**Are Bride Prices are a Legitimate Cause of the Viking raids?**

The aim of this essay is to determine if bride prices can be a legitimate cause of ‘Viking’ raids. This essay will consider a hypothesis that suggests that Scandinavian men embarked on early Viking expeditions to acquire foreign wealth in order to pay bride prices to marry. This is one among many suggestions as a potential reason for Viking activity and the ‘Viking Age’ (Barrett 2010). This essay will first investigate the theory of bride wealth, which has not been previously discussed at length beyond one case study on Gotland (Burström 1993). Then it will examine the Scandinavian evidence of bride prices in detail, before looking elsewhere, in this case to Great Britain, to see if the evidence of bride price are unique to Scandinavia, or if they existed elsewhere in Europe. If the evidence is similar in Great Britain, then it seriously challenges the validity of the ‘bride-wealth’ hypothesis, because if the evidence is similar in Great Britain, then we would expect the people of Britain to have become ‘Vikings’ themselves.

**Historical Background**

Bride prices have been suggested as a potential cause of the ‘Viking Age’, but this requires clarification. The ‘Viking Age’ has been used to include both the murder of a local official on the beach of Portland in AD 789 and the successful military invasions of England by named Danish monarchs in the early eleventh century, but the nature of violence differs greatly (Barrett 2010: 297). There is little doubt that Sweyn or Cnut’s invasions of England were political offensives, but most scholars agree that the unsystematic looting of monasteries and harbours were smaller-scale opportunistic violence (Randsborg 2000; Barrett 2010: 288). The first fifty years or so of Viking raids targeted undefended monasteries (Lindisfarne AD 793, Jarrow 794, Iona 795), and churches (Hartness and Tynemouth 800) which would have been relatively undefended, and it is only from the 830s onwards that Vikings began targeting defended towns (Southampton AD 840, London and Rochester 842) and engaging in conflict with local English kings (with Egbert AD 836 and Æthelwulf 843) (Redmond 2007: i). To be certain, this essay will use a somewhat restricted definition of ‘Vikings’ to mean seafaring Scandinavian raiders who did not act as part of a military. I will use ‘Viking Age’ to mean the period of time these raiders were active (c. 800 – 1000).

It is these earlier, opportunistic raids that the bride price hypothesis aims to explain, however it would not be a stretch to suggest that this first phase of Viking raids enabled the later and more ambitious raids, but the individuals who sacked Lindisfarne probably did not foresee the military invasions that would come in further centuries. Regardless, the social circumstances that triggered the earliest Viking raids certainly could have continued into the decades and centuries following.

**The Scandinavian Evidence**

In short, bride prices are the wealth that bridegrooms are expected to pay to a bride, or a bride’s kin, before they can marry. Thus the wealth flows from the male’s to the female’s family, as opposed to dowries where the wealth flows in the opposite direction. Bride prices are practiced in a number of historical and contemporary societies (Keesing 1981: 253; Anderson 2007), and the expected contents of bride prices are culturally specific.

This hypothesis that bride prices motivated Viking raiders was proposed by Burström (1993) as a potential explanation for a remarkably large number of silver hoards on the Island of Gotland. The large amount of silver present on the island was taken to indicate Viking loot, while Burström suggested that the nature of the silver being deposited into hoards implicated that loot functioned as bride wealth. Burström argued that silver for bride prices would have been prestige items, and so using that silver economically would have been socially discouraged (comparable to pawning a modern engagement ring), so the silver would have been kept in hoards. That bride wealth was too prestigious to be traded is key to this interpretation of hoards. Ninety percent of the hoards are dated to the ninth to twelfth centuries, however some date to the eighth century and it is certainly possible that the trend began in the eighth century and intensified as raids increasingly proved to be successful (Burström 1993: 35).

Encouragingly, bride prices are mentioned by Snorri Sturluson in his legendary thirteenth-century Ynglinga saga when the character Vanlande “married the daughter of Aude the Rich, and gave her as her bride price (*bruðkaup,* literallybride purchase) three large farms, and a gold ornament” (*Ynglinga* Saga, Chapter XXXVII). This is not the place to thoroughly investigate marital practices in the sagas, but it is important to note that there are later medieval Nordic source that remember, and therefore support, the bride price hypothesis. As with any thirteenth-century source, we must be careful that we are not projecting thirteenth-century idealisation of society onto a society that existed five centuries earlier. Archaeological evidence can help us identify this practice in earlier centuries.

The hypothesis that Viking loot was used for bride wealth is further evidenced by the proportion of Insular (British and Irish) artefacts being uncovered in female burials in southwestern Norway (Warmers 1998; Graham-Campbell 2001; Raven 2005). In fact, 85% of all insular grave goods are found in female graves (Warmers 1998: 42). Furthermore, the earliest burials with Insular loot were dated to c. AD 800 by artefact styles, which is roughly contemporary with the earliest Viking activity, and the quantity of burials with insular artefacts increased in the ninth century, but then decreased in the tenth century, which corresponds with the historical activity of opportunistic raiding. This appears to evidence the flow of goods from early Viking raids to Scandinavian brides, but we need to be careful. Firstly, the Norwegian evidence is 500 miles away from the Gotland evidence. Secondly, grave goods and hoards are very different types of evidence, and we should not shape evidence to fit our hypothesis. Hoards are far less common in southwestern Norway, so how can we be sure that loot in both hoards and graves were bride wealth?

Warmers (1998: 48) anticipated this question when he calculated the weight of silver in burials against the weight of silver found at wics (trading places) including Kaupang and Hedeby, and observed that the quantity of insular silver at one wic was comparable to the amount of silver in just one rich Norwegian burial. This implies that like the silver found on Gotland, these insular grave goods were not widely circulated in the economy. Bride prices are certainly not the only possible explanation for this, but it does provide one mechanism through which loot may have been considered too prestigious to have been used for trade. Indeed, Kristoffersen (2004: 34) interpreted the frequency of keys and beds as grave goods to mean that burial practices corresponded to (or even reiterated) wedding practices as a ‘marriage to death’. If marriages were indeed reflected in burial practices, then it would make sense that bride wealth would be buried with the bride.

**Mechanisms for Bride Price Systems**

What none of these scholars addressed was why foreign artefacts became bride prices in the first place. Burström (1993: 35) claimed that bride prices typically constituted objects difficult to obtain, but he provides no evidence or examples of this. Precious metals may have had greater availability beyond Scandinavia, but then how did society come to expect precious metals as bride prices? Were there objects other than foreign loot used as bride wealth before the eighth century (the *Ynglinga Saga* mentions farms, not loot, as bride wealth), or was the entire system of bride prices absent prior?

A potential context to answer these questions is a high male to female sex ratio, which can be caused by selective female infanticide, especially since this would have resulted in competition for brides (Clover 1988: 169; Barrett 2010: 293). There are plenty of modern examples of unequal sex ratios effecting marital practices, such as parts of China where the high sex ratio has resulted in an increase in sex trafficking and forced marriages (Junhong 2001). However, sex ratios cannot wholly explain why foreign loot would become the expected bride price. Furthermore, UN studies suggest that bride prices result in a preference for female children, since male children cause parents to loose wealth (Singh 2013). There may have been other reasons for parents to prefer male children, from patrilineality to an increased militarisation of society (Barrett 2010: 296), but the model fails to explain how foreign loot became expected bride prices.

Barrett (2010: 294) passingly offered ‘youth bulge theory’ as an alternative theory. Youth bulge theory posits that populations with significantly higher proportions of youth cohorts are more susceptible to violence, which has been supported by a series of empirical investigations of historical twentieth-century conflicts (Heinsohn 2003; Urdal 2004; 2006). Heinsohn (2003: 24) attributed youth bulges to increasing birth rates, typically due to industrialisation, however industrialisation cannot apply to early medieval Scandinavia. Youth bulges require low median ages in the respective population, but in the early medieval Scandinavian population, median ages would not have had to remain consistently low throughout the entire Viking Age. The Youth Bulge had to exist just long enough for loot to have become expected bride prices. Once the social practice had been established, it may have continued regardless of demographic changes. Importantly, a youth bulge would still have required a momentarily expansive population. Selective female infanticide again has been proposed as an alternative for a Viking youth bulge, and I would offer disease that reduced life expectancy as an alternative mechanism. This could be sustained by constant population growth, however this is usually minimised by modern scholars as a cause for the Viking Age (Barrett 2010: 292).

Therefore, I argue unequal sex ratios are a less legitimate mechanism for bride prices than disease or population expansion. No cause works in isolation, so bride prices do not need to explain every cause of Viking raids. Although not entirely unproblematic, low median age, ‘youth bulge’, evidence for loot to not be circulated in the economy, and the preference for loot to be buried in female graves, all make bride wealth a legitimate hypothesis.

**Methods**

Burström’s (1993) interpretation of hoards along with Warmers’s (1998) interpretation of female grave goods can be used as potential evidence for a bride price system that encouraged and enabled early Viking raids. Together, this fits the available evidence as a possible cause of Viking raids from the eighth to tenth centuries, as well as giving us interpretations to identify bride wealth elsewhere. To validate this hypothesis, we need to look for this evidence from the ‘Viking Age’ in areas beyond Scandinavia, because if the evidence is present there, then we would expect those regions to also have produced ‘Vikings’. The remainder of this essay will examine these two strands of evidence separately, by comparing the evidence from Scandinavia with evidence from a geographically comparable region, in this case Great Britain. It is important to note that different regions of Great Britain are historically attested to have been settled from different regions of Scandinavia. The individuals that buried their hoards on Gotland historically settled the Baltic Sea, while the individuals from southwestern Norway (aka ‘the Norse’) historically settled around the North, Norwegian, and Irish Seas (Redmond 2007: 11).

The first section will explore hoard evidence. For the British evidence to match the Scandinavian evidence we expect: hoards to contain loot, a very large quantity of hoards, and that the hoards contain artefacts that can be seen so socially valued as not to have been widely circulated in the economy.

The second section will explore burial evidence. Here we expect grave goods to be more likely to appear in female graves. Bride wealth does not necessarily need to be precious metals, although this would reflect the Scandinavian evidence Warmers (1998) observed in Norway. The presence of brooches, beads, and pins in female burial could indicate bride prices, but they could equally reflect other aspects of gender (Stig Sørensen 2009), and should be taken as positive evidence for bride prices.

**Hoards**

There were more than 400 silver hoards found on Gotland, and some 600 more in Sweden altogether from the eighth to twelfth centuries (Burström 1993: 33). In Great Britain, there are 162 identified hoards from c. 700 – 1100, including all ‘Anglo-Saxon’, ‘Pictish’, Viking, and mixed hoards. The quantity of British hoards is calculated from the compilation of PAS *Treasure Annual Reports* (Parol and Richardson 2016) for modern England and Wales and Canmore for modern Scotland.

There are two eighth-century (pre-Viking) hoards in Great Britain: the Staffordshire hoard buried by the ‘Anglo-Saxons’ and the Broch of Burgar Hoards buried by the ‘Picts’ (Dean, Hooke, FSA, and Jones 2010: 145; Graham-Campbell 1985). The Staffordshire Hoard is considered to have been buried after a conflict to consolidate a boundary (Dean et al 2010: 151), and the Broch of Burgar has been suggested to have been hidden to protect valuables from Vikings (Graham-Campbell 1985: 257). I am not aware of any attempts to analyse either of these hoard as bride wealth, but the hoards do not fit the bride wealth evidence of Gotland. These are the only two hoards and it appears they are exceptions to the common practice. The Broch of Burgar Hoard contains the same types and materials of artefacts that are on Gotland, like silver brooches and combs, but the Staffordshire Hoard contains mostly military gear, which is unlike the bride wealth on Gotland. There is nothing to suggest that these hoards were used for bride prices.

There are 43 ninth-century hoards, and 117 tenth-century hoards (Parol and Richardson 2016). The stark increase of the number of hoards from this period correlates with increasing Scandinavian settlement (Hadley 2006; Redmond 2007). On the surface, this indicates that something in Scandinavian societies encouraged the burial of hoards, which may have been bride price systems. However, the scale is still fewer than the relatively small island of Gotland.

In terms of the artefacts within the hoards, five (12%) of the ninth-century hoards contain artefacts that could be found in the Gotland hoards and could be reasonably interpreted to be bride wealth, such as brooches, chalices, bowls, and brooches all made of silver. The one ninth-century hoard identified by Canmore in Scotland was the Galloway hoard which included hundreds of gold and silver artefacts from not only Britain, but also Ireland, Francia, and both western and eastern Scandinavia (Owen 2015: 16), unlike the other four ninth-century silverware hoards which contain only local artefacts (Parol and Richardson 2016: 25).

Table 1 Number of 'Viking Age' Hoard and the ratio of currency to non-currency hoards

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Century | Number of Hoards in Great Britain | Primary Artefacts – coins/hacksilver | Primary Artefacts – silver ware |
| Eighth Century | 2 | 0 | 2 (100%) |
| Ninth century | 43 | 38 (88%) | 5 (12%) |
| Tenth Century | 117 | 102 (87%) | 15 (13%) |
| Total | 162 | 140 (86%) | 22 (14%) |

Of the 117 tenth-century hoards, 102 (87%) were exclusively coin hoards, and 38 (88%) of the 43 ninth-century hoards are the same. If we continue to assume that bride wealth would have been considered too prestigious to be circulated in the economy, then we can exclude coin hoards from being bride wealth, which are again similar to the types of artefacts in the Gotland hoards (Burström 1993: 33).

The most common types of artefacts in the remaining nine hoards includes brooches and hacksilver which both appear in six hoards, and necklets, arm rings, and ingots which appear in three hoards each (Parol and Richardson 2016: 25). Of these artefacts, we need to determine first that they are loot, and second that they are socially valuable enough to have been used as bride prices.

Any of these objects could have been looted, and I argue that this is further evidenced by the Bossall-Flaxton, Silverdale, and Vale of York Hoards where bullion and coins were buried in boxes and gilt vessels (Parol and Richardson 2016: 26). This suggests that objects were packed into portable containers for transporting loot.

We cannot be so certain that the looted goods were given a social value that disabled them from being circulated in the economy. Many of the artefacts like brooches, necklets, and arm rings could have been worn and occasionally lost, as evidenced by the occasional single. However, the larger pieces of decorative ware are not typically single finds, and it is conceivable that they were only worn for ceremonial purposes (such as weddings?), if at all, before being buried. It is more difficult to make this argument for hacksilver, which is usually argued to have functioned as currency (Graham-Campbell 1985), a practice that traveller Ahmad Ibn Fadlan observed first hand among Scandinavians on the Volga River in the tenth century. This suggests that although these hoards may have contained loot, they were probably not bride wealth.

Overall, there is little to suggest that the British silver hoards of the eighth to tenth centuries were buried bride wealth. We could expect to find artefacts like necklets and arm rings in the hoard on both Gotland and Great Britain, but the presence of coin and hacksilver hoards, which together are over half of all the known British hoards, contradicts the evidence that these were bride prices. Finally, we cannot ignore the sheer quantity of hoards. The 400 hoards on the small island of Gotland suggests that hoarding, and its motivations, were common practice, whereas the 162 hoards in all of Britain (including the Northern Isles) suggest that hoarding was the exception.

**Grave Goods and Sex**

In order to compare the supposed evidence for bride wealth, we need to investigate how grave goods were distributed by sex, and then we will determine the sex ratio of precious-metal grave goods in British burials. This analysis will focus on Kent, where evidence is widely available. It is important to note that Kent is not a region that corresponds to attested Scandinavian settlement.

Unfortunately, a complete corpus of British burials and corresponding grave goods for the eighth century does not yet exist. Therefore I will rely on the Anglo-Saxon Kent Electronic Database (Harrington and Brookes 2008) for a more thorough statistical analysis.

It is important to note the difference in religious practices. Kent was ruled by some of the earliest English monarchs in Great Britain in the sixth and seventh centuries, and Christian practices were presumably taken up by the Kentish population, although scholars have warned us that Christianity would not have immediately influenced burial practice (Meany 2003: 293). Meanwhile, eighth-century Scandinavians were largely non-Christian. The difference in religion would certainly have effected burial practice so that even two societies that both utilise bride prices would manifest differently. Christians tend to buried without non-wearable artefacts, so comparisons between Scandinavia and Kent are fundamentally complicated. However, even comparisons between Scandinavia and other ‘Pagan’ regions would be complicated, because ‘Paganism’ was not a uniform religion, and we cannot rule out that any apparent differences may actually result from differences in religion. Similarly, Christian burial practices varied greatly at this time period (Price 2010; Lund 2013). Therefore, Kent and Southwestern Norway remain legitimate regions to compare.

There are 72 identified eighth-century burials in Kent that have been positively sexed, 40 female and 32 male, across six sites: Buckland, Eccles, Finglesham, Mount Pleasant, Ozengell, and Polhill (table 2). Only twelve of these burials had grave goods made of what I will consider precious materials: ivory and ‘precious metal’ materials, gold, silver, and copper and alloys. Of these two (17%) are in male graves and ten (83%) are in female graves, and if we exclude ivory, than all ten (100%) are in female graves. This closely mirrors the proportion found in eighth-century Norwegian burials, so we might expect a bride price system in Kent. However, for the 10 female burials with precious-metal grave goods, there are 30 without. I argue that this makes weak evidence for bride wealth, although it is possible that these 10 women had different (more valuable) bride prices than the other 30. These 10 women may have been relatively wealthy or high-status, and so required precious metals as bride prices. Eighth-century Kent may have had differing social values of marriage; divorcees and women with children may have had lower bride prices (as is the case in modern Thailand (Anderson 2007: 152)).

Table 2 Grave Goods by sex in eighth-century Kent (ASKED)

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Site | Sex Ratio (eighth-century only) | Female Precious Grave Goods | Male Precious Grave Goods |
| Buckland | 6 female: 6 male | Null | 2 ivory bags |
| Eccles | 1 female: 0 male | 3 silver brooches | Null |
| Finglesham | 7 female: 5 male | Silver finger ring; 3 silver rings used as beads; silver pendant | Null |
| Mount Pleasant | 0 female: 1 male | Null | Null |
| Ozengell | 16 female: 6 male | 2 silver earrings; silver pendant; silver necklet; silver pendant; silver finger ring | Null |
| Polhill | 9 female; 15 male | Silver finger rings | Null |

The second difference we need to consider is the volume of precious metal grave goods. The combined quantity of all silver and gold grave goods in Kent are less than would be found in one rich Norwegian burial. This again could be the result of different social values of bride prices, however the decrease in both volume and frequency of grave goods doubly challenges the presence of a bride wealth. Given the historical context, we would not expect to find comparable amounts of foreign loot in Kentish graves than in Norwegian graves, but we could expect the presence of a bride price system to manifest itself in an extremely unequal distribution of valuable grave goods in female graves. I argue that the inequality in Kent is minimal compared to that in Norway. We could apply the interpretation suggested by Kristoffersen (2004: 34) that beds and keys were evidence of bride prices, but there are no beds and only three keys present in these British burials.

Finally, we should note that the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, the closest comparable English historical record to the Scandinavian sagas, does not mention any bride prices, which further evidences that bride pries may have been absent in the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ kingdoms.

Overall, the combined evidence of Kentish burials does not support a bride price system. Although there is an apparent preference for precious-metal grave goods in female eighth-century burials, there is a far smaller quantity of grave goods. Furthermore, there is nothing to evidence that these grave goods were bride wealth, much less loot.

**Conclusion**

Scholars have done a great deal of work to propose potential causes of the Viking, however work must be done to critically engage each of these hypothesis to further narrow down our understanding of the ‘Viking Age. This essay explored bride prices across two themes. First we have further investigated the theory of bride prices. The hypothesis emerges from two different strands of evidence that are separated by 500 miles. Between the two regions, the evidence of female grave goods and hoards fits the hypothesis well. We can consider ‘youth bulge theory’ as a context for loot becoming the expected bride prices. Although problematic, selective female infanticide or disease are legitimate and likely mechanisms for this to have occurred.

Second, we compared the Scandinavian evidence to Great Britain. There are not enough British hoards to suggest that hoarding, and its related social impetus, were common practices. Many of the hoards did contain loot, but the presence of coins and hacksilver in more than half of the hoards suggests that they were not buried as bride wealth. Although there was an apparent preference for grave goods in Kentish female eighth-century burials, the quantity of grave goods is far less than the comparable Norwegian evidence. Many of the female grave goods are wearable artefacts that may represent other expressions of gender.

Overall, we find little comparable evidence of a bride price system in Britain. This validates the bride wealth hypothesis for Scandinavia. If bride prices are a legitimate cause of the Viking raids, then the evidence for bride prices should exist only in Scandinavia, otherwise we would expect Vikings to have originated in other regions at the same time. Although validating, this cannot prove this hypothesis, nor should we expect bride prices (or any one hypothesis) to wholly satisfy a cause of the Viking Age. However, if we allow this model to work concurrently with other hypotheses, then bride pries remain a valid cause of the Viking Age.

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