GUIDEBOOK

THE VANG BURIAL GROUND

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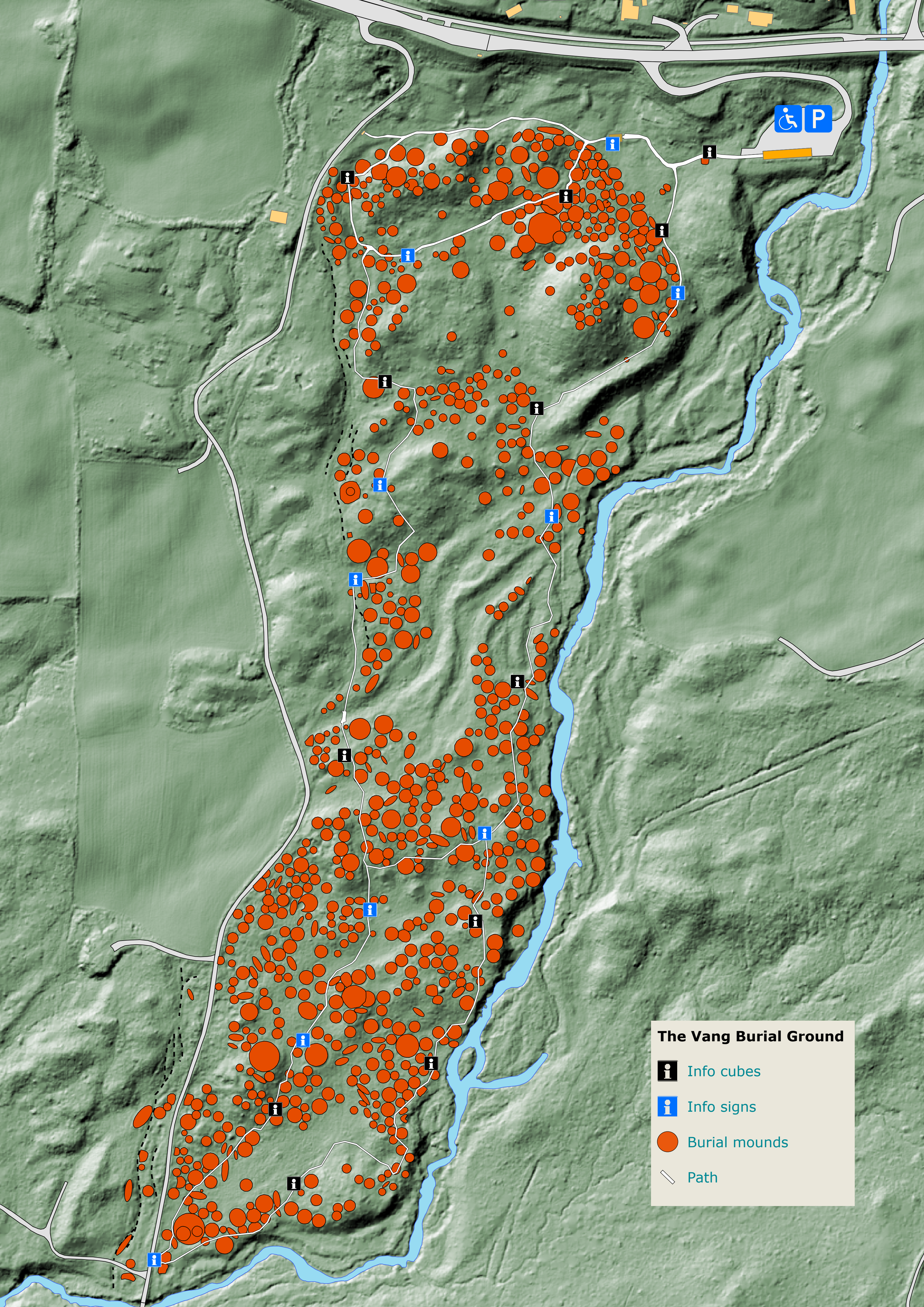
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THE VANG BURIAL GROUND – SUMMARY

The burial ground at Vang is a magical place. This is the largest Iron Age burial site in Norway, and one of the most extensive in Northern Europe. More than 900 large and small mounds and cairns are concentrated in a beautiful landscape.

The site was used for burials for hundreds of years. Mounds from the Viking Age (750–1050 A.D.) dominate. Scattered between these are graves from the Migration Period, several centuries earlier and also graves that lack physical surface markings. For all we know, the Vang burials may date back to a very distant past.

Precious objects found their way to the mountain village of Oppdal and eventually accompanied the dead at the Vang Burial Ground. The grave goods are high quality findings. They reflect wealth and power. Magnificent objects and ornaments tell stories of close contact with the Nordic region. The swords and the remarkable Celtic jewellery and ornamental luxury objects show strong connections with the British Isles and countries further south in Europe during the Iron Age. The sword blades were some of the very best available at the time. These were costly prestigious items showing that the settlement of Oppdal took part in the international communication network of trade and travel.

The burial ground at Vang is surrounded by miles of mountains and plateaus. These are hunting grounds where thousands of years of hunting for the wild reindeer and moose have left their unambiguous marks on the landscape. Butts and hides and large trapping systems, stray arrows in snowdrifts and arrowheads in the burial mounds at Vang, show hunting as the main source of livelihood in the area. The mountains were a source of profit and wealth. The hunt for wild reindeer and moose provided food, clothing, surplus goods and export of products. Hides, furs and antlers were in big demand in Europe. Some of the wealth from the trade and travel was buried with the dead in the mounds at Vang.

Vang is where roads meet. The burial ground sits at the old crossroads for travellers to and from Sunndalen and the Møre coast to the west, the Trondheim Fjord in the north and the Dovrefjell crossing in the south. With its central location between sea and mountains, along some of the country's main thoroughfares, the large burial ground indicates the presence of powerful and influential families in Vang and Oppdal. Vang has been an important hub since the Viking Age, and still is. The main Pilgrim Path to Trondheim and the Kingsroad over Dovrefjell follow the old northbound road alongside the burial ground, to Oppdal Church and onwards to Trondheim.

Photo: Marit Johansson.

THE VANG BURIAL GROUND IN OPPDAL

On a gentle south-facing hillside below Oppdal Church you find the Vang Burial Ground – Norway's largest Iron Age burial site, and among the largest in northern Europe. It's a communal burial ground with more than 900 registered mounds, where most of the graves date back to the Viking Age (750–1050 AD). Archaeological research shows that the site was probably in use as early as the 400s–600s AD, but we may discover even older graves in the future.

A 700-meter walk along the west bank of the lively Skjørdøla River takes you through pastures and pine groves along the entire length of the burial site. The many burial mounds have been placed in dense clusters spread across four acres of land. Graves are marked by large and small, round or oblong mounds of dirt and rock, as well as flat stone markers. The idyllic surroundings are evocative, but they are not why this was chosen as a location for the site. The placement on the hillside provides ample view in most directions, visible to people from a long distance – a signal that strong and powerful families reside in Vang and Oppdal. The burial ground sits where the main roads meet, at the old crossroads for travellers to and from Sunndalen and the Møre coast in the west, the Trondheim Fjord in the north, and the Dovrefjell crossing in the south.

The burial ground is unusual and unique in both size and scope and has piqued the curiosity of visitors ever since the burial ground went out of use more than a thousand years ago. When the Christian faith arrived, during the transition between the Viking Age and the Middle Ages, burying the dead in mounds at pagan sites was outlawed. New burial rites adapted to a different worldview eventually took over. The Vang site became shrouded in mystery, and the notions and myths of what was hidden in the strange mounds grew in people's minds. Who built the mounds, and what are they concealing? Some were more curious than others, and we see traces of this in the form of old excavations (so-called looting pits) at several mounds. In recent decades, 15 graves at the site have been carefully excavated by archaeologists (in the years 1966/67, 1989/90 and 1999), and investigations have given us insight into the unique prehistoric source material located at the Vang site.

The graves are rich in objects, some very exclusive. These are evidence of a community with significant resources and an extensive network of contacts in the Nordic countries and Europe during the Viking Age. What were the reasons for the great wealth and standing of the people in this mountain village over a thousand years ago?

What can the burial ground tell us about the people who once lived and buried their dead at Vang? What can we discern from the physical traces preserved both in the landscape and below the ground?

Photo: Kristin Prestvold.

MYTHS

One of the earliest known descriptions of the enigmatic Vang site is Gerhard Schøning's travel notes from the 1770s. Schøning was a historian and curator, and put a lot of work into documenting the country's history and geography. His travelogues from central Norway are a treasure trove of detailed observations, descriptions and sketches, providing valuable insight into Norway's topography before the profound changes to landscapes and society brought on by the great modernisation.

Schøning describes an «unusual number» of burial mounds at Vang, and his sketches and descriptions of the overgrown site estimate that there are about 117. However, a hundred years later, another historian, Henrik Mathiesen, notes: *«When Schøning says that there are at least 116 mounds, I must say this number seems very low, considering the 1500 m long and 300 m wide hillside is literally covered in mounds»*.

Even though Schøning gravely underestimated the number of graves at the Vang Burial Ground, he didn't hold back when presenting the stories behind them. He writes:

> *«One tells that here, in years past, a great battle has taken place. By all accounts, some later recorded, this must be the place where King Harald Fairhair clashed with the kings of Trondheim which had united against him».*

The notion is based on information in the Saga of Harald Fairhair, written by Snorri Sturluson on Iceland in the 1220s. The saga claims that Harald Fairhair fought against the Orkdalings at Oppdalsskogen in 863. This was still a common belief among people in Oppdal when Gerhard Schøning visited the burial ground in 1774. The idea is captivating, but does not hold true today. The burials are not the result of a single event, but have rather accumulated through a period of several hundreds of years. People were buried at Vang long before Fairhair's time.

Gerhard Schøning.
Illustration from Wikimedia Commons.

Photo: Kristin Prestvold.

TREASURE HUNTING

Between two and three hundred burial mounds at the Vang Burial Ground have been looted for treasure through the centuries. People dug down from the top of the mounds, resulting in them having a number of depressions of varying depth at the centre – archaeologists call them «looting pits».

Some of the digging took place in the century following the burial, when descendants of the deceased breached the grave to subdue the dead. He or she may have become too great a burden for remaining ancestors, and one way for the living to bring peace was to bend or destroy the buried sword, or otherwise make sure that the «mound people» did not cause unrest among the living. Occasionally, enemies and competing families would plunder mounds to obtain various symbols of power. Nevertheless, most of the mound excavations took place in the 19th century and the early 20th century, when amateur archaeologists and history enthusiasts hunted for treasure and rare antiques. Archaeology was in vogue, and people were fascinated by burial mounds and past greatness. Digging for antiquities in the mounds became a hobby, and finding precious metals or valuable artefacts could also be quite profitable.

In a report from 1871, Henrik Mathisen writes that he during a trip to Kvikne in Østerdalen became aware of a number of «relics» in Oppdal, and therefore decided to travel there. Mathiesen was a historian, businessman and illustrator, and was very interested in the history of Trøndelag. Upon arriving in Oppdal, he bought objects from a number of people who on various occasions had dug into the mounds with the intention of handing their findings over to the university. Mathiesen was annoyed that those who had dug up the objects from the various graves *«did not possess the wisdom to keep them separated»*.

Mathiesen and other history enthusiasts made an effort to get these findings added to museum collections. This is a time when Norway is committed to documenting its own prehistory. Archaeological collections were essential to nation building and part of official contemporary policy. Despite this, many of the items were sold to private collectors from all over the country. Many of them are probably

lost, and others damaged as a result of inadequate storage conditions while in private ownership. As we also lack information about find locations and more, they currently have little research value.

Dense forest, a new priest and fresh legislation helps fend off pillaging

For a number of reasons, the rampant treasure hunting at the burial ground gradually subsided. In 1871, Mathiesen writes that the hillside has become overgrown with forest, with the extensive roots making it difficult to dig. Many of the mounds were therefore not in complete disarray. In 1932, local historian Inge Mull writes about the Vang site that *«While in the 1870s, anyone could dig and explore as they pleased, luckily a new priest arrived and put an end to the haphazard messing about. No digging has taken place since»*.

In addition, Norway enacted its first Act concerning the cultural heritage in 1905, granting archaeological heritage sites formal legal protection. These factors contributed to the burial ground at Vang being more or less left alone throughout the 20th century. The site was given a few years off from digging hands until professional archaeological investigations were initiated in the 1960s.

Thirst for knowledge replaces hunger for gold – archaeological investigations at Vang

While the «haphazard mess» of the 19th century was characterised by pure treasure hunting, focused on excavating valuable artefacts and precious metals from the ground, professionals and researchers gradually realised that single artefacts out of context were of little scientific value. The key to learning something about the past was through a scientific approach to the material – that detailed documentation and observations during the excavation process, and of the site conditions, could form the basis for comparison and analysis of the grave findings.

In 1966–67, motivated by research and guided by specific scientific questions, excavations began at Vang. This happened in connection with Oddmunn Farbregd's PhD thesis in archaeology at the University of Oslo. Eight burial mounds were excavated by the University Museum in Trondheim, with support from Oppdal Municipality and the Research Council of Norway. The excavations showed that the larger mounds had been particularly exposed to looting, while the smaller ones were left undamaged. Despite the damage caused by looters, the excavations yielded substantial findings. From the eight mounds,

Archaelogical digs in 1989.
Photo: Syver Ulvolden,
NTNU University Museum.

3-400 objects were recovered. The examined burial mounds were scattered throughout the site, and all turned out to be from the Viking Age. In the years 1989–90, Farbregd examined two more Viking Age burial mounds. These digs were salvage excavations after a winter storm toppled around fifty pine trees on the site. One of the windthrows towards the centre of the site had exposed several objects from a plentiful grave. They were neatly placed at eye-level between the soil and roots. The subsequent excavation to salvage the material yielded such interesting finds that an adjacent burial mound was excavated the following year –again with remarkable discoveries

During deforestation in the 1990s, archaeologists became aware of a number of previously undiscovered low cairns. In 1999, two of the cairns were archaeologically examined in connection with Anne-Lise Fløttum's Master's thesis in archaeology at the University of Tromsø. The aim was to uncover whether the stones were in fact grave markings, something confirmed by the excavations. The graves were dated to the 400s–500s – The Migration Period. A total of 15 graves at the site have now been examined scientifically by archaeologists.

Archaeological heritage sites are granted robust legal protection. But preserving the experience and scientific value of cultural heritage monuments and sites for future generations is also an important conservation principle. Cultural heritage is a non-renewable resource, and although archaeological excavations can provide a lot of information, unfortunately the method also results in the removal and destruction of such heritage as part of the investigation process. Therefore, excavations are only permitted when they are deemed to be of great value to society, when the research projects are well-founded and can provide fresh knowledge, or to secure knowledge when cultural heritage is in danger of being lost due to natural causes like erosion and flooding.

GRAVES AND BURIAL RITES IN THE LATE IRON AGE AND VIKING AGE

Archaeologists use the term «burial rites» for all rituals and ideas related to the treatment of the deceased from the time of death until the funeral ceremony is completed. The dead pass from one phase to another, marking the start of a new existence. It is important that the transition to the realm of the dead is successful, both for the living and the dead themselves.

Examples of this are rituals meant to prevent the deceased from returning to haunt the living and their homestead. Rituals and actions that leave physical traces, as well as ceremonial rites, songs, sacrifices and actions that do not leave traces, all reflect people's basic spiritual imagination and mythology. Remains of the physical traces can be found by archaeologists in the graves or «tombs». But while a burial was meant to serve the deceased, the grave monument could in many cases also have a function beyond that of a final resting place. The design, size and placement in the landscape could play a major role in demonstrating power, social status, property rights, and rights to land/travel/farm and ancestral worship. In this way, the funeral

Illustration: Arkikon.

and the grave monument impacted and helped structure the existence of the living.

Early Iron Age

In the earliest phase of the Iron Age, the Pre-Roman Iron Age (500 BC–year 0), burial rites in this country remained relatively frugal and uniform; the dead were often burned, sometimes placed in urns, and then buried in pits below ground or covered by a small stone packing. The graves contained few items, often with no grave goods at all. Through the Roman Iron Age (0–400 AD) we see an increasing degree of variation in burial rites. Some are granted more lavish grave goods, with larger mounds or cairns. Some of the graves contain an abundance of precious metals and imported artefacts, and are built to an impressive size. In addition to the pyres, people in the Roman Iron Age began to bury their dead unburned, in so called flat graves (unmarked and thus invisible above ground). Perhaps the increasing differences between graves and their contents reflect a growing class divide in society, where some are accumulating both wealth and networks with Europe and the Roman Empire. During the Migration Period (400–570 AD), the trend of plentiful graves and imposing monuments continues – albeit for a select few. Not everyone was granted impressive grave monuments. We do not know who these chosen ones were, the criteria for selection, or what the survivors wanted to tell us about the deceased and about themselves. Fashion and trends play a role. We nevertheless emphasise the great diversity of burial rites – burnt and unburnt graves, graves in mounds or cairns, flat graves, as well as frugal and plentiful graves side by side.

Late Iron Age and Viking Age

The Late Iron and Viking Ages saw a particular multitude of burial rites. In the Merovingian Period (570–800 AD), burial rites are still varied, but the tendency is towards graves being less abundant, both in number and content. At the beginning of this era, the graves tend to have less conspicuous markers, and many are buried in flat graves with no surface markers at all. This applies to burnt and unburnt funerals alike. We do not know why, but many researchers point to a general downturn due to an inhospitable climate, disease, failing crops, civil unrest and declining populations from the mid-500s. These may be some of the reasons why people spent fewer resources on graves. Gradually, we see the beginning of a new burial rite – laying

people to rest in boats. Towards the end of the Merovingian Period, large mounds are built in some places, and grave findings become more abundant.

As we enter the Viking Age (750–1050), the number of graves increases once again, along with their contents. The archaeological material from this period is very diverse. The rites vary between burnt and unburnt burials, in round, oblong or star-shaped mounds, in cairns, wooden coffins, boats and ships. The dead are buried with various amounts of clothing, personal equipment, tools, jewellery and weapons. In many cases we also find animal remains in the graves, most often horses or dogs. Geography and local traditions, fashion, social status, gender and ethnicity, as well as other conditions we are not aware of today, may all have had an impact on the design, content and location of the graves.

The Oppdal communal burial grounds stand out

Iron Age graves are often granted a prominent location in the landscape, near settlements or along thoroughfares, clearly visible to anyone passing by. They are designed to be noticed, as markers in the landscape, but also to provide the dead with a view of the farm or village. In the Late Iron Age, the connection between burial mounds and their farmsteads appears strong, and the norm is for each individual farm to maintain a burial ground of its own. This is not the case in Oppdal, which differs markedly from this norm with its large communal sites. We know of three such communal burial sites in this area: the largest at Vang is for the central village, the others for Drivdalen at Rise and towards Sunndalen at Strand by Lønset. Most of the graves at the last two sites were removed as part of cultivation efforts in the 19th century. Apart from the large burial sites, we find only a few Iron Age graves. Previous researchers have estimated that there were about 40 farms associated with the Vang Burial Ground around 1000 AD. The concentration, grouping and distribution of graves at Vang seem to correspond to the number of farms. In Sunndalen, along the road from the mountain towards the nearest port, there is also a communal burial site. The similarities might indicate close communication and cohesion between these valleys in the Iron Age. Such large communal sites are otherwise unusual in Norway and Scandinavia during the Late Iron Age, and quite unique to the extent seen at Vang. Why did the villagers band together on this issue in the Late Iron Age, instead of burying family members at separate farmstead sites like elsewhere in Norway? Were the people of Oppdal just extremely conservative and traditional, choosing to stick to the old burial rites despite the general shift towards

Archaeologist Oddmund Farbregd digging at Vang. Photo: NTNU University Museum.

farmstead sites? Or is this a consequence of the massive cooperative efforts needed for hunting reindeer and constructing those large mass capture facilities in the mountains? Together in life, together in death?

Pyres – cremation graves

The prevailing burial rite at Vang is cremation burials or so-called cremation patches. The deceased were dressed in their finest clothes and jewellery, and placed alongside weapons, tools and other objects needed in the afterlife. The pyre was then lit on fire, and the body and objects burned. Left on the ground were the remains of the pyre and the surviving grave goods: pale white bone, molten pearls and fire scorched jewellery and weapons. Atop

the pyre remains, a mound or marker was built. The treasure hunters who dug into the mounds in search of beautiful jewellery and precious objects in the 19th century observed and reported charcoal and ash layers inside the mounds.

The mounds built atop the cremation patches at Vang are both round and oblong, and of all different sizes, from 3–4 m to around 20 m in diameter. Several mounds are only half a meter tall, and many even lower. Archaeological research has not uncovered any correlation between the size of the mounds and the wealth contained in the graves. In addition, we believe that burials without external markings, so-called flat graves, can be found below and between the burial mounds on the site. These are simple pits in the ground or graves constructed using stone slabs to form a small chamber.

Horses in burial rites

Another interesting feature of many of the Viking Age graves at Vang is the number of unburnt horse bones, especially parts of jaws and teeth, placed in the mounds alongside the cremated human bones and objects. The horse remains are found just outside the cremation patches and grave goods, but still within the mound. Archaeologists unearthed the remains of horses during excavations in both the 1960s and 1990s, and treasure hunters reported similar findings in the 1800s. Bridles and halter straps, as well as rings and iron hooks that are probably from harnesses or other horse equipment, have been found in several of the graves.

We see that during the Viking Age, one or more horses are usually included in the burial rites at Vang, but are not part of the cremation. What role did horses play in the funeral? The horse was an important animal in the Viking Age, both in daily life and in religion. In Norse mythology, horses were associated with a number of special skills. For example, the horses Rimfakse and Skinfakse were believed to be pulling night and day across the sky. The most famous horse in Norse mythology is Odin's mount, the eight-legged Sleipner. No other horse came close to Sleipner's speed, and he could traverse both land and water, ride through skies and mountains, and even visit the realm of the dead.

Horses are also found in Viking graves in other parts of the country. Perhaps the horse was meant to carry the deceased to the realm of the dead? In the graves at Vang we find parts of the horses' heads. Maybe the horse(s) pulled the stretcher or coffin carrying the dead to the pyre and was then killed? Perhaps the head was placed in the burial mound to symbolise a safe journey to the realm of the dead, while the rest of the animal was part of a ritual feast for the funeral procession? It is also possible that whole horses were placed in the graves at Vang, but that the remaining parts have rotted away. Teeth are better preserved in soil than bones due to the protective tooth enamel.

Viking woman on a horse.
Photo from Heidi Marie Frantzen Wold.

GRAVE GOODS

Burial rites and how we relate to death are formed on the basis of faith, religion and world of thought. Changes in ideas and beliefs therefore lead to a great variety of burial rites and grave goods through the ages. In some parts of prehistory, the graves contain only the remains of the deceased, while at other times it was common to bury the dead alongside a selection of objects, often called 'grave goods'. The graves can be rich, containing a wealth of material goods. At the same time, the content of the graves can vary greatly within the same time period, and even within the same burial ground. A plethora of different burial rites existed throughout the Iron Age. Fashions of the time probably also played a role.

Archaeologists have long debated what the grave goods represent. Do they directly reflect the role and social standing of the deceased? Can we assume that a man buried with a pair of tongs was a blacksmith? Or are there also symbolic and abstract ideas behind the selection of specific objects? Were the grave goods meant to be things the dead would need in the afterlife? Did they all belong to the deceased, or are they gifts and offerings from relatives? Does the wealth in the grave reflect the social standing and prosperity of the deceased? Or are the objects and grave markers part of the families' battle for power and prestige – a way to show off?

Grave findings have been one of the main aspects of archaeological research since the very beginning, and interpretations about what the graves can tell about the people of the past are many and varied. The objects are of great research value. They are the result of deliberate actions at a given moment in time, and therefore provide a valuable contemporary snapshot. They make possible comparisons across time and space.

Common Viking Age grave goods

It was common during the Viking Age to bury the dead belonging to the middle and upper strata of society with costumes, accessories, ornaments, jewellery, personal items, weapons, tools, various containers, food, pets and other objects which might be needed in the afterlife. Despite rich variation, the wealthiest graves are almost what we might call 'standardised' in terms of content. A complete set of weapons for a free man or woman in Viking times consisted of a sword, axe, spear and shield. A 'standardised jewellery set' for upper class women contained two oval bronze brooches worn on the chest, often combined with a third brooch by the neck and a glass bead necklace.

In addition to costumes and personal jewellery or weapons, personal hygiene items (tweezers, combs and ear picks) were also common. Furthermore, tools related to tasks and crafting

Artefacts found at Vang. Photo: Syver Ulvolden, NTNU University Museum.

often occur, such as hunting equipment (arrowheads), blacksmith tools (anvils, tongs and files), agricultural tools (sickles and scythes), horse equipment (bridles and harnesses), textile tools (beaters, shuttles, wool combs and spinning wheels), fish gigs for catching salmon in the river, knives, whetstones, needles, kitchen utensils, serving utensils and various vessels containing food and drink. Even animals such as horses and dogs were common. Some rich graves also contain imported goods.

The Viking Age grave goods at Vang

The objects that we archaeologists expect to find in well-equipped Viking Age graves are all well represented among the Vang grave goods. There are a large number of weapons such as swords, spears and axes, a variety of knives and arrowheads, jewellery, and a wide range of tools and horse equipment. Some of the graves also contain rarities of particularly high quality: luxury objects from afar – symbols of prestige and social standing.

Imported goods from the British Isles

Among the grave goods found at the Vang Burial Ground are three beautiful and elegantly decorated gilded bronze clasps. The clasps differ in form and design from their Norse Viking Age equivalents. The origin of the objects can be determined by examining the quality and ornamentation; they are decorated with animals or braid patterns, typical of Irish intricate metalwork at the time. Irish decorative art from early Christian times was known for its exquisite quality, and the ornamentation of the metal clasps is the blacksmithing equivalent of the richly illustrated books and church art found in contemporary churches and monasteries. These beautiful gilded clasps adorned the covers of holy books, richly decorated reliquaries or processional crosses. Two of the imported clasps at Vang originate from Irish church art, while the third may be from a harness. Based on the style, we believe they were crafted in the 700s or 800s AD.

Reliquary from Overhalla. Photo: Per Fredriksen, NTNU University Museum.

It probably took a few decades for the beautiful clasps to end up as grave goods at Vang. Archaeologists use the terms 'insular finds' for imported goods originating from the British Isles. It is used for all objects from the islands west of Norway. Recently, eight insular finds which may have originated from Vang were discovered in a private collection. Unfortunately, the related documentation is incomplete, and we can therefore not confirm that they are indeed from the Vang Burial Ground.

The Rise Angel from Oppdal. Photo: Ellen C. Holte, UIO Museum of Cultural History.

We know of about 100 confirmed insular Viking Age finds in Trøndelag. Of these, about thirty are different types of clasps. The rest are drinking cups, flatware, swords, needle brooches and weighing scales. Most of the finds are from the rich agricultural settlements in the inner parts of the Trondheim Fjord. But we also have some finds from the mouth of the fjord, as well as from Snåsa and Namdalen. The insular clasps from the Vang site are accompanied by insular clasps from Rise and Strand, two other large Iron Age burial grounds in Oppdal. Along with several insular finds from Sunndalen in Møre og Romsdal, about 50 km to the west, the area represents a concentration of imported objects in Norwegian terms.

A shared trait for the import pieces is that they come from quite far away, and have been removed from their original environment either through looting or trading. After arriving at their destinations in Trøndelag, they were repurposed as jewellery or clothing ornaments. We see clear evidence of this when examining the backs of objects, where there are traces of hooks, nails or needles used for fastening, adapting them for use in new ways and in a different cultural context. We know that the clasps were often used as a 'third brooch', placed between the two oval brooches used in female Viking Age costumes, but they were sometimes also used to decorate belts. There were probably other uses for these magnificent import items as well. The largest Irish clasp at the Vang Burial Ground was discovered in mound 318. The grave contained carnelian pearls from the East, as well as an imported sword which we will return to in the next chapter.

The bronze clasp from burial mound 318, before cleaning. Photo: Per Fredriksen, NTNU University Museum.

Copy of the clasp, made by Marius Hoel and Magnus Meistad.

Photo: Per Fredriksen, NTNU University Museum.

Although the clasps were made of shiny gilded bronze, we believe that the objects' exceptional quality and distinctly foreign and exotic design were of great importance, having an alluring effect on the Norse population of the time. By wearing the magnificent objects and showing them off, the contemporary elite broadcasted their status and that of their family. It was evidence of extensive networks of communication across considerable distances – symbolic value transcending material worth.

The Ulfberht-swords – foreign blades of exceptional quality

Towards the centre of the elongated Vang site, archaeologists discovered a pair of blades while excavating two burial mounds in 1989-1990. Swords are fairly common grave goods in the Viking Age, but the blades from mounds 318 and 319 stand out. They are of unusually high quality – luxury weapons of the Viking Age. Both swords have decorated hilts. On one sword, both guard and pommel are inlaid with transversing bronze threads – about 14-16 m of bronze thread was used to decorate the hilt. The second sword is even more magnificent. Here, the guard and pommel are covered in an intricate geometric pattern with inlaid threads made from a silver and copper alloy. The different pommel surfaces are separated by braided silver threads, with each side crafted as animal heads. Both blades are exquisite decorative swords, reflecting the impressively refined craftsmanship of Viking Age blacksmiths.

When discovered, the iron blades themselves were rusty and worn after many centuries in the earth. To the naked eye, they looked quite ordinary. It was only through X-ray examination at the conservation laboratory that their rare qualities were uncovered. Both swords had inscriptions along the blade, made by inserting a patterned thread into the iron during forging.

On the front of the blades, Latin letters spell out the name 'ULFBERHT', while the back shows a geometric cross-pattern. The 'Ulfberht' swords are known throughout much of Europe, and were even found in the Orient. We believe that 'Ulfberht' is the name or trademark of a forge along the Rhine in the Frankish Empire during the 800s - 1000s. The spelling varies somewhat, and we often find the signature alongside one or more cross-patterns, as is the case for the swords from Vang. Some researchers have suggested that the Ulfberht signature refers to a scholar, and probably not to the blacksmith himself – that Ulfberth is the name of the workshop or the person or persons who oversaw the production. The crosses in the signature could indicate that Ulfberht was a clergyman, perhaps a bishop or abbot who oversaw an armoury attached to a monastery. Many questions remain about the enigmatic 'Ulfberht' swords, but there is no doubt that the swords were very prestigious. The blades were highly sought after, and carrying a sword with this inscription was a hallmark of quality. Counterfeit Ulfberht swords have also been found, confirming the blades' considerable worth.

The Ulfberht forge produced a large number of high-quality blades in the Viking Age. More than 160 have been discovered in the Nordic countries and Europe, around 44 of them in Norway. The number may increase, as many swords have yet to be X-rayed. The large proportion of Ulfberht swords found in Norway, when compared to continental Europe, is mainly due to Norway's elaborate Viking Age burial rites – the swords here ended up in the 'underground archives'. Large parts of Western Europe were already Christianised, meaning the dead were no longer granted grave goods.

HUNTING WILD REINDEER

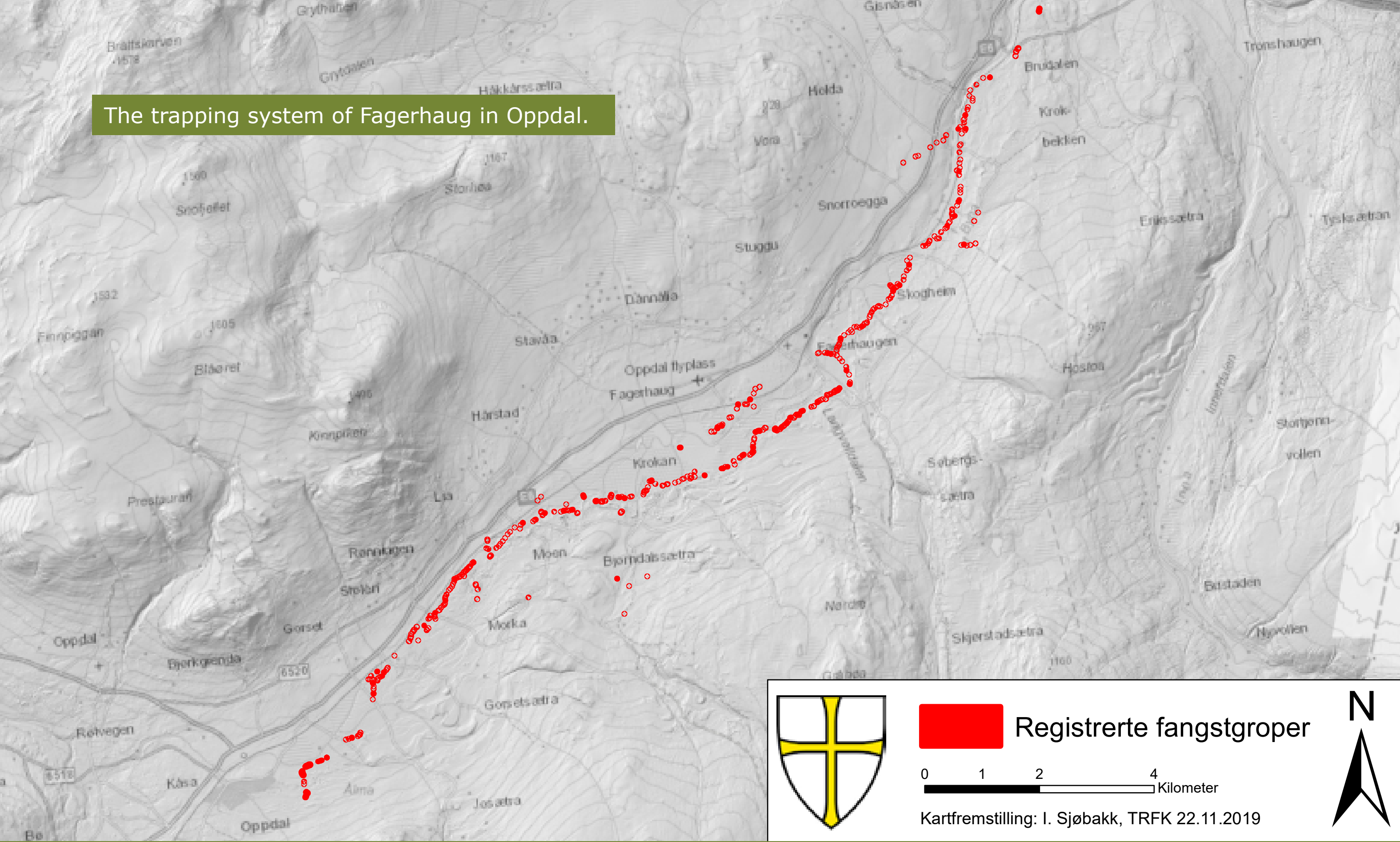
The size of the Vang Burial Ground, special characteristics and exclusive grave goods have often been attributed to its location at the crossroads between north, south and west – as a communications hub between sea and mountains. But this is not the only possible explanation. The people here had access to a highly sought-after resource, for which others were willing to pay, and pay well. Wandering in the mountains, there was an almost inexhaustible source of exploitable wealth – the wild reindeer.

Wild reindeer have remained important since the first humans settled along the Norwegian coast around 12,000 years ago. The earliest part of the Stone Age in Norway has been named the 'Fosna culture'. During this pioneering era, people survived on marine resources for most of the year. But in the summer, hunters and trappers left the coast and travelled up towards Oppdal in search of wild reindeer. Stone Age people left traces in the mountains, and in the old settlements we find hunting tools and arrowheads made of flint, quartz, bone and shells. The earliest hunters used bows and arrows, often from small hunting posts – stone hunting blinds – along the reindeer's migration routes.

Drift hunting was also common. On hot summer days, the reindeer seek out snowdrifts to cool off and deal with the particularly intrusive botflies. The wild reindeer are observant and alert, reacting quickly to movement and possible dangers, constantly on the move. Using well-placed scaring sticks in the snow and stone hunting blinds along the drift edges, hunters could to an extent steer and scare the reindeer in the desired direction. The method is suitable for both small and larger groups of hunters, and has been used all the way up to modern times, even though the bow and arrows were replaced following the introduction of gunpowder. Plenty of arrowheads have surfaced in the last century from under the melting snowdrifts of the Oppdal mountains, many of them thousands of years old.

Many ingenious hunting methods for wild reindeer or other deer and elk have been used throughout the ages. Trapping pits, or networks of trapping pits, is an ancient method based on a simple principle: Long and narrow deep pits are dug along the animals' migration route, and then covered with twigs and leafs. Guiding fences or other devices lead or scare the animals towards the row of pits. The pits are often funnel-shaped with a wooden frame towards the bottom,

Hunting wild reindeer.
Illustration: Arkikon.



The trapping system of Fagerhaug in Oppdal.

preventing the animals from gaining a foothold and escaping. Trapping pits were used as early as the Stone Age, but the use of this method virtually exploded during the Iron Age. In loose soil, earth-dug pits like the ones described here remained the most common. In the alpine regions of southern Norway, however, hunters built narrow, rectangular dry-walled stone pitfalls – sometimes called trapping graves. Nature dictated both construction method and building material.

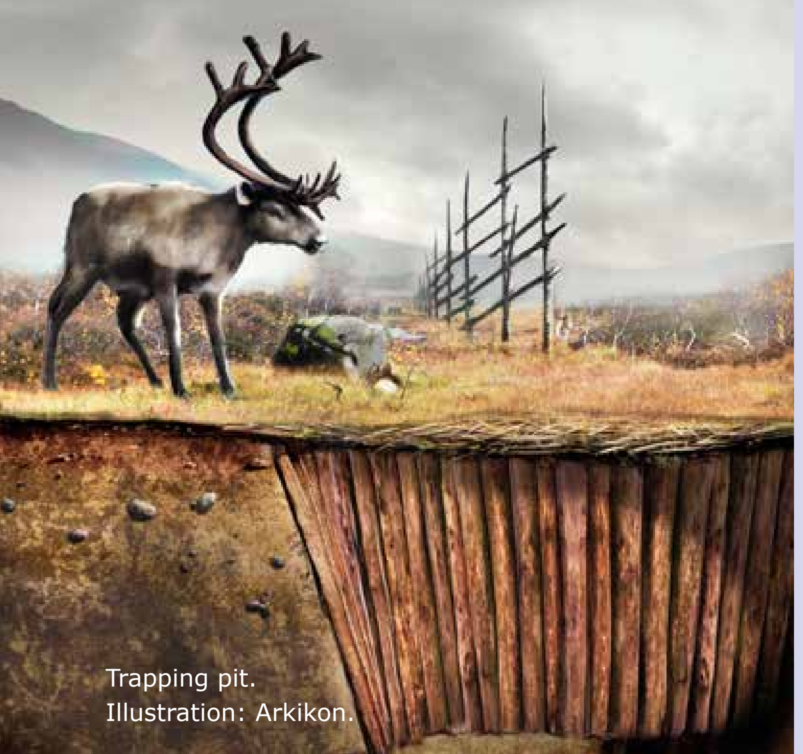
Iron Age and Middle Age industrial scale hunting

The use of such pits or graves was widespread, especially in the Viking Age and the Early Middle Ages. We see examples of trapping networks extending across several kilometres, consisting of more than a thousand pits. The largest such network is found on Dovrefjell, but also Fagerhaug and Nerskogen have large trapping systems with several hundred to a thousand pits. Digging, maintaining and operating these pits was a formidable task.

During the Iron Age, the so-called ‘mass trapping facilities’ came into use, with larger traps and enclosures intended to collect and detain hundreds of animals. One such facility has been found at Vålåsjåhø on Dovrefjell. The site consists of a large funnel-shaped enclosure made using closely spaced wooden posts secured by rocks at the base. Towards the far end, the narrowing enclosure leads to a cramped stall where the animals were killed. The trapping facility is located just beyond a gentle hill summit, designed so that it is barely visible to the wild reindeer herd before they’ve actually crossed it and are almost inside the enclosure with no means of escape. The posts are gone, but wooden remains found in one of the postholes have been carbon dated to the latter half of the 13th century, which is probably towards the end of its time of use.

The trapping pits and mass trapping sites indicate that wild reindeer hunting took place on an industrial scale at Dovrefjell in the Late Iron Age and Early Middle Ages. Several centuries of massive trapping in the southern Norwegian mountain areas had its consequences, resulting in a drastic decline in the wild reindeer population towards the end of the 13th century. We can almost use the term collapse as a result of this overtaxation.

Visitor Center Wild Reindeer at Hjerkinn provides extensive information on wild reindeer. Through the exhibitions, you can hear stories of wild reindeer hunting in the mountains and learn more about all the different hunting facilities used through the ages. Several of these have been reconstructed at the Visitor Center Wild Reindeer.



Trapping pit.
Illustration: Arkikon.

What made the reindeer so valuable?

Pelts, antlers, bones, flesh, blood and tendons – the animals were packed with materials of considerable value to humans. The wild reindeer are herd animals with established migration habits. This makes them predictable, giving knowledgeable and experienced hunters a good chance of success. But what made the wild reindeer especially valuable in the Iron Age and Early Middle Ages? The industrial trapping yielded returns far beyond the needs of a self-sustaining community.

The large markets for these products existed in the many towns and trade posts established throughout the Nordic countries and Europe at the time. Travel was common, the trade networks extensive, and demand was soaring. The founding of cities and permanent trading posts led to the emergence of professional craftsmen and a growing market for raw materials. In the early cities of the Late Iron Age and Early Middle Ages, archaeological traces of a large number of workshops can be found. Antlers were used for game pieces, needles and combs. Combmaking was a particularly busy occupation in the early European cities. Dense populations led to increased problems with lice and vermin, making combs a handy tool indeed. But beautiful combs made from antlers were also coveted ornamental objects. Intricate hairstyles required quality tools, and the comb played a major role in the art of hairdressing. We liked showing off, just like today. Hairstyles are fashion, and hair can be decorative.

ALPINE COOPERATION AND CULTURAL CONTACT

The construction, maintenance and operation of the large wild reindeer hunting sites and systems were tasks requiring enormous efforts in terms of time, organisation, manpower, supplies and equipment. This would not have been possible without extensive cooperation.

The farms in Oppdal and at Vang acted as way points for much of the raw materials and products obtained through the wild reindeer hunts, before they were distributed to the European market. Raw materials were transported from the mountains mainly by horse and through to the nearest port where the ships set sail for foreign markets. But the people of Oppdal were not the only ones harvesting resources from the vast mountain areas surrounding their village. Towards the southern part of Dovrefjell you would find peasants from Tofte and Dovrebygd, and the vast mountains and forests were also home to a Sami population. Who initiated the hunts? We do not know how the hunt was organised or who managed its operation and divvied the spoils, but trapping on such a large scale would be impossible without extensive contact and

Sami drum. Photo: Åge Hojem, NTNU University Museum.

When the dammed up Aursjøen lake on the border between the counties Innland and Møre og Romsdal was drained, archaeologists began their investigations of previously flooded settlements and heritage sites. The image is from the 2006 excavation of four rectangular fireplaces ('aernieh') with a structure typical of Sami settlements. The fireplaces have been dated to around 700-900 AD.
Photo: Jostein Bergstøl, UiO Museum of Cultural History.

cooperation between people. As hunters, the Sami's proximity to, and knowledge of, the mountains and reindeer undoubtedly made them sought-after hunting partners.

Sami traces in the southern mountains

Whether or not there were Sami populations living in the southern Norwegian mountains in the Iron and Middle Ages, and how far back this presence extends, has been a contested issue. The Sami are mentioned sporadically as an ethnic group present in southern Norway in written sources both from the Early Middle Ages and more recent times. Many European sources throughout the Iron Age mention the Sami – or 'Finns' – as a people.

Ethnicity can be difficult to trace in archaeological material. Where the Norse population constructed more or less permanent settlements through farmsteads, celebrating their holdings and heritage in the form of large burial mounds as territorial markers in the landscape, this rarely applied to the Sami population. A nomadic people who follow the seasons and constant migrating natural resources do not leave the same obvious traces. And they become even more difficult to detect as time passes – even for the trained eye. The Norse population is probably overrepresented in archaeological material due to their lifestyle and settlement forms. But new and important finds are regularly uncovered in the forests and mountains of southern Norway, providing valuable knowledge of who lived there. Findings of characteristic tent settlements and circular dwellings with stone-set fireplaces, as well as loose objects and graves containing unique arrowheads and jewellery of Eastern origin, are interpreted as Sami. Archaeological finds, written sources and research on South Sami language development point to Sami populations living in the southern Norwegian mountains, at least from the Viking Age onwards. Today, this is a commonly accepted view among researchers and archaeologists. Linguistic commonalities and individual settlement findings in recent years indicate Sami activity in the Early Iron

Age as well, but further research is needed before drawing definite conclusions. South Sami archaeology is a relatively fresh field of research, and future investigations will undoubtedly yield exciting results about our common past.

Cooperation and alliances

Competition was probably not the driving force of Late Iron Age Sami-Norse coexistence in southern Norway. Archaeology and written sources point in the direction of communication, cooperation and bartering between Norse and Sami peoples. The Saga of Harald Fairhair tells of how Harald met Snæfrithr – daughter of the Sami king Svási – near Dovrefjell. Snæfrithr and Harald had several children who continued the royal lineage. Whether or not the story is based on truth is irrelevant in this context. Snorri Sturluson, who wrote the King's sagas in the 13th century, believed that the event was important for the story of Harald Fairhair's effort to unite the country as one kingdom. The purpose was to describe the creation of a mutual alliance between the king and the mountain population and show how important this alliance was for establishing control of Norway as a whole. The story tells us that Sami people lived in the area in the Viking and Middle Ages. In addition, Harald and Snæfrithr's children can be viewed as a symbol of a lasting union between the two peoples. The Sami must have represented an important

Perhaps the most obvious manifestation of Sami-Norse coexistence in an archaeological context is the Sami drum hammer ('vietjere') from Rendalen in Østerdalen dated to 1160-1260. It is beautifully decorated with geometric Sami decor on one side and Norse Ringerike style markings on the other. The object is evidence of contact between the two ethnic groups. The hammer was probably used with a Sami drum ('gievrie'), the shaman's tool for divinations and spiritual journeys.
Photo: Kirsten Helgeland, UiO Museum of Cultural History.

and equal part of the population, with whom it was important to bond and forge alliances if one was to succeed as the emerging head of a kingdom united.

Cultural communication in the Late Iron Age was not limited to bartering, marriage and the exchange of goods and services, but also affected faith, mythology and the art of sorcery. Elements of Norse mythology can be said to share similarities with Sami spiritual concepts. Odin, the god who can shapeshift and travel between worlds, embodies qualities comparable to those of the Sami shaman – the noaidi. There are examples from saga literature that emphasise the usefulness of partnering with the Sami, for instance the story of Thorir Hund who bartered with the Sami for magical reindeer pelt jackets that ended up saving his

life at the Battle of Stiklestad. An addendum to the Saga of St. Olaf states:

> *«This spring, Thorir approached Møttul, asking for his advice and well-wishes; 'because I trust your wisdom in all matters', he said. Møttul replied: 'I would indeed wish you luck against King Olaf, and something tells me that you will at last defeat him! Here are twelve reindeer pelts that I wish to offer you. I have blessed and enchanted them, so that no iron will pierce them'. These pelts were worn by Thorir and his men at Stiklestad.»*
> *(Addendum to Saga of St. Olaf)*

The oldest Christian laws in the Eidsivating and Borgarting acts place a ban on believing in divination or seeking out Finns for such services. The fact that it became necessary to specifically ban this practice following the Christianisation indicates that it used to be quite common.

Photo: Kristin Prestvold.

VANG IN THE WORLD

In many respects, the Viking world was globalised, with people actively travelling and communicating across wide distances. During the 700s, the Vikings set off, hoisted their sails and ventured across the oceans using an innovative technical marvel: the longship. They quickly conquered the island groups of the treacherous North Sea, claiming both land and loot, while forming alliances and establishing a powerful and extensive trade network that stretched across the North Atlantic to the Mediterranean and the northern coast of Africa, across the European mainland to the Middle East and eastward through Russia to the Caspian Sea. Oppdal and the Vang Burial Ground were active players in the Viking world.

Vang in Trøndelag

Large parts of Trøndelag had been settled in the Late Iron Age. People gravitated towards the fertile agricultural settlements around the inner part of the Trondheim Fjord and along the coastal sea lanes, including areas at the mouth of the fjord. This is where we find the richest farms, the best soil and the largest burial mounds. The largest measure over 40 m in diameter, and the Herlaug mound on Leka is in a league of its own, measuring in at around 60 m. These burial mounds symbolise resourceful communities and families with considerable political power. Power was largely a result of advantageous geography: rich agricultural lands and control of sea lanes. The Oppdal village enjoyed none of these conditions. Its advantages lay in wilderness resources – vast mountain ranges with inexhaustible wild reindeer wealth. There was a great demand for the raw materials and products Oppdal could offer the markets further south in Europe. Located in the uppermost mountain valley, near the mountains but still close to ports and international transport routes – a crossroads at the country's thoroughfares between north, south and west, between the mountains and the sea. This remained the basis for their wealth. These mountainous areas may at first glance seem like a mere geographical outpost in the Trøndelag Iron Age, but the burial site on Vang shows how closely linked to Europe and the world they actually were.

The Viking Age – a time to travel

Historical periods alternate through a series of more or less overlapping and related events, making it impossible to draw sharp distinctions between the different eras. Traditionally, the Viking Age begins with the looting of the Lindisfarne monastery off the north-eastern coast of England in the year 793. However, archaeological finds and written sources also indicate Norse expeditions motivated by trade and looting in the decades preceding 793. Here in Norway we often pin the end date for the Viking Age to the Battle of Stiklestad in

The Vikings' World.
Illustration: Arkikon.

The viking enactment group Veðrar during filming of a movie about Vang Burial Ground. Photo: Kristin Prestvold.

1030, where Olaf Haraldsson was killed and later canonised as 'Saint Olaf'. After the battle, Christianity gained a firmer foothold in Norway, following a long process of Christianisation and missionary work from kings and local leaders throughout the 900s. Internationally, the end of the Viking Age is set to the Battle of Stamford Bridge in 1066, where Harald Hardrada lost against King Harold Godwinson, thus failing to invade England and usurp the Anglo-Saxon throne.

The Viking Age was an era of political scheming, wars and conquests. There was widespread trade and communication between peoples and cultures across vast areas, despite great distances. The coastline of our elongated country led to some highly specialised ship building technologies – superior to European standards. The flexible and robust shallow-keeled sailing ships of the Viking Age made it possible to navigate both across the open sea and along shallow beaches and rivers with ease. Fast ocean vessels, built for rowing and sailing. The longship, along with the sun compass for navigation and excellent seamanship, mixed with a vibrant culture valuing warrior courage and dying in battle as the ultimate honour, enabled one of the most defining endeavours of the era: the voyage.

The Vikings braved the oceans, conquering the northern and western world.

Motives for travelling

Reasons for making a journey were plentiful: trade expeditions, looting and pillaging, mercenary missions, colonisation and settlements, contact, communication and forging alliances in an ever-changing political landscape. Being well travelled remained an ideal of the Viking Age, granting honour and prestige. The warrior ideology glorified strong, brave and honourable fighters. Conducting both peaceful and warlike expeditions increased one's standing in Norse society. The networks and alliances forged through these voyages were necessary for accruing political and social influence. Goods and artefacts changed hands, both peacefully between trading partners and through ruthless looting, war booty or tribute.

Viking raids – a trademark of its time

The British Isles were mainly Christianised during the 400s. By the beginning of the Viking Age, Ireland in particular had developed a rich culture around churches and monasteries. Church art represented the very best of contemporary craftsmanship,

and church rooms, reliquaries, holy books and processional crosses were richly adorned with fine gilded smith work, decor and precious stones. The monasteries were often remotely situated and were at the same time defenceless sites containing great wealth. For opportunistic Vikings in search of 'easy money' the temptation was too great, making them favoured targets for looting. In addition to precious metals, people were also a valuable commodity. High-ranking clergy could fetch a fine ransom, and slaves were valuable goods on the international market.

The Vikings' first raids and attacks along the Irish coast were sporadic, but well into the 800s the attacks became more frequent, with the Vikings moving inland on the great rivers, plundering monasteries and towns along the riverbanks. The shallow keeled ships allowed for hasty retreats. At first, the raids remained a summer activity – no one braved the open sea in the worst winter storms. The ships set off in the spring and returned in the autumn. From around 840 the raiders from across the sea began to stay over winter. The winter camps at the mouth of the River Liffey eventually developed into the city of Dublin. And in time, Dublin became one of the most important Viking-ruled cities – a hub for both trade and communication.

Norwegian Vikings dominated the northern and western parts of the British Isles, while Danish Vikings became influential across eastern England. Together they founded and conquered cities all over the islands. Most famous, in addition to Dublin, is probably York in England. From the early 800s, the Vikings also established permanent settlements on Shetland and the Orkney Islands, expelling the native Picts and establishing an earldom on the Orkney Islands that lasted until 1468.

The voyages were also directed towards the continent, along the Dutch and French coasts and rivers and further towards the Mediterranean areas, including Spain, North Africa, Byzantium and Italy. In the late 800s, the Vikings encountered such heavy resistance on the continent that the raids eventually subsided. But they still formed alliances and entered into pacts with those in power, settling and founding cities, including in Normandy. They took part in internal conflicts and became part of high-level power structures.

The Vikings' raiding, looting and conquering of lands and cities caused great unrest in populations everywhere, inflicting great losses and remaining a constant thorn in the side for local rulers. Kings often paid large tributes to Vikings in exchange for keeping the peace and leaving the country. Buried treasure caches dated to Viking times have been discovered, some consisting of several kilograms of silver. We see the silver treasure in connection with the enormous wealth coerced from local rulers.

The Vikings not only attacked lands and people abroad. Strife was also common between different Viking groups. Loyalties between chiefs and their allies and warriors could shift rapidly, tipping the balance of power. The story of the Vikings who settled and colonised Shetland and the Orkney Islands in the early 800s and then began to raid the western coast of Norway, ends with Harald Fairhair sailing across the North Sea and cracking down hard on the quarrelsome Viking gangs and settlers on the western islands. He proceeds to establish the Norwegian earldom for the Orkney Islands and Shetland, placing the islands under Norwegian crown authority.

CULTURAL CONNECTIONS AND TRADE NETWORKS

The hordes of wild Vikings from the north and across the ocean who ravaged, plundered and killed were recorded in contemporary church writings. The Vikings were strangers, they belonged to a pagan religion, they came as a surprise and they posed a threat to the existing order. These actions were therefore seen as extra gruesome, even though they did not differ much from the pillaging carried out by warring parties in local conflicts and between chiefdoms. Great attention is devoted to the Vikings even today, through a mix of dread and fascination. But the Vikings' trade journeys, with peaceful communication and bartering, were an equally important part of the Viking Age.

One of the most well-known written sources dealing with this topic is the Norwegian Ohthere's account from approx. 890, written at the court of the Anglo-Saxon King Alfred of Wessex. Ohthere is a travelling merchant who, according to his own description, «lives furthest north of all Norwegians». He tells the king about his farm in Hålogaland, about his wealth, connections and trade goods, and about his journeys to the northeast and the various peoples who live there. He also talks about his journey south across the sea to the British Isles, and about the trading posts he visited along the way. We know nothing more about Ohthere than what he tells the scribes, and we do not know what he was doing at the king's court, but the record provides unique insight and knowledge of domestic conditions and trade goods, including trade routes, cities and networks in Europe in the Viking Age.

Trade routes and the development of towns

Several trading posts and markets emerged at the start of the Viking Age, many eventually becoming market towns with permanent settlements. In Scandinavia, the most important trading sites were Skiringssal (Kaupang in Vestfold), Birka (by Lake Malar), Hedeby and Ribe (Jutland). York and Dublin were important cities in the British Isles. Trade, barter and craftsmanship were key urban activities. Dublin played a particularly large role in the extensive Viking Age slave trade, and a large number of British and English slaves were sold from here to Scandinavia and

the Muslim world. The Vikings bartered their goods across large parts of Western Europe, the Mediterranean and North Africa. They also travelled east to trade: from the Baltic Sea to the Baltic countries, up along the Russian rivers where they founded settlements or established trading posts. The most famous are Staraya Ladoga and Novgorod on the Russian river Volkhov. But Norse merchants made their way as far as the Black and Caspian Seas, and even Baghdad.

Archaeological findings show trade to be widespread. There is an increase in the number of exotic and imported artefacts among the grave goods. Glass beads from the Orient, drinking glass from the Carolingian Empire, imported jewellery and high-quality weapons, ceramics from Rhineland, amber from the Baltics, bronze vessels from the British Isles and more. The objects indicate extensive networks of communication. Occasionally, we also find balance scales and weights in Viking Age graves, and such items are often connected to trade. Coins were common in Europe and the East, while here at home it was the weight of the silver itself that acted as the currency whenever coins were used. Arab silver coins have been found in large numbers in Scandinavia. Silver bars or nuggets, cut jewellery and other silver items were also used as currency.

What did the northerners have to offer?

Norway had a number of exploitable natural and wilderness resources. There was a market out there, far from the Norwegian coast, which craved these raw materials. What popular goods could northerners offer international market? The people of Oppdal had valuable products from wild reindeer hunting to barter. Raw materials from elk were also in demand, while antlers, walrus tusks and whale bones were particularly sought-after materials for craftsmen. Materials such as hides and furs from lynx, otters, reindeer, bears, and wolves were also valuable. High quality rope was made from seal and walrus hides. Along the coast, down and bird feathers were collected for use in blankets and duvets. Large quantities of whetstones were exported from Norwegian forests, as well.

How did European luxury good end up in a small Norwegian mountain village?

What are the hidden stories behind the imported grave goods found at Vang? Were they brought back by Vikings raiding foreign lands, looting as much wealth as they could carry? Or were the items obtained peacefully through trade or barter while travelling around Europe?

When it comes to the magnificent Ulfberht swords, it is worth noting that Carolingian law prohibited the sale of weapons to foreigners. The Ulfberht swords have therefore probably reached pagan lands as a result of raiding lands or military arsenals, or perhaps stolen from individuals. They may also have been given as ‘ransom’ for releasing lands or people, or they may simply be the result of smuggling or

From Trondheim Viking Market.

fencing – there are many possible explanations. But the legal texts indicate that the swords did not change hands through lawful trading.

We can also speculate as to how the Irish clasps found in the graves ended up at Oppdal. These are largely ornaments from holy books or church and monastery items or furnishings. The prevailing theory is that such items were acquired either through looting abroad or through trade at southern European markets. However, it cannot be ruled out that one or two Irish Christian missionaries made their way to pagan lands, only to be robbed of their belongings on Norwegian soil. The clasps have in any case been removed from their original setting and repurposed as jewellery and clothing ornaments, which indicates that the new owners did not particularly care what the objects were originally used for.

There may have been drama surrounding the transfer of these objects, but this does not necessarily mean that the person buried with the object is the perpetrator. The items may have been purchased at a market or exchanged for other goods. They may also have come to Oppdal and Vang because of marital alliances. In the mountain village to the north, a new life awaited. The imported objects hide many intriguing stories.

Cultural links in the Viking Age. The object recounts

The following story is an imagined chain of events about one of the insular ornamental, luxury objects found in a grave at the Vang burial site. The story has been made into a short film, which you can find at www.kulmin.no or download using a QR code when walking the Vang trail. The story goes as follows:

The year 1989. A violent winter storm has toppled several pine trees at the Vang Burial Ground, and one of the roots has unearthed a magnificent sword. The damaged mound must be excavated to secure its contents and document the grave. The archaeologist gently lifts the worn and verdigrised piece of metal she just uncovered. Intricate patterns are evident on its surface. She immediately realises that this is a very unusual piece – both the shape and décor are foreign to these lands. «How did this beautiful piece of jewellery find its way to Oppdal?» she wonders.

Created in the year 818 n a forge in Ireland. The blacksmith opens the mold, and an ornate piece of bronze is revealed. Only finishing touches and the mounting of the gemstone remains before the piece is ready to adorn the cover of the Holy Book at the abbey church altar.

The year 847. The Irish monastery is looted and set on fire. The Viking wedges his knife underneath the bronze ornament and breaks the whole piece from the book cover. Egil holds it in his hand for a moment, admiring the red gemstone and the shining animal figures surrounding it.

«Sigrid is getting this!»

From the Kulmin video ”The Object Recounts”.

The year 848. Egil can't even eat, as the fever rages through his body. He realises that he won't be able to return home in the spring. «Give this to Sigrid when you get home», he says, «make sure she gets it – promise me!» Hallgrim promises. As he leaves his dying friend, he looks down at the object and the beautiful red stone. He grabs the knife from this belt and uses the tip to pry the stone loose. Maybe he can finally pay the fine after his holmgang with Torstein.

The year 849 in the mountain village of Oppdal. A young woman carrying a small girl exits the house. Hallgrim immediately sees the face of his dead friend in the child. He has been dreading passing on the death message and the bronze piece, and now he bitterly regrets his own greed back in Dublin, where he removed the stone. Sigrid's stone.

The year 883. A woman's loving hand rests over her mother's on her deathbed. The mother has told Ingrid the story of the remarkable bronze piece. Ingrid experiences a sense of loss and a connection to the father she never met. She decides to take the item to the blacksmith. He can attach a pin to the back. Ingrid will wear it as a piece of jewellery on her cape to honour her father.

The year 911. The burial mound is completed, built over Ingrid's funeral pyre. She fell to the same fever that killed her father across the ocean many years ago. She is buried in her most exquisite dress, with expensive jewellery and pearls placed on her chest. The fire and the sacrificial horses have aided her on her journey to the other side. The remains of the pyre will rest here, beneath the mound, forever.

CONCLUSION

Most of the graves at the Vang Burial Ground are from a period of our prehistory with a rich and diverse source material. In order to form a clear picture of the Viking world, we have to retrieve puzzle pieces from all over Europe. Through the Vang guidebook, we hope to offer you a glimpse into the past, a peek into what may once have been, as a source of wonder and curiosity. The burial ground from our common past is open to interpretation. For those who want to know more about the Viking Age or about specific topics such as trade, hunting and trapping, Norse mythology, South Sami prehistory, burial customs and so forth, you are invited to take a look at our reading tips.

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