

Smithsonian.com

SmartNews Keeping you current

Viking Woman Warrior May Have Been Slavic

A new analysis of female Viking warriors suggests one found in Denmark was actually from the area of present-day Poland



Artist's reconstruction of the Langeland grave. (Miroslaw Kuźma)

By [Jason Daley](#)
smithsonian.com
July 26, 2019

A 10th-century grave in Denmark was long thought to contain the bones of a warrior believed to be a Viking woman. But a new analysis of the grave, located on the island of Langeland, suggests that the warrior wasn't Viking, but rather Slavic, likely from the area of present-day Poland.

Researcher Leszek Gardela was researching Viking warrior women when he came across information on the Langeland burial. The grave, about 1,000 years old, includes the bones of the warrior woman along with an axe and an Arab coin from the 10th century, which helped date the burial. It was the only grave in the cemetery found to contain weapons, suggesting its occupant was a warrior, though the bones don't indicate she died in battle.

When Gardela, of the Department of Scandinavian Languages and Literatures at the University of Bonn, looked at the axe buried with the woman, however, he recognized it as a distinctly Slavic weapon. "So far, no one has paid any attention to the fact that the axe in the grave comes from the area of the southern Baltic, possibly today's Poland," he says in a [press release](#).

The style of grave is Slavic as well, a chamber grave with an additional coffin. Both of those facts have led Gardela to conclude that the burial's occupant is likely of Slavic origin.

The idea isn't that surprising. Slavic tribes and Viking tribes were closely linked, fighting one another, intermixing and trading. "The presence of Slavic warriors in Denmark was more significant than previously thought; this image emerges from new research" Gardela adds in the release. "During the Middle Ages, this island was a melting pot of Slavic and Scandinavian elements."



Leszek Gardela examines an axe found in a suspected female warrior's grave. (Mira Fricke)

So far, Gardela has identified 10 suspected Viking warriors who were women in his research, adding to the 20 who were previously identified. It's difficult work; in many cases, bones have not survived in the graves making it hard to definitively identify the sex of potential warriors. In many cases, what's buried with the skeleton, such as ornaments and jewelry, suggests their sex.

It's unknown whether these women participated in raiding or combat. Women warriors tend to be buried with axes. Rarely do the graves include things like arrow or spearheads. It's possible that their weapons were used ritualistically for things like divination ceremonies. Because the edges of the weapons found are often unblemished, it's possible they were made specifically as grave goods.

The Viking sagas, written in Iceland after the Viking age had ended, have female characters who are warriors, such as the warrior goddesses, the Valkyries, indicating that women warriors were a part of the Norse culture. But critics point out that the Valkyries, as well as the trolls, dragons and gods found in the sagas are fiction. So far, Gardela reports, there's scant evidence that Viking women took part in combat.

At least one suspected female warrior's grave, however, suggests that she may have been battle-ready. Found in 1878 in Birka, Sweden, the warrior grave included two sacrificed horses, a sword, shield, arrowheads and other weapons. It was, in fact, the ideal warrior burial. In 2017, researchers used DNA to identify the occupant of the grave as female.

Earlier this year, [a follow-up study confirmed that conclusion](#), and researchers also believe the array of weapons and armor suggest she had a career as a mounted archer. A game set found in the grave used to plot out military strategy as well as certain garments suggest she may have been a cavalry commander or some sort of military leader.

About Jason Daley

Jason Daley is a Madison, Wisconsin-based writer specializing in natural history, science, travel, and the environment. His work has appeared in *Discover*, *Popular Science*, *Outside*, *Men's Journal*, and other magazines.

|