

## Description

For 128 years, the occupant of a high-status Viking burial at Birka, Sweden, was assumed to be a man. The grave, dated to the 10th century, contained a sword, axe, spear, armor-piercing arrows, two horses, and a complete game board with pieces — all recognized markers of military command. The individual was placed in a sitting position, adorned in silver and silk garments, within a 3.45-meter wood-chambered burial of exceptional quality. It wasn't until modern genomic testing of sample brk581 that the truth emerged: the occupant was female.

The discovery forced a major rethinking of Viking military hierarchy. Historians had long assumed that the presence of weapons in a grave automatically indicated a male burial, particularly in Birka, an important urban trade hub in Viking-age Sweden. The "shield-maiden" had been considered a figure of Norse mythology, not a documented historical reality. The genomic evidence transformed that assumption entirely.



*Hjalmar Stolpe's 1889 archaeological drawing of Birka grave Bj 581.*

The strategic significance of the grave goods is striking. The game board with pieces is not decorative: it is a recognized symbol of tactical command, indicating that this woman planned and led military operations. She was a professional officer of high rank. The two horses reinforce

that status. Her burial is among the richest of its kind, and for over a century it told its story clearly; only the assumption of who she must have been stood in the way. This discovery has fundamentally changed how archaeologists approach Viking-age graves, shifting the field away from gendered assumptions and toward bio-archaeological evidence. She is now one of the most important individuals in Viking studies.

| Modern population     | Distance |
|-----------------------|----------|
| Irish                 | 4.611    |
| Icelander             | 4.661    |
| Norwegian             | 4.749    |
| Danish                | 4.763    |
| Orcadian              | 4.802    |
| Scottish              | 4.821    |
| White American (Utah) | 4.840    |
| English (Cornwall)    | 4.861    |
| Welsh                 | 4.881    |
| Dutch                 | 4.900    |

## Source

---

**Date:** 1743–1793 CE

**mtDNA:** T2b

**Location:** Sweden

**Research:** A female Viking warrior confirmed by genomics

**Sample(s):** brk581