



Figure 1 Artist's reconstruction of the burial, showing the position of the objects on the body. Drawing by Veronika Paschenko (Moilanen, et al. 47).

Weapon Grave of Suontaka

Early Medieval Finnish Grave (1040-1170)

The **Weapon Grave of Suontaka** is an archeological site at Suontaka Vesitorninmäki, Hattula, Finland.ⁱ It is an early medieval inhumation grave dated to 1040-1174 CE.ⁱⁱ It is well-known for the [Suontaka sword](#), a well-decorated bronze-hilted sword with apparent Christian inscriptions.ⁱⁱⁱ

Originally understood as an example of powerful women buried with weapons in early medieval society,^{iv} a new

[aDNA](#) analysis published in 2021 suggests that the individual buried had [Klinefelter syndrome](#), where the individual is phenotypically male with two or more X chromosomes.^v The 2021 research allows for new interpretations of the grave, where sex and gender intertwine. It raises the possibility that the individual may be an example of someone who “did not fit into a binary gender model.”^{vi}

Original Excavation and Finds, 1968

In late October 1968, a bronze-hilted sword was found by water pipeline workers. Oiva Keskitalo conducted a [rescue excavation](#) on the site. The “[grave cut](#),” where the Suontaka grave was dug, was inside the water pipe trench.^{vii} Underneath the bronze-hilted sword, possibly quite some distance away, Keskitalo found the other artifacts. These include “a hiltless sword blade with silver inlays, a sheathed knife, two oval brooches, a twin-spiral chain-bearer, a small penannular brooch, and a sickle,” arranged around some skeletal

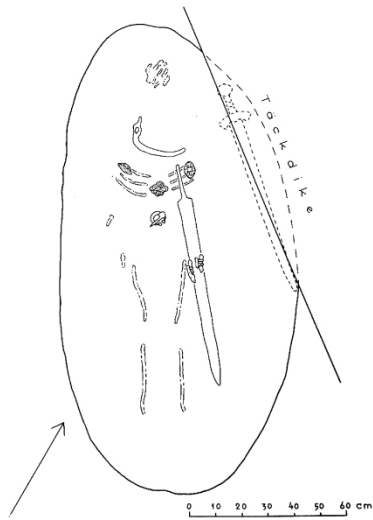


Figure 2 Plan of the Suontaka burial. 'Täckdike' marks the water pipe trench which led to the discovery of the grave (Keskitalo, 1969b: 85). Reproduced by permission of Finnish Heritage Agency.

remains.^{viii} At the time, the bones were already decomposed, and only fragments could be recovered.^{ix} However, the close association between the body and various artifacts other than the bronze-hilted sword was still clear.

The finding of jewelry, along with swords, puzzled archeologists. Jewelry is traditionally associated with females, while swords have a strong masculine connotation, especially in the Nordic context.^x The presence of both traditionally male and female items, and the rarity that they may belong to one single individual,

gave rise to the suggestion that there may be two individuals in the grave. Keskitalo himself, among other archeologists after him, tried to find evidence of another body in the grave with little success.^{xi}

Viking Warrior women?

Another explanation for the Suontaka burial finding is that it represents a powerful warrior woman.^{xii} There has been continuous discussion about Viking warrior women. In 2017, aDNA research done on a [Viking Age tomb at Birka, Sweden](#), showed that the inhabitant of a high-status warrior burial was biologically female.^{xiii} This finding garnered significant public attention.^{xiv} Similarly, the Suontaka grave, with the bronze-hilted sword, has long been prized as an example of Viking warrior women,^{xv} potentially

more so than the Birka tomb, which lacks objects like jewelry traditionally associated with women.^{xvi}

New Research, 2021

In 2021, Moilanen et al. published a new research article revisiting and providing “the first detailed study” of the grave.^{xvii} Importantly, they wish to analyze the idea that the grave had been a double burial and review the warrior women hypothesis.

Findings

Moilanen et al. observe a significant distance between the bronze-hilted sword and the body. Since the corpse does not have a coffin and other artifact surrounds it tightly, the bronze-hilted sword is unlikely to be part of the original burial assemblage.^{xviii} The bronze-hilted sword may be a part of the grave fill, or it may be deliberately hidden later.^{xix}

The size of the grave pit also prohibits the placement of two bodies. The soil also shows no sign of the decomposition of another body, and no other artifacts can be found to accompany another corpse.^{xx} Therefore, all the materials discovered initially, other than the bronze-hilted sword, are associated with the one individual.

Soil samples from the little bone fragments recovered in the original excavation also provide valuable information. They include 23 hairs from mammals and three fragments of bird feathers of various colors, which suggests elaborate clothing.^{xxi}

The most significant new finding is from [ancient DNA](#). While the skeletal remains do not allow sexing of the bones, aDNA requires relatively little material.

Conducted at the archaeogenetics laboratory of the [Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History](#) in Jena, Germany, the aDNA evidence shows signs of Klinefelter syndrome.^{xxii}

Interpretation

While the elaborate bronze-hilted sword is not a part of the burial assemblage, the variety of textiles surrounding the body and the various prestigious animal furs that may have formed the bedding and garments of the buried individual still suggest considerable wealth and social status.^{xxiii} The hiltless sword placed on the body still provides a powerful symbol of identity and personhood.^{xxiv}

The diagnosis of Klinefelter syndrome does not resolve the problem of gender that arises from the presence of both sword and jewelry. As the researchers at both Suontaka and Birka point out, [gender](#) is not the same as biological [sex](#), and biological sex does not automatically determines individual gender identity.^{xxv}

However, Klinefelter syndrome does lead to specific physical symptoms, most importantly delayed pubertal development and lack of fertility.^{xxvi} These symptoms can be evident to society and may influence how the individual identity is constructed, especially since masculinity and sexual ability are often closely connected. Therefore, the symptoms of Klinefelter syndrome may easily be seen as evidence of a lack of masculinity.

Clothing and ornamentations are also powerful expressions of personal identity. The Suontaka individual wearing feminine clothing and jewelry may express gender ambiguity.^{xxvii} This gender ambiguity and lack of masculinity often led to negative

attitudes toward the individual, especially in medieval and early modern Finland.^{xxviii}

However, this does not seem to be the case for the individual in the Suontaka grave. The individual enjoyed high status unhindered by their physical and social conditions.

Moilanen et al. offer a variety of possible explanations for the incongruity.

One possibility is that the individual may enjoy some ritualistic authority. The Old Norse word *seiðr* has been interpreted as a shamanic ritual complex. While often practiced by women, men practicing *seiðr* have often been scorned and feared and are associated with various non-standard sexual and gender identities. The Sami people of Scandinavia were known to practice [shamanism](#) and thus may engage with the culture of *seiðr*.^{xxix} While Shamanic rituals may offer space for intersex individuals in society, it is uncertain if they may achieve a high social status that way.

Another possibility is that [non-binary gender](#) identities were not always suppressed in early medieval Scandinavia. Suontaka was an important and prosperous town in the area during that time. The rich funeral goods in the Suontaka grave indeed suggest considerable wealth and trade. It is not hard to imagine the individual in the Suontaka grave as a member of a wealthy and powerful local family, being allowed to be different because of their strong social position.^{xxx}

It is also important to remember that the deceased does not conduct [burial](#) rituals; the living does. Therefore, the fact that the jewelry and the sword have been placed around the body with considerable care may indicate communal acceptance of this unique gender expression. The beautiful bronze-hilted sword, later added to the grave, may still indicate continuous veneration of the buried individual as an essential part of local historical memory.^{xxxi}

Reception

The 2021 research has garnered significant public attention. The metrics section of the article's page on Cambridge University Press's website shows that 109 news outlets have picked it up.^{xxxii} Among these news articles, a common trend, exemplified by an article titled "1,000-year-old Grave in Finland Contains Possibly Nonbinary Leader, Upends Long-held Medieval Gender Notions" in the *New York Daily News*, appears. Many media outlet tends to emphasize the aDNA findings.^{xxxiii} While this alone is not a problem, media outlets also prefer to focus on the issue of gender non-binary identity. By emphasizing these two aspects of the research, many news articles appear to imply that genetic evidence leads to the suggestion that the individual is non-binary. This is precisely the view Moilanen et al. try to cast aside.^{xxxiv}

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ⁱ Moilanen, et al. 42.

ⁱⁱ Moilanen, et al. 45.

ⁱⁱⁱ Moilanen, Mikko. 147, 263, 411; Moilanen, et al. 45.

^{iv} Moilanen, et al. 42.

^v Moilanen, et al. 49-50.

^{vi} Moilanen, et al. 54.

^{vii} Moilanen, et al. 45.

^{viii} Moilanen, et al. 45.

^{ix} Moilanen, et al. 46.

^x Moilanen, et al. 45. For the cultural significance of swords, see Sayer, et al. 542-62.

^{xi} Moilanen, et al. 46-7.

^{xii} Moilanen, et al. 42.

^{xiii} Price, et al. 191.

^{xiv} Price, et al. 182.

^{xv} Moilanen, et al. 43.

^{xvi} Price, et al. 189.

^{xvii} Moilanen, et al. 43.

^{xviii} Moilanen, et al. 45.

^{xix} Moilanen, et al. 45, 50.

^{xx} Moilanen, et al. 47.

^{xxi} Moilanen, et al. 48, 51.

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- xxii Moilanen, et al. 48-50.
- xxiii Moilanen, et al. 51.
- xxiv Moilanen, et al. 50.
- xxv Moilanen, et al. 51; Pricc, et al. 191.
- xxvi Moilanen, et al. 50, 52.
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- xxxiii Braine.
- xxxiv Moilanen, et al. 51.