

Moen feels many archaeologists have put too much emphasis on historical texts, such as Snorri Sturluson's sagas.

“As archaeologists we have to base our analyses on archaeological material. Historical material do have some value, but only as secondary sources.”

Identifying male graves

The fact that far more graves of men than women have been found from this era has also been seen as an indication that men were more powerful. But it might not be that straightforward to identify a grave as male or female, Moen suggests.

Usually archaeologists have to rely on artefacts to gender identify a grave, due to a lack of human remains. But the presence of male objects (such as swords, shields or spears) or female objects (jewellery, fabric and weaving artefacts) does not conclusively prove the gender.

“There have also been cases of male graves with beads and woven cloths, and women were sometimes buried with smaller weapons, for instance arrowheads. Generally it is fairly obvious what constitutes male or female objects, but the lines were sometimes blurred.”

Prominent female graves

Added to this, the larger metal objects usually found in male graves are more likely to be discovered after hundreds of years - while smaller female objects such as brooches (and hence, female graves) can remain undetected.

“If it is the case that women belonged to the private sphere of the home and men were in the public sphere of society, this should be reflected in the burial landscape,” Moen points out. But in the Kaupang area she has studied, female graves are side by side with male graves – and just as prominent.

Victorian ideals of domestic women


“Since the Viking era became an important part of building Norwegian national identity in the 19th century, early archaeology was influenced by Victorian ideals. The contemporary ideals of women belonging to the home and men being out in the public was imposed on Viking society,” says Moen.

“The domestic role of Viking women may have been less limited to the private sphere than it is today. The large estates were contemporary seats of power, and the woman of the house had the keys. How private or public this role was should be interpreted outside our own cultural context.”

 [The viking women were powerful. \(Drawing: Erik Werenskiold\)](#) [7]

 [In Oseberg long boat the skelatons of two women were found. \(Photo: Wikimedia Commons\)](#) [8]

 [Marianne Moen.](#) [9]

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