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**Nordic Middle Ages – Artefacts, Landscapes and Society.**  
**Essays in Honour of Ingvild Øye on her 70th Birthday**

Irene Baug, Janicke Larsen and Sigrid Samset Mygland (Eds.)



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## From Paganism to Christianity in Norway – An Examination of Graves and Grave Finds

Christianisation brought about fundamental changes for the societies where it was introduced and accepted. Therefore, the conversion from paganism to Christianity in Norway has been a matter of debate for more than hundred years (cf. ecclesiastical historian Einar Molland 1974 702-710), based upon historical sources, but also upon raised stone crosses (Birkeli 1973). According to the historian Anders Winroth (2012, 104), the written sources focused upon institutional conversion, the baptism of chieftains and kings, the building of churches and the installation of bishops, whereas archaeological material may hold information about the Christianisation process.

In the pre-Christian Norse society, rituals appear to have accompanied the individual from birth to death. Remains of some rituals are still visible in the landscape, including grave mounds, cairns, raised stones and stone crosses. Burials in mounds or cairns often include grave goods which until further examination represent silent primary sources. In Europe, clear indications have been found that pagan burial sites such as cremations, mounds, ship and horse burials disappeared with the Conversion at different times in different areas (Pluskowski & Patrick 2003, 46).

Some Norwegian archaeologists have focused upon graves and grave material in order to gather information on the chronology of the Christianisation process: Eivind Engelstad (1927; 1929), Jan Henning Larsen (1984), Anne Brit Hatleskog (1997), Kristin Gellein (1998) and Sæbjørg W. Nordeide (2011). Also the present investigation is based upon graves and grave finds, but it differs from the mentioned works in several respects, for instance with regard to investigation area, time span and selection of graves.

The investigation area includes 13 counties and their 308 municipalities in southern and central Norway (the counties Oslo, Østfold and Vestfold are not included). In comparison, Engelstad examined graves in 27 municipalities in inland east Norway, Gellein 33 and Hatlestad 16 municipalities both in Hordaland, Larsen 15 municipalities in Aust-Agder and Nordeide 21 test areas (municipalities) in southern and central Norway. The time span also differs. Hatleskog covered the Merovingian and Viking period, Nordeide the period AD 560-1150/1200, Engelstad and Larsen the late Viking period, whereas the present investigation focuses upon the tenth and eleventh centuries into the medieval period. The previous investigations included both male and female graves, whereas the present study is based upon

male graves (weapon graves) only. The choice of weapon graves was due to the fact that such graves are far more numerous than female graves, as there are between 3.6-5.5 weapon graves to each female grave (Solberg 1985, 75). Also, the weapon chronology is generally more precise than the one for e.g. jewellery (Petersen 1919, 184). The weapon graves may not provide precise dates, but a relative date is another matter. Comparison of weapon types and weapon combinations in the various districts may reveal relative chronological differences.

Graves and grave goods are many-sided and their symbolic role is now generally recognised (Bennett 1987; Skre 1997), including symbols of gender, status and power. As both historians and historians of religion agree that the process of political unification and Christianisation represent two sides of the same coin, the symbols of power may have special significance.

Even the absence of graves may symbolise or rather demonstrate an important matter related to ownership of land. In recent years, studies of ownership of land have also brought forward new information about the relationship of mounds/cairns and the ownership of land. According to the historian Absalon Taranger (1935, 125 cited by Frode Iversen 2009), claims of *òdel* could be put forward by referring to ancestors buried in mounds, particularly in an oral society. Thus, grave mounds signified allodial land (absolute ownership of land) and burials of allodial owners. Accordingly, absence of graves and grave monuments in an area or district may indicate that the keepers of the land were not the owners. This complicates a study of Christianisation based upon grave material, since absence or decrease in the number of graves in the late Viking period may either be the result of Christianisation or from a dwindling number of allodial owners.

Assuming that the youngest graves in a region represent the final phase of pagan burials, the present study aims at detecting chronological, numerical and spatial variation in the graves from the tenth, eleventh and the medieval period in the investigation area. Can regional and interregional variation be detected? If so, does eventual variation correlate with distance from the sea? Are the results from the present and the previous investigations in agreement? Can chronological, spatial and numerical trends in the weapon graves relate to information in historical sources?

## **Definition of Norse graves**

The Christian burial practice implies inhumation in a coffin, buried under ground (flat grave). The graves are orientated east-west, the head to the west. Burial should be in a physically demarcated cemetery. To bury the dead in mounds or cairns was strictly forbidden (Salvesen & Gunnes 1971, 100-105). The Norse graves differed from Christian burials in most of these respects. The graves varied considerably, from a single object in a small mound/cairn to rich equipment in numbers and quality often buried in large grave monuments. Even though pre-Christian burials may well be found in the ground (flat graves) and the orientation is in some cases east-west, registered inhumation graves have grave goods. Cremation burials were common, something forbidden to Christian custom. The graves were often covered by mounds, cairns or other types of visual demarcation. In the present study, the graves were defined by weapons found in mounds/cairns, stone settings or covered by a stone slab. Flat graves with weapons, tools or other equipment were included, as were cremation graves. The latter may be defined by burnt bones, charcoal and ashes and/or by observation of the artefacts being burned. Weapons found in combination with skeletons clearly represented graves.

## The chronological basis for the present work

Weapon chronology in the Viking period mainly depends upon the works of Oluf Rygh (1885), Jan Petersen (1919), Signe Fuglesang (1980) and Bergljot Solberg (1984). In Norway, archaeological finds have been catalogued and published by the archaeological museums since 1878. Rygh's types were used almost from the day of publication. Petersen's typology of swords, spears, axes, arrowheads, bridles and stirrups have been used since the early 1920's. Accordingly, in the present study their systems were used as well. The main reason for this is that the material from the five archaeological museums has now been included in a common database, [www.unimus.no](http://www.unimus.no). Weapons that entered the museums' collections prior to Rygh's publication, were verbally described. However, unless they have been presented in drawings or referred to in later studies, for instance by Petersen (1919), they are not included in the present study. In order to distinguish the material from the tenth and eleventh centuries and the material from the Merovingian and early Viking period, the actual types of weapons have to be defined. The basis for dating the graves to the tenth and the eleventh century is indicated in Figure 1.

**Figure 1.** Weapon categories and types which mark the graves as belonging to the tenth or eleventh century. Petersen's (1919) types are presented with letters or figure numbers. Rygh's (1885) types are defined by R. Ringerike style decoration (Fuglesang 1980) is indicated by \*.

Weapons	Tenth century	Tenth & eleventh century	Eleventh century
Sword types	O, P, Q, R, U, V, W	S*, Q, X, Y	T, Z, Æ, special type 20
Spearhead types	I, K, R 527	K*	G, H, K, M, R 530, Pet. fig. 26
Axe heads	E fig. 34, H, I, K	K, L	E fig. 35 & 36, F, L, M
Shield bosses	R 562		R 563, R 565

It should be noted that type Z swords may continue well into the medieval period. In Dalarna, Sweden, a sword with hilts like type Z, had decoration in the Urnes style (Serning 1966, 38), indicating the period 1050-1100.

In cases where swords of types S, Q, X, U, V, W, Y were not found together with eleventh century weapon combinations, they were dated to the tenth century. Some types cover a long time span. Type M, for instance, covers the period 850-950 (Petersen 1919, 182). Accordingly, an isolated find of a type M sword cannot be precisely dated but should be dated by the find combination. In the present material, type M swords are only included if the find combinations allow for a more precise dating. The chronology of axes has received little attention. It should, however, be noted that an axe (Ts 11937) of type M (R 560) had decoration in the Ringerike style.

During the search for grave finds, several reports of medieval weapons were observed. Some were reported to be from mounds, cairns or covered by a stone slab. When a Viking period weapon was found in a mound/cairn, it was automatically regarded as a grave find, but when the weapons were of a medieval type, the finds seemed to have been overlooked. However, when individuals without knowledge of weapon chronology reported similar find circumstances in various parts of the country, it should be taken seriously. Here, the medieval weapons found in a mound, cairn or covered by a stone slab were regarded as weapon graves.

## Localisation

Localisation is standard procedure in the archaeological museums, where the finds are referred to by county, municipality and farm. In this study, the mentioned names represented counties and municipalities only. If in rare cases a farm name is given, it is indicated in the text. To obtain a basic overview, the finds in the present study were first referred to by county. It soon became clear that presence/absence of weapon graves (hereafter only called graves) within a county varied considerably. Localisation to municipality was, therefore, necessary. This enabled detection of municipalities without graves from the actual period and differentiation between coastal and inland municipalities. It also enabled differentiation of tenth and eleventh century graves in the various municipalities. Four or more grave finds in a municipality from either the tenth or the eleventh century are here defined as a grave cluster. As a result of these findings, the 13 counties are separated into two large regions: Region 1 includes 7 counties from Vest-Agder to Nord-Trøndelag, Region 2 includes 6 counties in east Norway (Fig. 2). As will be demonstrated, the regions are far from uniform.



**Figure 2.** Southern and Central Norway separated into two large regions.

## Region 1

### **The coast**

The coastal area from the county of Vest-Agder to the county of Nord-Trøndelag covers 92 municipalities. As many as 45 of them had no graves from the tenth and eleventh century (Vest-Agder 2, Rogaland 5, Hordaland 12, Sogn og Fjordane 7, Møre og Romsdal 11, Sør-Trøndelag 4 and Nord-Trøndelag 4). Altogether 69 graves from the tenth century were recorded in the coastal districts, with the number reduced to 13 in the eleventh century. The decrease was strongest in Vest-Agder (100 per cent), followed by Nord-Trøndelag, Rogaland, Hordaland and Møre og Romsdal. In the remaining counties, the decrease varied between 50 and 67 per cent (Fig. 3).

**Figure 3.** Coastal and inland representation in Region 1 for tenth century, eleventh century and medieval graves

County	Coast		Inland		Coast	Inland
	10th century	11th century	10th century	11th century	Medieval	Medieval
Vest-Agder	8	-	-	-	-	2
Rogaland	21	3	28	8	-	1
Hordaland	15	2	32	8	-	-
Sogn og Fjordane	5	2	47	25	-	-
Møre og Romsdal	8	2	31	11	-	-
Sør-Trøndelag	3	3	17	12	2	6
Nord-Trøndelag	9	1	34	19	1	3
<b>All</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>189</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>12</b>

The youngest graves in the area from Rogaland to Møre og Romsdal were from around AD 1000 or slightly into the eleventh century. In Sør-Trøndelag, a medieval grave was found in both Rissa and Hemne, while in Nord-Trøndelag a medieval grave was recorded at Nærøy.

### **The inland**

The inland of Region 1 includes 91 municipalities, of which 26 were without graves from the tenth and eleventh centuries and the medieval period. A total of 189 graves belonged to the tenth century. In the eleventh century, the number was reduced to 83. Twelve medieval graves were recorded (Fig. 3). In Vest-Agder, the inland had no graves from the tenth or eleventh century. It may, however, be noted that in Hægebostad, a stirrup and a dagger from the Middle Ages were found buried together in the ground with much charcoal and ash. The place was surrounded by stones. In Åseral, an axe of a medieval type was found below a stone slab.

Rogaland had a marked decrease of graves from the tenth to the eleventh century (72 per cent). In the tenth century, weapon clusters were present in Strand, Sandnes, Vindafjord, Suldal and Bjerkreim. In the eleventh century, these clusters no longer persisted. In Gjesdal, a medieval axe and a whetstone were found in a cairn. In Hordaland, there was a 75 per cent decrease in the number of graves from the tenth to the eleventh century, which agreed with the findings of Gellein (1998) and Hatleskog (1997). Weapon clusters appeared in the tenth century in Etne, Ulvik, Voss and Odda. No cluster was present in the eleventh century. In

Sogn og Fjordane, there was about a 50 per cent decrease in graves from the tenth to the eleventh century. Weapon clusters from the tenth century were recorded in Gaular, Gloppen, Stryn and Sogndal. In the eleventh century, Stryn represented the only cluster with an increase in the number graves compared to the tenth century. In the municipality Eid, a flat cremation grave was found with a full weapon set, including a type Z sword.

In Møre og Romsdal, the decline in graves from the tenth to the eleventh century was 65 per cent. Tenth century grave clusters were recorded in Ørsta, Vestnes and Rauma. In the eleventh century, Rauma represented the only cluster which included more than half of the eleventh century graves in the county. In Sør-Trøndelag, the decline in graves was far less than the remaining counties, roughly 30 per cent. Midtre Gauldal was the only municipality with a weapon cluster in both the tenth and the eleventh century. In general, graves with a full weapon set were rare, and flat graves outnumbered finds from mounds/cairns. Some graves which included type S swords with relevant combinations and also a sword of type Z demonstrated traditional burials well into the eleventh century. Medieval graves were recorded in Malvik (2), Oppdal (1), Skaun (2) and Tydal (1). In the inland of Nord-Trøndelag, weapon clusters from the tenth century appeared in Steinkjer and Verdal. In the eleventh century, the clusters were restricted to Levanger and Verdal. A large part of the graves had a full weapon set. Two type T swords, both from Stjørdal, were found in the ground, thus representing stray finds. The general impression was that a fair part of the graves in Nord-Trøndelag reflected aristocratic presence in both the tenth and eleventh century. The medieval graves were from Levanger (1), Verdal (1) and Høylandet (1).

In conclusion, Region 1 was characterised by a low number of eleventh century finds compared to the tenth century. The trend was most marked along the coast, but also relevant for the inland. There was marked inter-regional variation. The four counties Vest-Agder, Rogaland, Hordaland and (except for the municipality Rauma) Møre og Romsdal had a marked decline in graves during the eleventh century. In comparison, Sogn og Fjordane and Nord-Trøndelag had about a 50 per cent reduction, Sør-Trøndelag about 30 per cent.

## The historical record

The early political unification of the Scandinavian countries was, according to the historian Thomas Lindkvist (2003), the outcome of political decisions made by individuals and military force as supported by historical sources. In the skaldic poem *Háleygjatal*, composed during the 900s, one learns that Håkon Grjotgardsson, the first historic known earl of the Håløyg family, had a stronghold at Lade in Trondheim. The earl family appears to have won its domains by defeating local opposition all the way from Hålogaland to Ørland at the coast of Trøndelag, eventually reaching Trondheim (cf. Andersen 1977, 68-69).

The story seems in some way to repeat itself in various parts of the coast of western Norway. At Møre, the sagas mention the Møre earl, and around AD 1000, the powerful Giske family played a part in national events. After King Harald Finehair defeated his opponents, his domain seems mainly to comprise the coastal districts of western Norway (Helle 2013, 48). His royal manors were located at the coast from Nordhordland to Rogaland. In Hordaland, Seim, Alrekstad and Fitjar represented the king's manors, and in Rogaland, Avaldsnes and Utstein

had the same function. It has been assumed that King Harald acquired these estates after he had defeated his rivals (Bjørkvik 1995, 71). Studies of the ownership of landed property around these manors some hundred years later seem to support this opinion (Bjørkvik 1995; Iversen 1998; Fyllingsnes 1999).

An increasing accumulation of land by a few hands may, therefore, be a major cause of the few grave finds along the coast. But does this situation exclude missionary efforts and eventual acceptance of Christianity? On the contrary, if a king and some of his subordinates had become Christians and wished to pave the way for Christianisation, their social positions might help the mission succeed. *Ágrip*, one of the oldest royal sagas, informs that Håkon the Good (933-959?) built churches and filled them with priests, but that the people burnt down the churches and killed the priests. Snorre likewise reported in the saga of Håkon the Good that the king set up churches in Møre. This story has been supported by excavations in the early 1990s at Veøy, a small island in the Romsdal fjord. The excavation resulted in the finds of two Christian cemeteries and graves with remains of skeletons (Solli 1996). The graves were all east-west orientated and without grave goods and had the correct depth according to Christian custom. The earliest dates for the majority of samples from the graves were from the eighth to the tenth centuries which place it as the earliest Christian graveyards found in Norway. It would hardly be possible for the church at Veøy to continue for decades without acceptance from those who controlled the district.

The attempts to christen the population seemed not to have been welcomed all over West Norway. At Lund, Rogaland, a well-equipped male grave which seems to be the youngest weapon grave in Rogaland, has been found at the farm Hove. Maybe it represents the last strong defender of the old cult and of the ceremonial place – the Hov?

In conclusion, the results of the excavation at Veøy represent the strongest evidence of early Christianisation of West Norway. They seem to confirm the historic tradition that King Håkon brought English missionaries to Norway. The documented presence at Veøy of a church and grave yards strongly indicates that the ruler of Møre (Møre earl?) did accept or even support the missionary effort. The marked decline of graves in some of the coastal districts may well be the result of the mission, at least in Rogaland and Hordaland. But in communities like Stryn in Sogn og Fjordane and Rauma in Møre og Romsdal, the strong representation of eleventh century graves indicates that the Christian mission did not succeed everywhere.

## **Region 2**

### ***Increase in traditional burials in East Norway***

In East Norway, the study area comprises 6 counties with their 124 municipalities of which 32 were without graves from the tenth and eleventh centuries or from the Middle Ages (Akershus 13, Hedmark 7, Oppland 2, Buskerud 3, Telemark 4 and Aust-Agder 3). In Akershus and Hedmark, eleventh century graves outnumbered tenth century graves. In the remaining counties, there were slightly more tenth century graves than eleventh century graves (Fig. 4).

**Figure 4.** Tenth century, eleventh century and medieval period graves in Region 2.

County	10th century	11th century	Medieval period
Akershus	22	28	2
Hedmark	50	63	9
Oppland	41	37	12
Buskerud	29	21	5
Telemark	58	56	12
Aust-Agder	20	17	2
<b>All</b>	<b>220</b>	<b>222</b>	<b>42</b>

In Akershus, the majority of graves were from a rather restricted area (cf. also Engelstad 1927, 42-43). Clusters of graves from both the tenth and eleventh centuries were present at Nannestad, Nes and Ullensaker. The core area corresponded to present day Øvre Romerike, and the finds seemed to reflect a real border to the neighbouring district in the south. The militarised graves may indicate a line of defence. The large portion of cavalry graves (Braathen 1989, 99) and of graves with full weapon sets indicated a strong aristocratic group. Two medieval graves were recorded, in Eidsvoll and Ullensaker, respectively.

In Hedmark, clusters of weapon graves were present at Stange, Ringsaker, Løten, Hamar (cf. Engelstad 1927, 99), all close to lake Mjøsa, in both the tenth and eleventh centuries. Nine medieval graves were recorded. Three graves were from Ringsaker, whereas the municipalities of Stange, Åsnes, Sør Odal, Rendalen, Elverum and Kongsvinger had one find each.

Stange had seven cavalry graves, all but one from the eleventh century. Eighteen graves were from mounds/cairns and seven graves included a full weapon set. The situation in Ringsaker, Løten and Hamar corresponded to that of Stange. Many graves included full weapon sets and were covered by large mounds.

In Oppland, tenth century weapon clusters were recorded at Vang and Gran, whereas Gran, Lunner and Lesja had eleventh century weapon clusters. Gran and Gjøvik each had a cavalry grave. Altogether, Gran, Jevnaker and Lunner represented a core area where the number of graves increased from 10 in the tenth century to 15 in the eleventh century. The core area may be compared to the same social level found in Akershus and Hedmark. The inland valleys were without weapon clusters and in many respects indicated a less stratified society. Twelve medieval graves were recorded, two each at Nord-Aurdal and Vestre Slidre. The municipalities Gran, Lunner, Gjøvik, Ringebu, Øyer, Sør-Fron, Lom and Dovre had one find each.

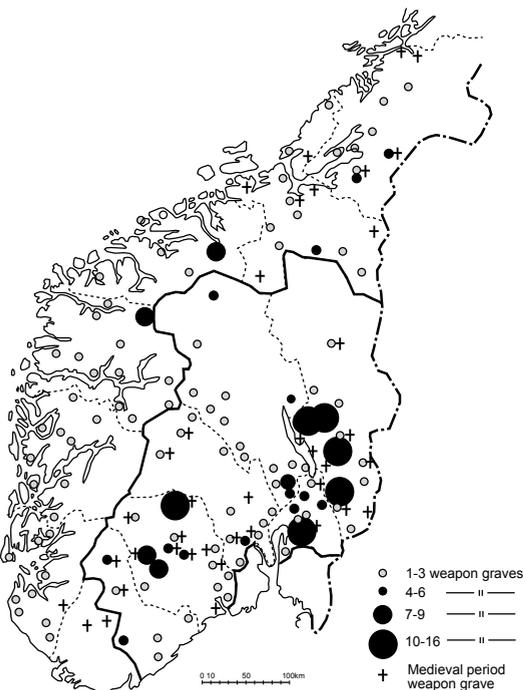
Buskerud, like Oppland, was divided into two parts, one representing the municipalities of Lier, Øvre Eiker, Hole and Ringerike, and the other representing the inland valleys. In the eleventh century, weapon clusters appeared at Øvre Eiker. A cavalry grave was found in Lier, Hole and Ringerike, indicating that central parts of Buskerud were dominated by high status families. The five medieval graves were from Flesberg, Modum, Krødsherad, Ål and Hol.

In Telemark, a marked difference in the localisation of weapon graves was observed. The coastal district had rather few finds (cf. also Larsen 1984, 180). In contrast, the inland had 58 tenth century graves, 56 eleventh century graves and 12 medieval graves. The latter were from

from Hjartdal (3), Tinn (2), one find appeared in each Bø, Fyresdal, Notodden, Sauherad, Seljord, Vinje and Tokke. In the eleventh century, weapon clusters were present at Tinn, Tokke, Seljord, Kviteseid and Bø.

In Aust-Agder, eleventh century weapon clusters were recorded in Valle and Evje og Hornnes. The two medieval graves were from Bygland and Valle. Both Larsen (1984) and Nordeide (2011) observed late graves in Valle, especially the find C 30539 which represented a renewed catalogue of the finds C 1283-1285 and C 1671-1672 deriving from the same grave. The find included some coins, the youngest struck in the period 1065-1080. Based upon the coins, Nordeide (2011, 280) considered the find to be the youngest pagan grave in Norway. But also the axe included in the find (Larsen 1984, Fig. 4) may well be of the same age.

In conclusion, Region 2 had no decline in the number of eleventh century finds compared to the tenth century. Actually the region held numerous graves which definitely were younger than anywhere else in Norway. These graves derived from two geographically separated areas: 1) Övre Romerike (now part of Akershus) and the fertile lands of Hedmark and Oppland and 2) the inland of Telemark and Aust-Agder (Fig. 5). The first area offered good conditions for cereal growing – a precondition for a fairly large population and a stratified society. In contrast, inland Telemark and Aust-Agder, situated in the periphery, had rather poor conditions for arable farming and were sparsely populated. For the central power there was not much to acquire (cf. Holm 2010, 241) and according to Larsen (1984, 181) the early kings were not in control of the inland regions of Aust-Agder. Most likely, the different environments may have resulted in different developments.



**Figure 5.** Distribution of eleventh century and medieval weapon graves in Region 1 and 2.

## The historical background

According to the sagas, the inland of East Norway, the Uplands, was ruled by petty kings whose power was based upon a combination of ownership/control of land and religious power. Thus, religious as well as secular power was centred on individuals and secured through ties of friendship and loyalty.

How long did the petty kings preserve these roles? Håkon the Good's missionary efforts seem to have been restricted to his core area, i.e. the coastal districts of West Norway. When King Håkon was defeated at Fitjar (959?), the Danish King Harald Bluetooth became king of Norway, followed by his son Svein Forkbeard (986-1014), who in practice seems to have left the rule of Norway from Lindesnes and northwards to the pagan Håkon Lade earl. Viken was ruled by the Danish king, whereas the Uplands were autonomous and ruled by petty kings (Andersen 1977, 100). When Håkon earl was killed in 995, Olav Tryggvason became king of Norway. During his short reign (995-1000), he enforced baptism of chieftains and people in Trøndelag whereas the Uplands seem not to have been affected. After AD 1000, Norway was ruled by the christened Lade earl, Eirik Håkonsson, who left the choice of religion to the people themselves (Andersen 1977, 107-108). The numerous graves from the eleventh century in both Øvre Romerike and Hedmark, Telemark and Aust-Agder demonstrated that the old burial practice continued.

This situation changed when Olav Haraldsson became king of Norway in 1015. Now, the Christianisation efforts reached the Uplands. The sagas inform that Olav enforced Christianity on inhabitants in the inland areas, subdued five petty kings and treated them harshly. Most written sources record that Christianity advanced during Olav Haraldsson's reign to the extent that the entire country was Christian by the time he died. However, most scholars today recognise that Olav's role in the Christianisation process has been exaggerated (Lund 1995).

## Pagan graves and the institutional conversion

How does this relate to the late weapon graves? If the Christianisation process was carried out during Olav Haraldsson's rule, one would expect a similar end time of weapon graves in the areas referred to as mainly pagan during King Olav's reign, especially Trøndelag and the inland of East Norway.

Sør-Trøndelag and Nord-Trøndelag had all together 31 graves from the eleventh century and 12 medieval graves (Fig. 3), whereas 222 eleventh century graves and 42 medieval graves have been recorded in East Norway (Fig. 4). Also the localisation of the youngest weapon types varied markedly, especially swords of types T, Z and Æ and/or swords and spearheads with silver decoration in the Ringerike style (Fuglesang 1980) (Fig. 6).

**Figure 6.** Localisation of sword type T, Z, Æ (Peterson 1919) and swords/spearhead decorated in the Ringerike style (Fuglesang 1980) from graves

County	Swords type T	Swords type Z	Swords type Æ	Weapon with Ringerike style
Sogn og Fjordane	-	1	-	-
Sør-Trøndelag	-	1	-	-
Akershus	1	2	2	-
Hedmark	7	4	12	
Oppland	-	1	2	-
Buskerud	-	1	1	1
Telemark	5	6	3	1
Aust-Agder	1	-	-	3

The fairly low number of eleventh century graves and of the youngest weapon types in Trøndelag indicated that in this region, Christianisation was relatively successful prior to 1030. In contrast, the numerous graves from the eleventh century in East Norway speak strongly against its success (at least any lasting success) during Olav Haraldsson's reign.

This was supported in Adam of Bremen's *Gesta* (translated by F. J. Tschan 1959, 96). He tells that 'the most blessed King Olaf was driven from the throne of Norway by a rebellion of the nobles whose wives he had apprehended for sorcery'. Adam of Bremen wrote this about forty years after Olav was defeated at Stiklestad whereas the majority of the saga writers produced their stories 150-200 years later. The narrow time span between Olav Haraldsson's defeat and Adam of Bremen's account supports following scholars who are 'prepared to accept that there is substance in his (Adam of Bremen's) stories' (Sawyer, P. 1991, 39).

## **The period 1030–1066**

The numerous weapon graves in the inland of East Norway, which definitely are younger than anywhere else in Norway, indicated that the petty kings in the Uplands had been allowed an independent position during the reign of King Magnus the Good (1035-1047) (Andersen 1977, 144). However, this situation changed when Harald Hardrada became king, and especially from c. 1060 when he brutally crushed a revolt in the Uplands. According to a poem of Harald Hardrada's scald, Tjodolf Arnarson, King Harald needed 18 months to crush the revolt. It seems strange that Harald Hardrada, being a skilled warrior king with a strong *hirð*, met this strong resistance, indicating that the revolt was led by skilled warriors, like some of the men buried in the cavalry graves (Fig. 7). The defeat of the petty kings was carried out during the years 1062-1065 (Tjønn 2010, 155). Most likely, the youngest weapon graves in the heartland of inland East Norway belonged to a relative peaceful period in this district prior to 1060-62. What caused the uprising against Harald Hardrada? According to the sagas, it was the result of the Uplanders' refusal to pay taxes to the King. However, if Adam of Bremen's account holds some truth, religion may have been the main cause. Refusal to pay taxes may well be a relevant cause for punishment, but Harald Hardrada's extremely brutal revenge, where he burned down farms, had people maimed, killed, chased in exile or silenced (Tjønn 2010, 153-155) and also the Uplanders' strong resistance, indicated a more substantial cause, namely continued paganism in inland East Norway.



**Figure 7.** Cavalry grave (C 21398) from Sterud, Ringerike, Hedmark. The axe of type M is similar to an axe from Valle, Aust-Agder found with a coin struck 1065/80. A burnt bone and a tooth tell us that the man has been cremated. The grave mound covered 200 square meters, to a height of two meters. (Photo: Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo).

Being leaders of a pagan cult represented one of the pillars of power for the petty kings, well worth fighting for. On the king's side, conversion could be made a factor in the reorganisation of local communities and their incorporation into the kingdom. As the protector of the Church, the king acquired both power and an exalted position in society (Helle 1991, 31-33). Crushing the petty kings in the Uplands enabled Harald Hardrada finally to integrate all of Norway into an institutionalised Christian kingdom (Andersen 1977, 153).

When Bishop Grimkell sanctified Olav Haraldsson in 1031, the petty kings in the Uplands and the common people in outlying districts may have paid little attention to the event. Most likely, they continued their way of life and their old rituals, like Adam of Bremen reported.

One may wonder why Adam of Bremen's account was never mentioned by the saga writers. A most likely cause is the time lag between Olav Haraldsson's death at Stiklestad and the situation when the sagas were written 150-200 years later. Olav Haraldsson had then been a declared saint since 1031, later confirmed by the pope in 1164. It seems likely that bringing the tale of Adam of Bremen into his story would be to discredit the official history of St. Olav's martyrdom and holiness and brought no merit to any saga writer.

Probably for the same reason, pagan rites were rarely reported; an exception appeared in the saga of Olav Haraldsson where the king incognito visited a remote farm. The disguised king and his company witnessed a remarkable ritual where a preserved horse phallus was worshipped as a god, with the ritual led by the farmer's wife (Steinsland and Vogt 1981).

In reality this was probably not an isolated incident. The prevalence of medieval graves in the periphery and outskirts indicated that people in the outskirts and the inland held on to their pagan customs long after Christianisation had been institutionalised. This is further supported in the older Christian law of the Eidsivathing (the preserved parts date to around 1200). It contains a paragraph which condemns ownership of items used for sorcery or sacrificial offerings. The German legal historian Konrad Maurer (1856, 418-420) found this statement in the law to be a testimony of pagan cults and customs long after Christianity was officially instituted, allowing a glimpse into the reality behind the traditional conversion accounts.

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