

Early English and Viking Ship Burials:  
Archaeology and Influence

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The interactions between the Early English and the Vikings date back to the First Viking Age, with the raid on the Lindisfarne monastery off the coast of England in 793 CE. Before this, there are no known written accounts of prior interactions between the Vikings and the Early English. There is also a lack of concrete archaeological evidence showing Vikings in England prior to 793 CE. That being said, there are some similarities between the two groups' practices and beliefs. One of the practices that the groups share is their use of ship burials. The original purpose of this essay was to compare the Early English and Viking ship burial practices in order to analyze whether one group influenced the other. Most scholarly discussions have assumed that Vikings (being known for their sea-faring) must have influenced the Early English ship burial practices, but as this essay shows, the ship burials of the Early English are earlier than those of the Vikings. There are, however, strong parallels between Early English and pre-Viking Scandinavian grave goods dating back to the Vendel period. It is possible that instead of Viking influence, there was a connection between the Vendel-period Scandinavians and the Early English, whether through a common ancestor, migration, or trade.<sup>1</sup>

The ship burials compared in this paper include two Early English ships—the Sutton Hoo Ship Burial and the Snape Boat Burial—with two Viking ships—the Oseberg Ship Burial and the Swordle Bay Ship Burial. Each of the four ships treated in this essay have been studied by scholars separately, and some have been compared to one another. However, there does not appear to be much scholarship that compares all four of these different ship burials. To perform

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<sup>1</sup>Furthermore, this paper attempts to build on the archaeological scholarship of the Middle Ages, which has previously been overlooked by past scholars. The importance of medieval archaeology was minimized during archaeology's early history because of an attachment to the Classical period over the 'dark ages.' This term 'dark ages,' however, is a problematic depiction of the Middle Ages. It gained this moniker in response to people during the Renaissance trying to 'reclaim' the glory of the Classical period in Greece and Rome. It often paints the people of this time as uneducated, violent, and unable to be innovative, when in reality, the style, art, and ideas of the Classical period did not disappear, but continued to exist and develop in ways that suited different groups (Sweeney, "Myth of the 'Dark Ages'").

this analysis, the ships of each group will be compared and contrasted in terms of their grave goods, the layout of the burial and the ship, and the person(s) associated with the burial. By analyzing the similarities and differences present in these burials, the evidence suggests that the earlier Vendel culture may have had more influence on the Early English than the later Viking-age Scandinavians.

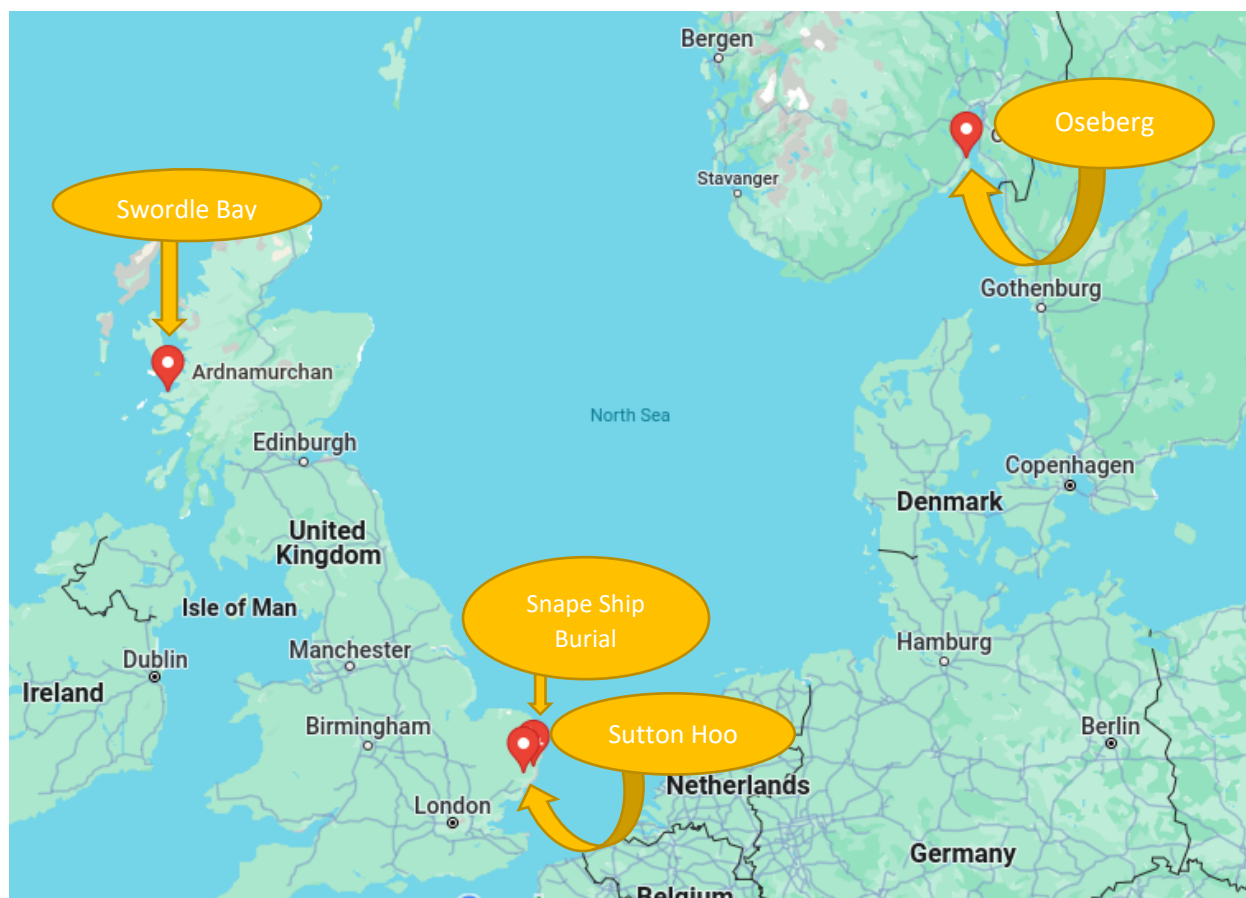


Fig 1. Map of the location of the four ship burials analyzed in this essay.

First, it is important to understand what ship burials are. According to Scandinavian archaeology, a ship burial is a burial that contains a ship that is “a large seagoing vessel, superior in size, complexity, and status to those contemporary vessels which were referred to as boats.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Bonde, Niels, and Frans-Arne Stylegar. 2016. “Between Sutton Hoo and Oseberg: Dendrochronology and the Origins of the Ship Burial Tradition”. *Danish Journal of Archaeology* 5 (November):19-33. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21662282.2016.1245885>. 27.

Boat burials, on the other hand, are “vessels with up to six pairs of oars.”<sup>3</sup> The Viking vessel at Swordle Bay falls more into the “boat” category, while those of Snape, Sutton Hoo, and Oseberg fit more with the label “ships.”<sup>4</sup> Ship burials are associated with pagan practices. However, some Christian elements do eventually find their way into the burials. For example, there is Christian imagery on artifacts in the Sutton Hoo burial.<sup>5</sup> Many scholars believe that ship burials were a reflection of the pagan beliefs associated with the afterlife. Specifically, using ships in funerary practices seems to be “traced to the belief that the realm of the dead was separated from the world of the living by water which had to be crossed, whether it was conceived by dwellers on the seashore to be a sea, or by inland folk to be a river, and that the dead must be provided with means of transport across it.”<sup>6</sup> Ship (or boat) burials were vessels that had been buried with the seeming purpose of honoring someone and helping them into the afterlife.

In some cases, human remains have been found inside the ship when it was buried, but other times, no remains are found. It is thought that after ruling out complete decomposition, the burial of the ship without a body may act as a cenotaph. A cenotaph is an empty burial that is meant to memorialize a person or people, who may have been buried elsewhere or lost. Often ship burials in general included many grave goods and funerary items that varied from household objects to extravagant riches, which were also seemingly meant to help the deceased have comfort in the afterlife. This is reflected in the medieval English poem *Beowulf*. The story of

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<sup>3</sup> Bonde & Stylegar, “Between Sutton Hoo and Oseberg,” 27.

<sup>4</sup> Although there are distinctions in the terminology, for the most part, this paper will make use of the common title of the burials and will refer to them under the term ‘ships’ when discussing them together.

<sup>5</sup> Both are discussed by: Pearson, Michael P., Robert van de Noort, and Alex Woolf. “Three Men and a Boat: Sutton Hoo and the East Saxon Kingdom.” *Anglo-Saxon England* 22 (1993): 27–50. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44510902>. 28; and Bruce-Mitford, R. L. S. *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon archaeology: Sutton Hoo and other discoveries*. London: Gollancz, 1974. 17-26.

<sup>6</sup> Major, Albany F. “Ship Burials in Scandinavian Lands and the Beliefs That Underlie Them.” *Folklore* 35, no. 2 (1924): 113–50. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1256487>. 116-117.

*Beowulf* depicts the ship burial of King Scyld Scefing. The biggest differences between the ship in the poem and the ships described in this paper are that the ship in the story was released on the water rather than buried. Still, however, the poem refers to a ‘voyage’ and implies that the ship and all of the grave goods were “destined to travel to the far reaches of the flood’s domain.”<sup>7</sup> These references in the poem’s prologue seem to imply the belief that a water vessel may be needed to traverse the journey from this world to the next. The importance of ships cannot be stressed enough for traveling, transport, and trade, and the idea that it had become a part of the belief system further emphasizes these groups reliance on these vessels. The significance of these ships themselves, may have been to show the status of the individual buried and provide a place to memorialize them. The ships were often fully stocked with provisions meant to be used by the individual associated with the ship to sail, battle, eat, and even enjoy leisure. This supports the hypothesis that these items were believed help a person journey into the afterlife.

When looking at the ships for this essay, some key components that will be analyzed include the presence or absence of human remains, who they potentially could have been, if certain grave goods are only reflective of one group, specific practices within the burial that they all have in common, the quality of the grave goods, the layout of the burial, the origin of the items, and the location of the burial. By examining each of these components, it may be possible to understand the significance of these ships and how that might show connections between the groups.

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<sup>7</sup> “*Beowulf*: An Anglo-Saxon Epic Poem,” Translated from the Heyne-Socin Text by Lesslie Hall. Accessed April 29, 2024. <https://Gutenberg.org/files.16328/16328-h/16328-h.htm>. 66, 82-84.

There is much to understand about these two different groups: the Early English and Vikings. The Early English, otherwise known as the Anglo-Saxons,<sup>8</sup> were a group of people who ruled England during the Early Medieval Period from 500 CE to 1066 CE, the year of the Norman Conquest. These people were originally from the Germanic region of Europe, until they eventually migrated to what is now modern-day England. According to Bede, they found their way into England thanks to King Vortigern, who invited in the groups of Germanic people (Angles, Saxons, and Jutes) in order to help protect his kingdom from his rivals coming from Scotland. These Germanic peoples, however, began to settle and take over the land until they became the dominant group in England.<sup>9</sup>

The general burial practices of the Early English varied from burial and cremation to, in some rare cases, ship burials. Ship burials have been found dating from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, but “until the end of the seventh century, Anglo-Saxons cremated their dead.”<sup>10</sup> Due to the scarcity of Early English ship burials, there is undoubtedly missing information about their practices, especially about the pagan beliefs they held “given that the pagans themselves left no written sources.”<sup>11</sup> The lack of textual corroboration can make it difficult to denote artifacts and artifact positioning as something significantly related to pagan beliefs, a difficulty which is exacerbated due to the small number of ships as well looters disrupting the sites.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Because of more recent associations with the term ‘Anglo-Saxon’ to represent hateful ideologies, many scholars have tried to move away from using the term (Rambaran-Olm & Wade, “Many Myths of the Term ‘Anglo-Saxon’”). For this reason, those otherwise deemed ‘Anglo-Saxons’ will be called ‘Early English.’

<sup>9</sup> Bede. “Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of England,” December 17, 2011. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/38326/38326-h/38326-h.html>. 29-31.

<sup>10</sup> Alvarez, Sandra. “Anglo Saxon and Viking Ship Burial – The British Museum.” *Medievalists.Net* (blog), June 9, 2014. <https://www.medievalists.net/2014/06/anglo-saxon-viking-ship-burial-british-museum/>.

<sup>11</sup> Leyser, Henrietta. *A Short History of the Anglo-Saxons*, I. B. Tauris & Company, Limited, 2016. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/lycoming-ebooks/detail.action?docID=4773462>. 29.

<sup>12</sup> There are only three known Early English ship burials, including the two found at Sutton Hoo and the one at Snape.

Besides the Early English, Vikings also had an important history and connection with the area that is now England. It is important to understand that the term ‘Viking’ refers not to an ethnic group, but rather to an occupation or way of life that is typically associated with people around the Baltic Sea and North Sea. While this ‘job’ included the stereotypical raiding and pillaging, their actions also included trade. Vikings began to emerge in European history during the First Viking Age, which is “generally dated c. 800-1050 AD.”<sup>13</sup> They were typically from the regions of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, although other peoples also become involved. While known for their seafaring and extensive travels, Vikings eventually established seasonal, and even permanent, settlements all over western Europe and England. Seafaring was extremely important to the Vikings’ way of life. While “boat graves are found also in earlier periods, [they] are much more common in the Viking Age,”<sup>14</sup> probably as a reflection of the importance that ships and boats had in their society. Unfortunately, records from the Vikings about their practices tend to be scarce (much like examining the pagan beliefs of the Early English), which is another reason a comparative analysis of artifacts is important to try to find connections or disparities between these groups’ burial customs.

As previously noted, these two groups were not isolated from each other; far from it, in fact. Vikings were constantly engaged with the Early English during the Viking Age in raids, trade, and settlements. One example of evidence of their relationship to the general area, with specific regard to ship burials, is the burial at Swordle Bay, which will be discussed in more detail later. There are also artifacts present in the boat burials like that at Swordle Bay, which point to overlap and trade between the Early English and Norse peoples (as well as with

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<sup>13</sup> Christensen, Arne Emil. “The Viking Ships.” In *The Sea in History - The Medieval World*, edited by Michel Balard and Christian Buchet, NED-New edition., 547–60. Boydell & Brewer, 2017.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7722/j.ctt1kgqt6m.53>. 547.

<sup>14</sup> Christensen, “The Viking Ships,” 550.

others).<sup>15</sup> Swordle Bay was a Viking ship burial found in Scotland containing items like an Irish pin and a drinking horn that may have come from “Irish markets to the south.”<sup>16</sup> Even the identity or identities of the individual(s) associated with boat burials could show connections. For instance, at Swordle Bay, the occupant of the burial was not from Scotland.<sup>17</sup> Through isotopic analysis of the individual's teeth, it seems that the individual was from coastal Norway. Furthermore, even the ships themselves can show overlap, like the ship burial at Sutton Hoo, that appears to be “Norse in character,” which leads some scholars to believe that it is possible that “shipbuilding in Anglo-Saxon England seems to develop along the same lines as in Scandinavia, or there may have been direct contact.”<sup>18</sup>

Analyzing each of these ships separately in order to pick out key items and practices will highlight the similarities and differences in the overall burial practices. This essay analyzes these ships in chronological order: Sutton Hoo ship burial (620-635 CE), Snape boat burial (635-650 CE), Oseberg ship burial (815-834 CE), and Swordle Bay ship burial (c. 10<sup>th</sup> century).

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<sup>15</sup> Harris, O., H. Cobb, H. Gray, and P. Richardson (2012). “A Viking at Rest: New Discoveries on Ardnamurchan.” *Medieval Archaeology* 56: 333.

<sup>16</sup> Batey, C. (2016). “Viking Burials in Scotland: Two 'New' Boat Burial Finds.” In: *Seventeenth Viking Congress*, Lerwick, Scotland, 3-10 Aug 2013, pp. 39-45. ISBN 9780993274039. 44.

<sup>17</sup> Batey, “Viking Burials in Scotland,” 43.

<sup>18</sup> Christensen, “The Viking Ships,” 547.



Fig 2. The excavated ship, looking west towards the bow showing the full length of the ship and the lines of plank fastenings running from bow to stern.

The Sutton Hoo ship burial, arguably one of the most famous ship burials in the world, was discovered close to Woodbridge, England in 1939. The ship was 80 ft long and was from the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE, around 620-635 CE.<sup>19</sup> Due to the environment, the majority of the ship had decomposed. However, “the ship’s rotting timbers left a perfect impression in the soil.”<sup>20</sup> Besides

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<sup>19</sup> Bruce-Mitford, *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology*, 73

<sup>20</sup> Urbanus, Jason. “The Ongoing Tale of Sutton Hoo.” *Archaeology* 67, no. 6 (2014): 48–51. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24364647>. 50.

just the ship's impression, there was also an abundance of grave goods. Some of those goods include "gold and garnet jewelry, silver bowls, coins, drinking horns, iron swords and spears, and a stunning warrior helmet and face mask."<sup>21</sup> There was also hair found, although it was not thought to be associated with the individual memorialized by the burial, and was not preserved. Along with these grave goods, many other artifacts were found in association with the burial, such as the ship's rivets. It appears from the site that the process of burying the boat had most likely been similar to the way in which coffins are buried, with the ship lowered into the ground and the mound piled on top. Prior to it being completely buried, a burial chamber was apparently "built on its deck," in which weapons like swords, knives, spears and angon (javelins), axes, ring mail, jewelry, buckles, dining ware, and "bowls of both native and foreign workmanship" were placed inside.<sup>22</sup> Once this was done, the ship was to be buried. However, at Sutton Hoo specifically, there was "an oval clay basin above the roof of the burial chamber [which] suggests libations of some kind before the mound was closed."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Mitford, *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology*, 50.

<sup>22</sup> Davidson, Hilda R. Ellis. "The Hill of the Dragon: Anglo-Saxon Burial Mounds in Literature and Archaeology." *Folklore* 61, no. 4 (1950): 169–85. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1256884>. 171.

<sup>23</sup> Davidson, "The Hill of the Dragon," 173.

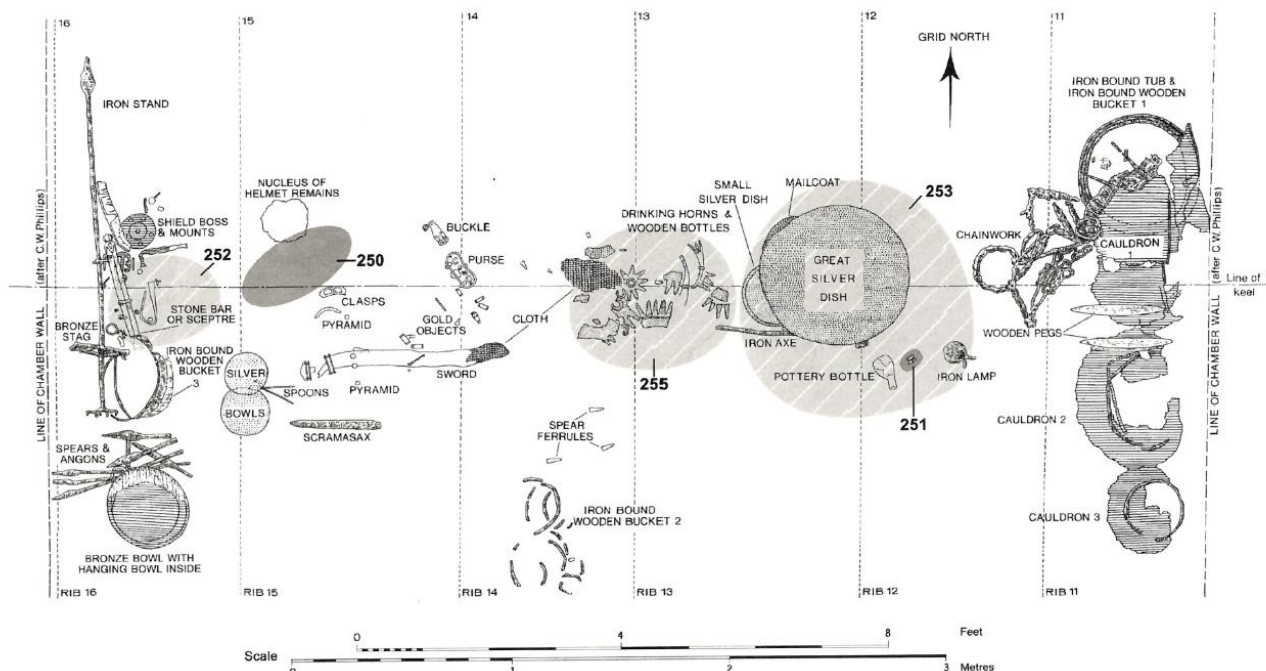


Fig 3. A layout of where the grave goods were located in the Sutton Hoo ship burial.

There is no doubt about the grandeur of the Sutton Hoo ship burial. The question of who it was meant for is still up for debate. The ship had no trace of a body. Hence, hypotheses suggest that it either decomposed completely or it was never placed in the ship to begin with; however, there appears to be no doubt that this ship was meant for royalty or someone of very high status.<sup>24</sup> This agreement is based on the richness of the grave goods present and the presence of what appears to be a scepter with a whetstone.<sup>25</sup> Some have speculated about who this person was and what type of influence they may have had. S.E. Rigold, a British archaeologist, pointed out that the hoard at Sutton Hoo comes from “the precarious frontier of the cosmopolitan culture and economy that had been making some impression in Kent for nearly a century.”<sup>26</sup> There is also a connection between the Sutton Hoo burial and the area of Rendlesham, which is just four miles northeast of the site. Rendlesham is important, mainly

<sup>24</sup> Bruce-Mitford, *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology*, 23-26.

<sup>25</sup> Bruce-Mitford, *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology*, 24.

<sup>26</sup> Pearson, van de Noort, and Woolf, “Three Men and a Boat,” 39.

because of Bede, who describes it “as one of the seats of early English kings.”<sup>27</sup> This further fits with the “underlying assumption that the burials at Sutton Hoo belong to an East Anglian political, social, and economic milieu.”<sup>28</sup> The idea that the burial at Sutton Hoo was meant for an East Anglian King is universally accepted. However, the question is which king it was? The most popular theory is that it is a monument or tomb for King Raedwald, based on how magnificent the grave goods are, as well as the size of the ship itself.<sup>29</sup> He also died around 625 CE, which matches the timeframe when the ship was buried. Another hypothesis proposed, that has since fallen out of popularity, was that the ship “served as a cenotaph (with no body) for either the East Anglian King Anna (d.654) or, less likely, his brother Æthelhere<sup>30</sup> Due to the dating of the ship, the death dates associated with Anna and Æthelhere make them seem far less likely to be the people connected with the burial than Raedwald.

There is no denying that the Sutton Hoo ship burial is Early English; but there are connections with Viking ship burials, in terms of similarities in the general practice. The Sutton Hoo burial has many similarities to royal Viking graves, such as at Oseberg, Gokstad, Ladby, Vendel, and Valsgårde.<sup>31</sup> There is some speculation about the link between East Anglia and Viking ship burials; while they both practiced this type of burial, grave goods and artifacts are positioned differently within the ship. Along with this, the burial does not appear to have any artifacts that are Anglian in style, which raises questions, especially as the boat burial at Snape (the only other known site with an Early English ship burial) shares this characteristic. The

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<sup>27</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 185.

Urbanus, “The Ongoing Tale of Sutton Hoo,” 49-50.

<sup>28</sup> Pearson, van de Noort, and Woolf, “Three Men and a Boat,” 27.

<sup>29</sup> Bruce-Mitford, *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology*, 73; Urbanus, “The Ongoing Tale of Sutton Hoo,” 50.

<sup>30</sup> Magoun, Francis P. “The Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial: A Chronological Bibliography.” *Speculum* 29, no. 1 (1954): 116–24. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2853871>. 116.

<sup>31</sup> Davidson, “The Hill of the Dragon,” 172.

scarcity of Early English ship burials found hinders our ability to make more general conclusions about Early English ship burials based on only three discovered ships. It is, however, a starting point.

Beyond cultural comparisons, religious influences are also evident. The Sutton Hoo seems to have some Christian influence, as seen in some of the artifacts found. In fact, Sutton Hoo “contains elements of both Christian and pagan symbolism.”<sup>32</sup> The pagan aspect of the burial practice that appears includes “a ship and so many grave goods, [which] contrasts with the inclusion of possible Christian accessories. The silver bowls with cruciform decoration and the two baptismal spoons all lay to the right of where the man’s head would have rested, suggesting that the mourners perceived these had a special significance.”<sup>33</sup> The blending of influences is apparent in the findings and in the burial itself. Sutton Hoo appears to be an Early English ship that most likely commemorated an East Anglian King who was surrounded by both pagan and Christian beliefs, and accordingly, his grave goods included items reflecting both the Viking culture and Christian influence.

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<sup>32</sup> Pearson, van de Noort, and Woolf, “Three Men and a Boat,” 27.

<sup>33</sup> Pearson, van de Noort, and Woolf, “Three Men and a Boat,” 28.



Fig 4. The Snape boat burial (Grave 47) was excavated from an Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Snape. This burial dates to the c. 6th Century AD.

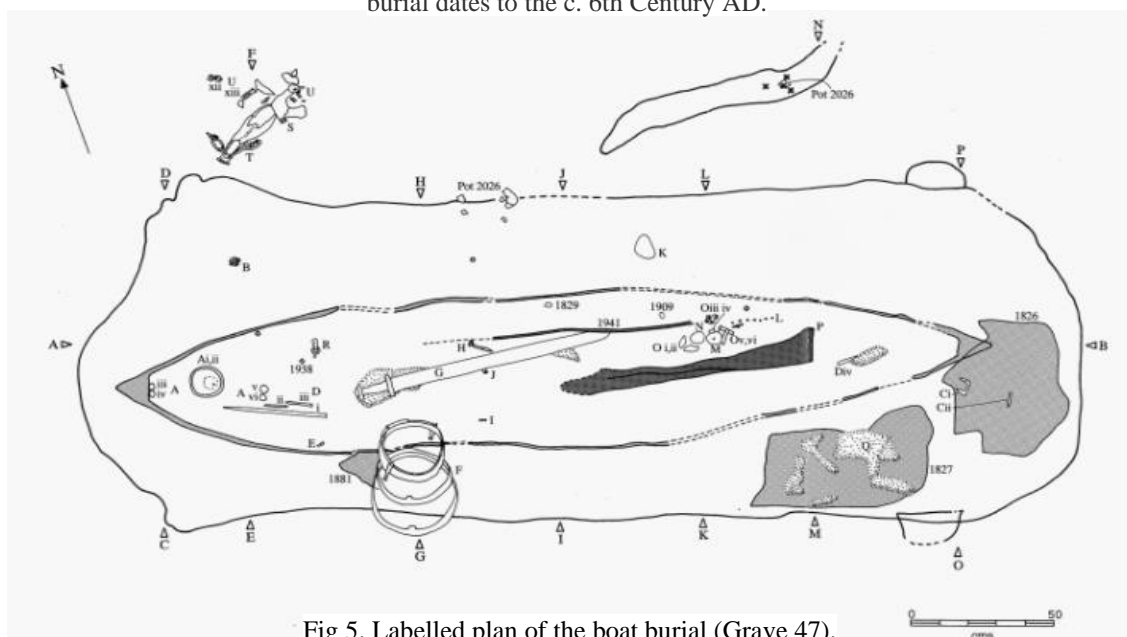


Fig 5. Labelled plan of the boat burial (Grave 47).

The next ship burial to occur chronologically is the Early English Snape ship burial that was found in 1862 by Septimus Davidson.<sup>34</sup> This 14-meter (45 ft) ship is located in an Early

<sup>34</sup> Bruce-Mitford, R.L.S. "The Snape Boat-Grave," *Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology*, 26 (1), (1952): 11.

English cemetery in England just north of Sutton Hoo. It is thought that the burial dates back to the “second quarter of the seventh century,”<sup>35</sup> around the years 635-650 CE, which puts this ship burial just a little after the one at Sutton Hoo. Like Sutton Hoo, there is neither a body nor any human remains associated with the burial. However, unlike the Sutton Hoo burial, there is not much discussion about the possible identity of the person associated with the burial. This is reasonable, however, because of the state of the ship and grave goods found. It appears that the ship burial had been looted, and the items were either taken or scattered about the site.<sup>36</sup> This makes it difficult to determine the richness of the grave or to compare it with other ships from the Vikings and the Early English. Despite the disruption, the positioning of goods suggests similarity to the Swedish boat graves, where “the grave-goods are spread out over the longer length of the boat,”<sup>37</sup> in contrast to Sutton Hoo, which uses a burial chamber located in the center of the ship to store the grave goods. Regardless of the looting at Snape, excavation crews came across “a few fragments of glass, and close by it, a mass of human hair, about the covering for one head,”<sup>38</sup> wrapped in a cloth. This is a similar find to the one made at Sutton Hoo. Due to poor preservation, however, there is not enough left to analyze.

Beyond this, the location of the Snape burial is interesting because it was placed in an urnfield, which contained many Early English cremations that had been buried in urns. Some of the urns even ended up placed near or on top of the mound where the ship was buried, which was about 72 ft in diameter and 4 ft 6 in in height.<sup>39</sup> The trench in which it was placed in this mound, however, was only 60 ft long, 14 ft wide and 6-7 ft deep.<sup>40</sup> Snape is a very tricky place to

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<sup>35</sup> Bruce-Mitford, “The Snape Boat-Grave,” 19.

<sup>36</sup> Bruce-Mitford, “The Snape Boat-Grave,” 7.

<sup>37</sup> Bruce-Mitford, “The Snape Boat-Grave,” 7.

<sup>38</sup> Bruce-Mitford, “The Snape Boat-Grave,” 5-6.

<sup>39</sup> Bruce-Mitford, “The Snape Boat-Grave,” 11.

<sup>40</sup> Bruce-Mitford, “The Snape Boat-Grave,” 22.

analyze because of the severe disturbance, which makes interpretations about the presence of certain items or the connections to other groups more difficult to make. That being said, the items that are present are reflective of the items found at Viking ship burials, including the weapons present.

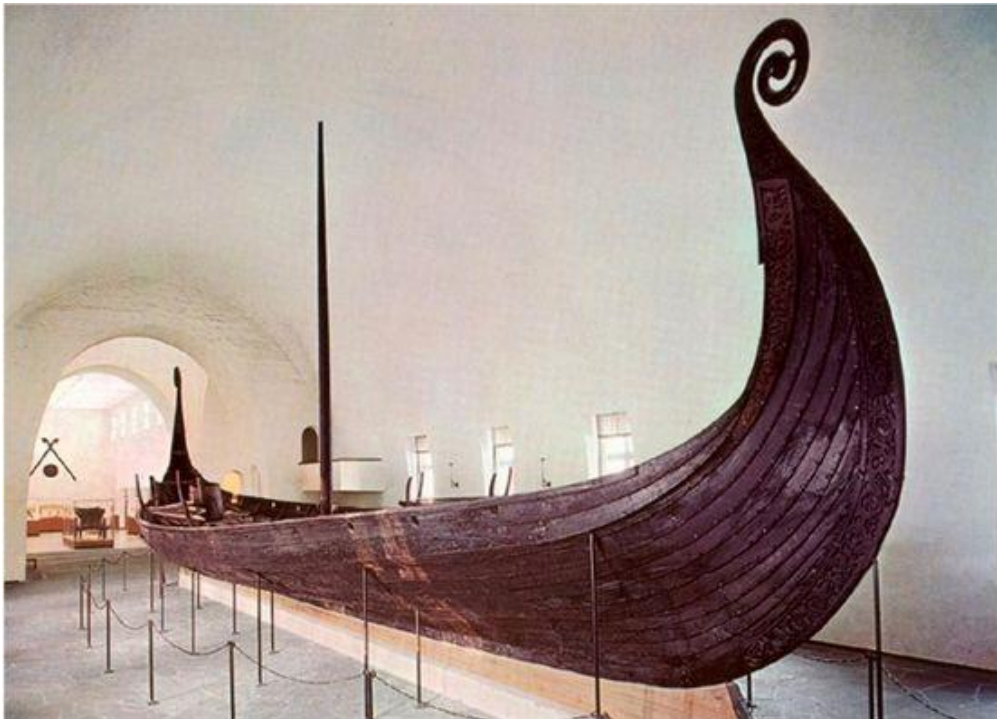


Fig 6. The well preserved Oseberg ship from 820 in the Viking Ship Hall in Oslo, Norway.  
Photo Museum of Cultural History



Fig 7: The excavation of the Oseberg in 1904.

Moving on to the next ship in chronological order, there is the Oseberg ship burial, a Viking ship burial. The Oseberg is the “oldest excavated Viking ship find with a mast” created in 815 – 820 CE.<sup>41</sup> It was buried, however, in 834 CE. It was excavated in 1904 in Slagen, Norway.<sup>42</sup> The Oseberg ship was located in a mound 145 ft in diameter and 19 ft high in order to cover the entire ship. The ship itself was 72 ft (22 m) long and 16.4 ft (5 m) wide, with a 19 ft (5.8 meters) mast that “was probably more than twice this length originally.”<sup>43</sup> The Oseberg is a large ship made almost entirely of oak, with the exception of the pine mast and small decorations and artifacts like a cart found inside made of beech. The ship’s primary purpose was not for burial, but for both rowing and sailing, which is how it was used before being retired in a burial

<sup>41</sup> Christensen, “The Viking Ships,” 550.

<sup>42</sup> Sjøvold, Thorleif. “A Royal Viking Burial.” *Archaeology* 11, no. 3 (1958): 190–99. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41663599>. 191.

<sup>43</sup> Sjøvold, “A Royal Viking Burial,” 193.

site. The ship was built to be rowed by thirty men (fifteen on each side) but handled a crew of roughly thirty-five.<sup>44</sup> The ship did not have seats for the rowers to sit on either, but it is thought that “each man used his own sea-chest as a rowing seat,”<sup>45</sup> which is plausible, and a chest was found among the grave goods. While this ship appears to be very large in size, it is actually “a smaller vessel than the regular Viking long ships, and it must have belonged to a group [of watercraft] described in the sagas as ‘karvi’ – small vessels used by chieftains for cruising along the coast. The Oseberg ship is clearly a pleasure vessel.”<sup>46</sup> The Oseberg ship is unique compared to the other vessels considered here because it was made in a different place than where it was found. Specifically, it could have been created at either Rogland or Hordaland, where ship-building was a common practice.<sup>47</sup>

Besides its creation, and unlike the ships in England, the Oseberg is almost entirely complete. Many of the details of the ship are still present, like the coiled snake and other highly detailed animals carved into the stem, sternpost, and upper stake. One of the only things that was not preserved was half of the mast and the sail, which would have been a large rectangle. Along with these missing elements, the ship was also lacking some of its grave goods due to looting.<sup>48</sup> Still, the Oseberg had a rich array of grave goods. The goods included 30 oars created specifically for the burial (although they were not all finished), equipment to sail the ship, items for cooking, food, clothes, beds, a cart, tents, and sleighs, as well as animals that had been sacrificed.<sup>49</sup> The ship used for the burial was actually:

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<sup>44</sup> Sjøvold, “A Royal Viking Burial,” 193.

<sup>45</sup> Christensen, “The Viking Ships,” 556.

<sup>46</sup> Sjøvold, “A Royal Viking Burial,” 193.

<sup>47</sup> Bonde and Stylegar, “Between Sutton Hoo and Oseberg,” 26-27.

<sup>48</sup> Christensen, “The Viking Ships,” 551-557.

<sup>49</sup> Sjøvold, “A Royal Viking Burial,” 192; Jarman, Cat. 2023. *River Kings: A New History of the Vikings from Scandinavia to the Silk Roads*. First Pegasus Books paperback edition. New York: Pegasus Books. 129.

“An old vessel, and had evidently been disused for some time and stripped of her gear. But for the funeral this was replaced by new gear to make her ready for sea, even to the extent of making her a fresh set of 30 oars, some of which were unfinished when they were thrown down into the grave-chamber before it was covered over. When the ship was excavated, it was found that three oars on the starboard side and one on the port side were actually shipped in their oar-ports, yet at the same time the vessel was moored to a stone.”<sup>50</sup>

There was some metalwork present, traced most likely to Ireland, which is not uncommon in Viking graves at the time due to the interactions then occurring between the groups as the First Viking Age began. That being said, not all of the grave goods were created at the same time. It seems that there was about a 50-year gap between the oldest and newest items, but “in spite of dissimilarities, they are all based on a common motif – animal figures.”<sup>51</sup>



Fig 8: Archaeological wood artifacts from the Oseberg find (left, animal head post; right, kitchen equipment) exhibited at the Viking Ship Museum, Norway. Photo: KHM, UiO

There were human remains found at the entrance of the robber trench. As for the placement of artifacts, most of the equipment was near the remains in the forepart of the ship, including the oars, bailing vessel, pails, sleighs, and a cart. Some horse and ox skeletons were

<sup>50</sup> Major, “Ship Burials in Scandinavian Lands,” 147.

<sup>51</sup> Sjøvold, “A Royal Viking Burial,” 195.

found beside the ship, and one ox skeleton was near the "...stern (rear [of the ship]), outside of the burial chamber."<sup>52</sup>

There were two sets of human remains. Both were women. There was no jewelry found at the burial because of the looting, which was unusual for the burial of women, as jewelry was "an integral part of the equipment of a Viking woman's grave."<sup>53</sup> The women died when they were around 50 for the younger one and 70-80 for the older one of the pair.<sup>54</sup> The identities of both women are unknown. Many think that one of the women was a queen, while the other was potentially a servant. The idea that the burial is connected to royalty comes back to the richness of the grave goods. A hypothesis was proposed that it could be the burial of Queen Aasa, Herald Comely-Hair's grandmother, "but the skeletal remains tend to disprove this theory and strong criticism has been raised against it on other grounds."<sup>55</sup> There have been DNA and isotope tests done on the remains in hope of finding out where they are from. While strontium 90 tests show that the older woman comes from around Oseberg, the younger one contained DNA traits similar to those of people around the Black Sea.<sup>56</sup> This means that travel was occurring for both women and men, although we are unsure whether it was willing travel or forced in her case.

Regardless, influences were being spread both east and west by the Vikings, as they traveled and traded. Even the Oseberg ship itself contained grave goods that were imported from England and Ireland, such as the Celtic metalwork.<sup>57</sup> Beyond seeing diversity of foreign material at the Oseberg site, there was also the diversity among its own material, as there was a

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<sup>52</sup> Sjøvold, "A Royal Viking Burial," 192-193.

<sup>53</sup> Sjøvold, "A Royal Viking Burial," 193.

<sup>54</sup> Jarman, *River Kings*, 130.

<sup>55</sup> Sjøvold, "A Royal Viking Burial," 199.

<sup>56</sup> Jarman, *River Kings*, 120.

<sup>57</sup> Bonde and Stylegar, "Between Sutton Hoo and Oseberg," 30.

“transition between two stylistic phases which are now known as early and late Oseberg.”<sup>58</sup> The Early Oseberg style (Fig 9) was named for the art style of the finds at the ship burial, that often depicted “‘gripping beast’ motifs of sinewy figures that intertwine in repeating patterns.”<sup>59</sup> The late Oseberg became the Borre style (Fig 10), which focused on depicting creature heads and was often “compact and almost circular.”<sup>60</sup> Overall, the Oseberg ship burial shows the distribution of grave goods around the ship rather than in one central location, which is more consistent with Viking burials. These elements of the burial show some of the connections the Vikings had with the rest of Europe.



Fig 9. Depicting the early Oseberg style. Detail from Oseberg Ship. Photo by Karamell, 2005.

Fig 10. Depicting the late Oseberg/Borre style. Gaut's Cross, Isle of Man.

<sup>58</sup> Sjøvold, “A Royal Viking Burial,” 195.

<sup>59</sup> Sons of Vikings. “Viking Art Styles,” May 25, 2020. <https://sonsofvikings.com/blogs/history/viking-art-styles>.

<sup>60</sup> Sons of Vikings, “Viking Art Styles.”



Fig 11. Pre-excitation photograph after initial cleaning. (top)  
Fig 12. Post-excitation photograph of the cut. (bottom)



The final ship to be considered in chronological order is the Viking boat called the Swordle Bay boat burial, also known as Port an Eilean Mhoir or Ardnamurchan. This vessel was fully excavated in 2011, after being found in 2006 in Scotland along the Swordle River. Initially,

a “circular turfed stone mound”<sup>61</sup> was observed, and once stones were removed “an oval-shaped feature, measuring 5.1 x 1.6m at its widest point and oriented WSW – ENE” was revealed.<sup>62</sup> was revealed. The vessel was defined by curb stones, was “boat shaped,” and the excavated feature contained over 200 rivets.<sup>63</sup> The boat itself was just a “small rowing boat.”<sup>64</sup> Although almost none of the wood has survived, the cairn material does help define some areas of the boat in more detail than in the other sections of it, which helps to distinguish how the boat was set up and the layout of grave goods.<sup>65</sup>

The grave good items appear to be spread around the boat, which implies that there might not necessarily have been a “defined central burial chamber.”<sup>66</sup> It appears that the western and central part of the boat housed a spear and shield, while the eastern part was “free of non-organic material.”<sup>67</sup> The spear and shield (or more accurately the shield boss and spear head) were what remained, due to decay, and it is also possible that they slightly shifted with decay and time.<sup>68</sup> The spear and sword appear to have been “killed” before both were interred in the grave.<sup>69</sup> “Killing” here refers to the ritual of breaking a weapon before placing it in a burial. It is possible that this “killing,” coupled with the sword being wrapped in a shroud, indicates that there was some performance ritual occurring. Furthermore, a ladle and some of the organic remains might point towards libations being poured.<sup>70</sup> Besides these items, other goods included the top of a drinking horn, rivets, a ring pin, whetstone, sickle, flint, and metalwork, which, for the most part,

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<sup>61</sup>Harris, Cob, Gray, and Richardson, “A Viking at Rest,” 334.

<sup>62</sup>Harris, Cob, Gray, and Richardson, “A Viking at Rest,” 334; Batey, “Viking Burials in Scotland,” 42.

<sup>63</sup> Harris, Cob, Gray, and Richardson, “A Viking at Rest,” 334-337.

<sup>64</sup> Batey, “Viking Burials in Scotland,” 43.

<sup>65</sup> Batey, “Viking Burials in Scotland,” 42.

<sup>66</sup> Batey, “Viking Burials in Scotland,” 42.

<sup>67</sup> Batey, “Viking Burials in Scotland,” 42.

<sup>68</sup>Harris, Oliver, et al. “Viking Boat Burial Swordle Bay, Ardnamurchan Season Six, 2011: Archaeological Excavations Data Structure Report.” Ardnamurchan Transitions Project, no 17. 2011. 10.

<sup>69</sup> Batey, “Viking Burials in Scotland,” 44.

<sup>70</sup> Harris, Cob, Gray, and Richardson, “A Viking at Rest,” 338.

seem to have been placed alongside and under the body. It is difficult to tell the significance of the positioning, however, due to the lack of a physical body, exempting a couple of teeth and bone fragments.<sup>71</sup> We can assume that, by using the position the teeth were found in, we can orient the body, indicating that the head was toward the west and feet toward the east.<sup>72</sup>



Fig 13. Some of the other finds recovered from the grave (clockwise from the top left): broad-bladed axe, shield boss, ringed pin and the hammer and tongs (photographs: Pieta Greaves/AOC Archaeology).

As for the identity of the person associated with the burial, there is not a clear answer because of “only two teeth and two small scraps of bone surviving.”<sup>73</sup> However, the grave goods do suggest a person of higher status,<sup>74</sup> and the excavators in 2011 have taken the multiple weapons to indicate that the person was “potentially male.”<sup>75</sup> It is best to be cautious when

<sup>71</sup> Batey, “Viking Burials in Scotland,” 43-44; Harris, et al. “Viking Boat Burial Swordle Bay,” 11-12 & 17-18; Ravilious, Kate, Nikhil Swaminathan, Zach Zorich, Jessica Woodard, Lauren Hilgers, Julian Smith, Samir S. Patel, Mike Elkin, and Jarrett A. Lobell. “Top 10 Discoveries of 2011.” *Archaeology* 65, no. 1 (2012): 24–31. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41780759>. 25.

<sup>72</sup> Harris, et al. “Viking Boat Burial Swordle Bay,” 15.

<sup>73</sup> Harris, Cob, Gray, and Richardson, “A Viking at Rest,” 334-337.

<sup>74</sup> Rusk, Oliver, “Norse by Northwest: Pursuing Scandinavian Settlement on Coll and Tiree,” University of Glasgow, 2016. 19.

<sup>75</sup> Harris, et al. “Viking Boat Burial Swordle Bay,” 20.

asserting such notions, however, after the revelation that the famous (and highly armed) Viking warrior from Birka was actually found to be a woman.<sup>76</sup>

Overall, this burial follows Viking boat burial traditions, ‘killing’ weapons and the dispersing of grave goods. The grave continues to also reflect that the Vikings and Early English groups interacted, because of both its location and the grave goods from the area. This is understandable though, given that this burial was “right on the main north-south seafaring route between Ireland and Norway” and “Vikings were known to have inhabited the nearby islands of the Hebrides.”<sup>77</sup>

In general, the similarities and differences between these groups are apparent. Some unique aspects of the Early English ship burials are that they include human hair and their items were probably located in their central burial chamber. For the Vikings, the unique aspects are that there are human remains present and the grave goods are spread out along the ship. Besides this, however, all of the ships, with the exception of Snape having been looted, contain a rich array of similar grave goods, contain items from both local and foreign locations, and take place in a pagan burial tradition. Even just the practice of using ships and the assortment of goods show similarities between the burial practices used by the Vikings and Early English. That being said, however, the issue of dating these ships must be addressed.

It is important to acknowledge that there is an issue with the date of the ships when comparing the ship practices and looking for influence. The two Early English ship burials, Sutton Hoo and Snape, are earlier than the two Viking ship burials, Oseberg and Swordle Bay.

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<sup>76</sup> Solly, Meilan. “Researchers Reaffirm Remains in Viking Warrior Tomb Belonged to a Woman.” *Smithsonian Magazine*. February 21, 2019. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/researchers-reaffirm-framed-ancient-viking-warrior-was-biologically-female-180971541/>.

<sup>77</sup> Ravilious, et al. “Top 10 Discoveries of 2011,” 25.

The dating for our earliest known Viking ship burial is the 800s CE, which is about 200 years after the earliest known Early English ship burials. This makes it impossible to argue that Vikings had any influence over the Early English ship burials because there is not any physical proof that Vikings were in contact with England before around 800 CE and we do not have Viking ships earlier than the Early English.

There are, however, some scholars who raise questions about the possibility of prior connections between these groups despite the lack of obvious sources, the appearance of Vikings at the Lindisfarne Monastery in 793 CE, the similarities in grave goods, and the similarities in ship burial practices. Niels Bonde and Frans-Arne Stylegar, for example, have suggested that the practice of boat burials was passed along via people traveling from Norway to Eastern England, potentially in a similar way that the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes did.<sup>78</sup> There is also the possibility that the ship burial practices developed independently in both groups, which, while possible, seems highly unlikely because of the strong similarities present between the burials and because of the distance between these groups.<sup>79</sup> That being said, however, ship burials are not unique to these groups and had developed independently in other places such as Egypt and various Asian countries in earlier periods.<sup>80</sup> Still, scholars, including Michael Pearson, Robert van de Noort, Alex Woolf, and Rupert Bruce-Mitford to name a few, all make connections and draw comparisons between Early English ship burials and Viking boat graves, often attributing the Early English practice as being Scandinavian in character.

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<sup>78</sup> Bonde & Stylegar, "Between Sutton Hoo and Oseberg," 30.

<sup>79</sup> Christensen, "The Viking Ships," 547.

<sup>80</sup> Egypt: Fessenden, Maris. "Archaeologists Find a Rare 4,500-Year-Old Egyptian Funerary Boat." *Smithsonian Magazine*. February 2, 2016. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/archaeologists-find-rare-4500-year-old-egyptian-funerary-boat-180958020>; Asia: Tenazas, Rosa C. P. "The Boat-Coffin Burial Complex in the Philippines and its Relation to Similar Practices in Southeast Asia." *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society* 1, no. 1 (1973): 19–25. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29791037>.

Overall, from the evidence presented in this paper, the initial research question of “did the Vikings influence the Early English?” yields the ultimate result of “no.” From the ship burials analyzed here, as well as our earliest confirmed Viking ship finds, this analysis is left with the conclusion that it does not support the presence of Viking influence on the Early English. This is because of the chronological appearance of Vikings in both the written record and the archaeological record being a few hundred years later than the Early English in terms of the ship burial practices.

It is undeniable, however, that there are still strong similarities between the ship burial practices of these two groups. And it seems negligent to account for those similarities as just the pure coincidence of two groups separately developing parallel practices. As discussed, scholars have even compared these groups and attributed the Early English burial practice to be Scandinavian-like. Between these scholars’ descriptions and this research, it seems fair to continue the discussion of Early English ship burial practices and Viking ship burial practices. Instead of completely rejecting the initial research here, it can be altered from this point in an attempt to reveal the possibility of further research.

The Viking ship burial practices appeared later than the Early English ship burial practices. However, there are ship burials located in Scandinavia that predate the “Viking Age,” as currently defined. These include ship burials dated to around the same time as the two Early English ship burials. Perhaps then, there might be a connection between the Early English and the Vikings’ predecessors in Scandinavia during the Vendel period.

The Vendel period, also referred to as the Merovingian period in Norway and Finland, dated to about 550-750 CE in Scandinavia, which overlaps with the dates for both of the Early

English ship burials.<sup>81</sup> This period was a period of migration, in which Scandinavians were beginning to travel outwards. It is also characterized by its rich grave goods and abundance of animal art. The Vendel period also had an abundance of ship burials. Even the name of the period comes from the site of Vendel in Sweden, which is a cemetery that contained 14 boat burials with rich grave goods.<sup>82</sup> Beside the site of Vendel, another notable site from this period is Valsgärde in Sweden. This site includes burials dating from around the fourth century to the 1100s CE, with over ninety-two graves, including at least 62 cremations and fifteen boat burials,<sup>83</sup> five of which come from the Vendel period and the rest from the Viking Age.<sup>84</sup> One of the notable features of these boat graves was that they had very rich grave goods, including animals, animal art, weapons, and helmets.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Nichols, Christopher. "Welcome to Valsgärde – Scandinavian Archaeology," May 7, 2023. <https://www.scandinavianarchaeology.com/welcome-to-valsgarde/>.

<sup>82</sup> Nichols, "Welcome to Valsgärde."

<sup>83</sup> Nichols, "Welcome to Valsgärde."

<sup>84</sup> Ljungkvist, John. "Valsgärde ~ Development and change of a burial ground over 1300 years." *Valsgärde studies: the Place and its People, Past and Present*: Uppsala, 2008, 13.

<sup>85</sup> Nichols, Christopher. "The Vendel Period: The Golden Age of the Norse." *Scandinavian Archaeology*, May 23, 2021. <https://www.scandinavianarchaeology.com/the-vendel-period-the-golden-age-of-the-norse/>.



Fig. 14. The Valsgärde burial ground with the location of different graves. Some fragmentary cremation graves that were found during the excavation of boat-graves are listed with the number of the boat-grave in parentheses: 40 (11), 42 (7), 43 (10), 44 (13), 45 (14), 53 (4), 54 (3), 58 (6), giving their approximate position.

The grave goods, specifically the helmets, really illustrate the similarities in artifact design between the Early English and the Norsemen of the Vendel period. The famous Sutton Hoo helmet and facemask was seen as an extraordinary find, but yet it is comparable to helmets found at both Vendel and Valsgärde during the 600s. Comparing the helmet from grave 5 at Valsgärde (Fig 15) dating from the 600s and the Sutton Hoo helmet from the 600s (Fig 16), the shape of the eye cutouts, the decoration style of the eyebrows, and the raised crest going between the eyes and towards the back of the head are very similar. Another helmet that also comes from Valsgärde in grave 7 during the early 600s (Fig 17) further demonstrates this style, with similar eye cutouts, decorated eyebrows, a crest that goes from the eyebrows to the back of the head, and

this one also has garnet inlaid into the metal. This type of helmet is found profusely in Vendel graves; however, it is a unique find at Sutton Hoo in the British Isles.



Fig 15: Helmet from Valsgärde grave 5 (7<sup>th</sup> c.). Photo: Joe Mabel (left)



Fig 16: Sutton Hoo Helmet Reconstruction with original fragments © The Trustees of the British Museum (right)



Fig 17. Helmet from Valsgärde grave 7 (6th c. AD), an example of the extravagant wealth of the Vendel Period elite. Museum Gustavianum. Photo: Christopher Nichols.

The garnet inlays mentioned above compare to another Vendel period example that also compares to the Sutton Hoo helmet. These occur in the swords found at Valsgärde, specifically the ones in graves 5 and 7 (Fig 18). Here there are notable similarities between the square cut garnets located on the pommel of the sword from grave 7 and the ones located below the eyebrows on the Sutton Hoo helmet (Fig 19). There are also similarities in the round garnet located along the crest of the Sutton Hoo helmet and found in the pommel and guard of the sword found in grave 5. Comparing the swords to one another, the large garnet inlay on the pommel of the swords in both graves 5 and 7 closely resemble that on the pommel of the sword found at Sutton Hoo (Fig 20/21).



Fig 18. Swords from Valsgärde graves 5 and 7. Photos: Joe Mabel

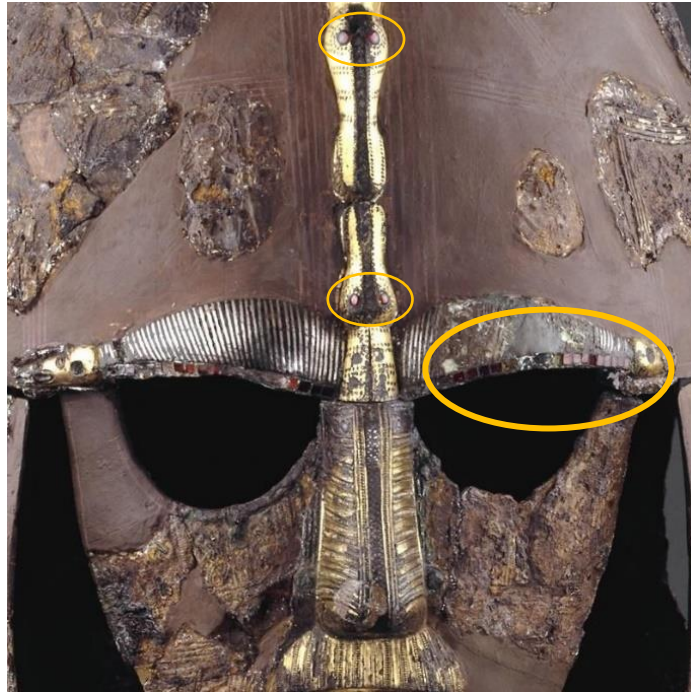


Fig 19: Garnet stones along eyebrows and crest in Sutton Hoo helmet. © The Trustees of the British Museum



Fig 20: Sword found at Sutton Hoo ship burial © The Trustees of the British Museum (Top)



Fig 21: Garnet stone pommel in Sutton Hoo sword. © The Trustees of the British Museum (Bottom)

Comparing each of these items, the similarities that occur between them, and the fact they were created around the same time, and noting that the Vendel helmets and ship burials appeared

before the Sutton Hoo burial, there is an opening to argue, not for Viking influence, but instead for earlier, pre-Viking Scandinavian influence. Specifically, Scandinavian influence from a period earlier being what influenced Early English ship burial practices. In this way, it can be demonstrated that the pre-Viking Scandinavian groups may have had contact with the Early English, possibly through migration or trade.<sup>86</sup>

Overall, from this research, there have been very strong similarities noted between the ship burial practices of the Early English and the Vikings. The chronological appearance of Viking ship burials versus Early English ship burials, however, does not support my original hypothesis of finding support for the Vikings influencing the Early English. A more satisfactory hypothesis surely lies in the Vendel period, with the potential to build an argument that the practice of ship burials traveled from Scandinavia to England via early contact.

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<sup>86</sup> Nichols, "Welcome to Valsgärde."

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