An incredible grave containing the skeleton of a Viking warrior was discovered in 1878 by Archaeologist Hjalmar Stolpe on the Swedish island of Bjorke. The Viking was long thought to be male and the grave included stunning artifacts that belonged to a high-status Viking warrior. The grave is one of approximately 3000 identified burials in Birka. Together they form what are perhaps the most striking archaeological features of the site. The burial was situated on a promontory, highly visible both from the town and the surrounding waters. It was marked by a large stone boulder. The settlement flourished from about A.D. 750 to 950. Scientists believed the town supported a population of perhaps 700–1000 inhabitants for the next 200 years until it relocated to a new site.

Birka was known as a Viking city. It is believed the Swedish King formed the city as part of a desire to control the trade in northern Scandinavia, both politically and economically. The Swedish king was living only a few miles away. Around the perimeters of the site are several cemeteries with the 3000 visible burial mounds. Approximately 1100 of these graves were excavated in the late nineteenth century by archaeologist Hjalmar Stolpe.
Location of the warrior grave: site labeled BJ 581.
THE GRAVE was constructed as an underground wooden chamber that measured 11.4 x 5.7 feet. Within the grave, the deceased had been dressed in exclusive garments with silk and silver thread decorations and propped up in a seated position. The body was surrounded by weapons and framed by one shield at the head end and one at the foot end of the chamber. The most known types of Viking-age weapons were present, making the collection a complementary set providing maximum efficiency in battle. Apart from the shields, it included a sword, an axe, two spears, a fighting knife and a set of 25 armor-piercing arrows. The bow was made of organic material and has since deteriorated. There is an empty space alongside the body, next to the arrows, indicating where it may have been placed. A set of 28 gaming pieces and three dice were located in the lap of the deceased, and the possible remains of an iron-fitted gaming board alongside the body. In the foot end, and outside the actual chamber, two horses had been placed on a platform. Both were bridled for riding.
Why do you think this body was buried with all these items? Why do you think this person was important? Why? Why do you think horses were buried with the body? If this body was a Viking warrior, do you assume it is male or female?

**The Grave**

immediately caught the attention of Viking scholars. The contents were spectacular, and the grave stood out even compared to other chamber burials in Birka. It was interpreted as the burial of a high-status warrior and consequently was sexed as male. The emphasis was on the warrior, the sex an assumption based on that interpretation. For over a century, scientists assumed the skeleton to be that of a "battle hardened man."

Studies in the 1970s had questioned the assumption the skeleton was male. A 2014 bone analysis of the skeleton's pelvic bones and mandible by Uppsala University bioarchaeologist provided evidence that it was the grave of a woman. Some archaeologists were skeptical, citing the probability that the bones had been mis-labeled in the last century, or perhaps jumbled with bones from other nearby graves. September 2017, a new study began, noting the bone analysis that triggered questions concerning sex, gender and identity among Viking warriors. The team extracted DNA from samples taken from a tooth and an arm bone of the person buried in Bj 581. According to the scientists, the skeleton was conclusively proven to be that of a woman, having X-chromosomes and no Y-chromosomes. The Viking was a female warrior.

The claim seemed to fit the evidence. Male Vikings were frequently buried with swords, and the sword was undoubtedly associated with the battle-scarred ideal of masculinity in Viking culture. If we assume that men buried with swords are warriors, then a woman buried with one was probably a warrior too.

The DNA now proved the body found in the grave was a woman. Does that change your view on who this person was? A Viking?
The Viking female warrior's teeth identified her as being at least 30 years old, a tall woman (5'6'') and without visible trauma to the bones. She also appeared to be of high status. Her grave chamber is on a prominent, elevated piece of ground between the town and a hilltop fort. The grave also contained a full set of gaming pieces and a gaming board, typically used by military leaders to work out battle tactics and strategy. The DNA also showed that she was not local to the region in which Birka is located, but rather from southern Scandinavia. Strontium isotopes strengthened this picture, also showing that she had lived a migratory life during her childhood and youth. Her clothing shows a high-status individual dressed in a manner suggesting close connections to the eastern part of the Viking world, with parallels in present day Ukraine.
The 2017 research paper has created such a stir in the archaeological world, as it claims the warrior is female. The discovery could have major implications for scientific perceptions of the greater Viking world. The grave, found among more than 3000 other graves, included a sword, an axe, a spear, armor piercing arrows, a battle knife, two shields and the remains of two horses. Taken together, the artifacts seemed to indicate a Viking warrior, and the individual was originally assumed to be male. Men were the warriors...or so it was assumed. Recent testing has proved the warrior was female. This proved a controversial finding for some academics, despite the depictions of woman warriors in Viking-era and poetry. The body was a Viking warrior, until it was determined to be female. The warrior status was never questioned until now. No scientist ever contested it until the skeleton proved to be female and then it was not a valid interpretation anymore.

"To assume that Viking men were ranked above women is to impose modern values on the past, which would be misleading." Viking gender roles may have been more complex than we assume. The warrior grave in Birka is not the first to belong to a woman. Two warrior graves in Norway are also believed to be those of women. Scientists are hoping to do DNA studies of the Norway warriors.

Is it hard to believe that a females could be Viking warriors? Why do you think that scientists fully believed everything about the grave was a Viking warrior, until it was found that she was female? (even though all items in the grave give proof of a warrior status)
Arguments Against the Grave

Scientists have not agreed on the interpretation of the complex Viking burial findings. Judith Jesch, a Viking studies professor at the University of Nottingham in England draws a detailed rebuttal. She states that the "Emotional lure of the woman warrior, especially in the Viking age, is too strong for reasoned argument, they want the woman to be a warrior, so the scientific analysis makes her a woman and her 'archaeological context' makes her a warrior."

1. Were the correct bones examined?
Judith Jesch most damning criticism is that the researchers bones that were analyzed might not actually have been from the grave in question. The Swedish archaeological site where the remains came from was originally excavated in 1878, and the scientist who led the dig took out all the bones and put them into bags. Some of the bags are poorly labeled and don't seem to correspond to the gravesite in any meaningful way.

2. Was the burial a high-ranking warrior?
The scientists doing the current research state the skeleton was a "high-ranking officer" based on the fact that the burial contained a full set of gaming pieces, implying a skilled knowledge of tactics and strategy. Judith Jesch thought that the scientists moved too quickly from evidence to speculation which is presented as fact.

Do you think the argument against the warrior is a strong argument? Do you think the scientist could have tested the wrong bones? Do you think they would have made sure it was the right bones?
Arguments Against the Grave

3. She had no signs of harm and healing, so unlikely a warrior.

The body had no apparent signs of injury or healing from injuries. Scientists noted that "Weapon related wounds...are not common in the inhumation burial at Birka" so either the "warriors" were such good fighters that they never got injured or the weren't "warriors" at all. The scientists in the report say nothing about whether there was any indication on the bones of the kinds of activities one might expect a warrior to have engaged in, as strenuous physical activity might be expected to have left some traces, particularly if they were good enough to avoid injury to themselves.

4. The scientists did not seek other possible explanations.

Was is possible for a woman to have been buried with a full 'warrior' accoutrement, even if she had not been a warrior in life? After all, archaeologists are always cautioning that 'the dead don't bury themselves' and they often seem not to like interpretations in which the deceased's grave goods are taken as representing their roles in life.

Overall, the study successfully demonstrates that the individual from Birka was biologically female, but sex does not necessarily equate to gender or social identity, and the meaning of her grave goods is still the subject of fierce academic debate. Do the objects indicate a warrior role, or a high status? The research is just the beginning – it opens up a whole range of questions about how gender was conceptualized in the Viking world.

ENGAGING QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think scientists had no problem calling this person a warrior, until they discovered it was a woman?
2. Is it sexist to question whether this woman was actually a warrior in life, rather than someone just buried like one?
3. What are other possible interpretations of who she was?
4. How would a Viking woman end up as a warrior?
5. Do you think more testing could reveal whether she ever fought in a battle?