence, rising to positions of power within the Vestfold dynasty.

13 For archaeological evidence of a Viking Age female warrior, see Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson et al., 'A Female Viking Warrior Confirmed by Genomics,' *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 164:4 (2017): 853–860, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajpa.23308>; Michael Greshko, 'Famous Viking Warrior Was a Woman, DNA Reveals,' *National Geographic*, September 12, 2017, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2017/09/viking-warrior-woman-archaeology-spd/>.

14 Holck, 'The Oseberg Ship Burial, Norway'.

marriages, their elaborate burial suggests they are being honoured for their own status, not that of a husband. In the Viking Age, power was achieved mainly on the battlefield but it is unlikely that the Oseberg women were themselves warriors. This is not because women as warriors were unknown in their world. Viking Age mythology features women in martial roles, and a tapestry found in the burial mounds shows women holding spears and shields. Valkyries, the choosers of the slain, are often described with weapons in Scandinavian mythology and poetry. Viking Age graves of women with weapons have been found, including one that was clearly of very high-status, indicating that while most warriors were not women, some women could be warriors.<sup>13</sup>

While the hypothesis that these women were warrior queens is beguiling, the complete absence of weapons-related grave goods is problematic. While very little metal was found in the grave, it is usually assumed that precious metal items were removed by the early grave-robbars. This could well have included weaponry, so the absence of swords, shields or spears may not be significant. However, the younger Oseberg woman was of a particularly slight build.<sup>14</sup> Had she been a warrior, her survival into her mid-fifties would be remarkable, and her skeleton does not show evidence of battle wounds. Possibly the older woman could have been a

warrior in her younger days after surviving her childhood illness, but there is nothing to corroborate this hypothesis.

In the absence of other evidence, it is most likely that the women achieved prominence through political influence, rising to positions of power within the Vestfold dynasty. Given the male authority embedded in Viking Age society, it was truly exceptional for women to achieve the level of power represented in the Oseberg burial. While these women remain unknown to us, they must have been widely respected in their time.

### Reflection

The women of the Oseberg ship are remembered more than a millennium after their death. They stand as testimony to the countless women whose power and achievements slipped invisibly through the historical record, leaving a lopsided view of the past with men as the main protagonists and women as their silent helpers. Our knowledge of the Oseberg women remains fragmentary and probably always will be, but their wealth and high status fit in with the pictures we have of Viking women from other sources. From runestones to myths, to law codes and the Icelandic sagas, the evidence consistently portrays women in early Scandinavia as social agents. They were not the possessions of men but their equals and, in the Oseberg world, clearly their leaders.

### Visiting the Viking Ships

[www.khm.uio.no/english/visit-us/viking-ship-museum/](http://www.khm.uio.no/english/visit-us/viking-ship-museum/)

The Viking Ship Museum (*Vikingskipshuset*) near Oslo, where the Oseberg ship has rested since 1926, is closed for several years. It is being extended into a new Museum of the Viking Age, where the Oseberg and Gokstad ships will continue to be the star attractions, along with other vessels and a huge collection of artefacts. In the meantime, make a virtual visit using the Museum's 360° photo walkthrough of the ships and artefacts:

- Oseberg ship: <https://my.matterport.com/show/?m=x4xgpD8hUBj>
- Oseberg artefacts: <https://my.matterport.com/show/?m=kzyPq6pdiBe>
- Gokstad ship: <https://my.matterport.com/show/?m=LCWEGGrUnpi>