

BLEMMYES / FLAKSTAD ANALYSIS

Comprehensive Review of Issues with the Mainstream Interpretation
and Alternative Developmental Variant Hypothesis

Executive Summary

The 2014 analysis of the Flakstad Viking Age skeletal material (Naumann et al.) proposed that headless individuals buried alongside intact bodies were slaves ritually decapitated and buried as grave gifts. While this interpretation has become the dominant narrative, it contains multiple significant gaps, inconsistencies, and assumptions that have not been adequately addressed. This document compiles the full range of issues with the mainstream interpretation and presents the case for serious internal re-examination with alternative hypotheses in mind.

1. Problems with the Physical Evidence

1.1 Extremely Consistent Cut Locations

The cuts on the cervical vertebrae are described as clean and occurring at roughly the same level (often around C3) across multiple individuals. This level of consistency is difficult to explain through repeated hand-held blade executions with period weapons (swords and axes), which would normally produce variation in height, angle, and cleanliness due to weapon dulling, executioner fatigue, victim positioning, and natural human variation in swing mechanics.

1.2 Lack of Binding Evidence

The interpretation relies heavily on the claim that the headless individuals were bound or incapacitated before death. However, there is no clear physical evidence of binding materials, rope impressions, or residue reported. Binding is largely inferred from the absence of defensive wounds rather than from direct evidence. If ropes were used and left on the bodies, traces would be expected but are not noted.

1.3 Absence of Associated Weapons

If these were deliberate executions or ritual killings on any scale, the weapons used (swords or axes) should leave some archaeological trace — either the weapons themselves deposited in graves or metal fragments/residue. No such associated weapons are prominently reported, despite the survival of bone material.

1.4 "Where Are the Rest of the Necks?"

In standard decapitation of a normal neck, the lower cervical vertebrae and upper thoracic vertebrae should remain attached to the torso. The consistent description of clean, high cuts with completely missing heads raises the question of whether the upper neck structure was already reduced or malformed due to a pre-existing developmental condition, rather than being fully removed by blade trauma.

2. Cultural and Historical Mismatches

2.1 Viking Burial Practices

Vikings commonly practiced boat burials, cremation on boats or pyres, and inhumation with grave goods. Large-scale, systematic decapitation followed by burial of headless bodies alongside intact ones in multiple graves is not a well-documented or typical Viking practice. This pattern fits better with very specific ritual contexts or falls outside normal Viking cultural behavior.

2.2 Treatment of Slaves in Death

In Viking society, slaves were generally treated as property. When a master died, slaves were typically inherited by family members, freed, or transferred to others. Deliberately burying multiple slaves as grave gifts alongside a master was not standard practice. The pattern of multiple headless bodies consistently accompanying intact individuals does not align with documented Viking customs regarding slaves.

2.3 Lack of Expected Grave Goods

Viking graves, especially those of higher-status individuals, typically contain weapons, jewelry, tools, clothing remnants, shield fittings, and other personal items. The apparent lack of these characteristically Viking grave goods associated with the intact individuals weakens the interpretation that these were standard high-status Viking burials with slaves as grave gifts.

3. Logistical and Scale Problems

3.1 Scale of Killing and Disposal

Systematic killing and disposal of large numbers of people through decapitation and burial would have required significant manpower, weapons, and logistical resources. The apparent absence of associated weapons, tools (such as shovels or fragments), and boat-related evidence despite the scale creates practical inconsistencies with the proposed interpretation.

3.2 Diet Differences Reconsidered

The isotope data showing headless individuals with a much higher marine/fish diet was used as evidence of lower social status. However, slaves would have eaten whatever their owners provided. They would not have been independent foragers living off inferior food sources. A more direct explanation is that these individuals had physical limitations (reduced jaw or neck function) that restricted them to softer foods like fish, regardless of social status.

4. Methodological and Confirmation Bias Issues

4.1 Narrow Analytical Focus

The original analysis was heavily focused on confirming the "decapitated slaves / grave gifts" interpretation. This led to strong emphasis on neck trauma, diet differences, and basic maternal lineage testing, while other anatomical regions and alternative hypotheses received little attention.

4.2 The "Where Are the Skulls?" Question

The fundamental question of whether these individuals had normal cranial anatomy was never seriously pressure-tested. The assumption that missing heads resulted from deliberate decapitation of normal people was adopted early and shaped subsequent analysis.

4.3 Overlooked Wounds on Intact Bodies

If the developmental variant hypothesis is correct, some individuals may have had milder expressions (still possessing a head) while others had more extreme forms. Trauma on the intact bodies may have been overlooked due to focus on the dramatically headless cases and assumptions about natural death or normal burial.

5. Genetic Analysis Gaps

5.1 Limited Scope of Existing Genetic Work

The only genetic analysis performed was ancient mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) fragments used exclusively to test maternal relatedness. No whole-genome sequencing, no screening for developmental mutations, and no calculation of inbreeding coefficients were conducted.

5.2 Missed Opportunities

No genetic work was done to test for developmental or structural variants, runs of homozygosity indicating multi-generational inbreeding, or comparison against known congenital disorder databases. This is a major gap for any hypothesis involving inbreeding-driven anatomical variants.

6. Skeletal Areas Under-Examined

The following regions received minimal or no targeted attention in the published analysis:

- Clavicle, supraclavicular fossa, and upper shoulder region — no systematic search for sockets, depressions, or remodeling relevant to eye placement.
- Upper chest and upper rib area — not reviewed for developmental features or cavities.
- Cervical vertebrae morphology beyond the cut marks — not assessed for developmental shortening, fusion, or malformation.
- Overall craniofacial development — with most skulls missing, no examination of whether facial bones were reduced or absent in the normal head position.
- Distinction between taphonomic changes and possible developmental variation — subtle features were likely attributed to postmortem degradation without alternative hypotheses being tested.

7. Alternative Developmental Variant Model

An alternative hypothesis proposes that the headless individuals belonged to a real biological population with a developmental variant caused by severe, multi-generational inbreeding. Key features of this model include:

- Reduced or absent traditional bony skull, with facial features (eyes and mouth) located in the shoulder/upper chest region.
- Shortened or malformed neck stub, with the brain potentially housed in this area.
- Orbital structures potentially cartilaginous rather than rigid bone, protected primarily by muscle coverage.
- Physical limitations on chewing and breathing, explaining the high marine/fish diet through necessity rather than social status.
- Extreme fragility leading to eventual population collapse, especially under environmental pressure (colder climates).

- The consistent "decapitation" cuts may actually represent strikes through a pre-existing anatomical weak point rather than traditional decapitation of normal necks.

This model better explains the consistency of cut locations, the diet differences, the cultural mismatches, and the eventual extinction without requiring large-scale ritual killing of normal people.

8. Specific Questions for Re-Examination

- Why are the cut locations so consistent across multiple individuals when period weapons and execution methods would normally produce variation?
- Where is the physical evidence of binding (ropes, impressions, residue) that the interpretation relies upon?
- Where are the weapons used for the decapitations, and why are none associated with the graves despite the survival of bone?
- Where are the rest of the necks? In standard decapitation, lower cervical and upper thoracic vertebrae should remain attached to the torso.
- Why did some graves contain individuals with heads while others contained headless bodies? What explains this inconsistency?
- Do the intact bodies (those with heads) also show trauma that may have been overlooked?
- Are there any sockets, depressions, or structural adaptations in the clavicle/supraclavicular/upper shoulder region?
- Do the cervical vertebrae show developmental abnormalities beyond the perimortem cuts?
- Why is there no genetic screening for developmental mutations or inbreeding coefficients despite the inbreeding hypothesis being biologically plausible?
- How do the diet differences align with the reality that slaves would have eaten what their owners provided, rather than foraging independently?

9. Conclusion and Recommendation

The mainstream interpretation of the Flakstad material as "decapitated slaves buried as grave gifts" contains multiple significant gaps, inconsistencies, and assumptions. The cumulative weight of problems with the physical evidence, cultural mismatches, logistical issues, and methodological limitations makes the current narrative increasingly difficult to sustain without additional assumptions.

A serious internal re-examination is justified, with particular focus on:

- The shoulder, clavicle, and upper chest region for any features relevant to eye or facial placement.
- Cervical vertebrae morphology beyond the documented cut marks.
- The intact bodies for possible overlooked trauma.
- Any available genetic material for developmental variants or inbreeding indicators.
- The fundamental question of whether these individuals had normal cranial and neck anatomy.

This request is made in the interest of thorough scientific inquiry. The existing study remains a valuable contribution, but alternative hypotheses have not been adequately tested against the same physical evidence.