

# THE SHIELDMAID

PART I



Jens Schumacher



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## Imprint

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## Preface

### The Discovery

*Björkö Island Sweden 1878*

In 1878, archaeologists on the Swedish sea island of Björkö noticed a slight depression in the ground. Seized by curiosity, they dug there for the remains of Birka, which in the early 8th century was considered one of the largest Viking settlements ever. Some archaeologists reported that during the excavations they could still hear the people of that time working, selling goods, fighting, crying, laughing and celebrating.

Over the next decades, the ground was to reveal more than 3,000 graves, and around 1,100 have been opened and examined with great care to date. But hardly any find was to be more spectacular than the body in grave Bj 581. There was great excitement when the excavators found a chamber tomb that helped shape our image of the Viking warrior. In the 3.5 meter x 1.80 meter chamber lay a skeleton in a hunched posture. The corpse had been buried with its weapons. To his left lay a mighty long sword, in his right hand he held a not-so-heavy battle axe.

Not only a spear, several arrows, a knife, two shields and a few stirrups completed the personal arsenal of this obviously not unimportant person. She was buried together with two horses. A mare and a stallion lay crowded in a small paddock at the foot of the grave, sacrificed as grave goods. This find was a sensation at the time and kept scientists busy for many years.

For 139 years, the body from grave Bj 581 was considered a powerful Viking warrior who led and won many battles. The richness and completeness of the equipment, many scholars concluded, was testimony to the fact that the buried man was of high rank - at least a high-ranking military leader. He had been buried as if he were about to be resurrected and ride his warhorses into battle, or so it was thought until 2017.

*Stockholm, Sweden 2017*

The more time went on, the more investigations were possible. In 2017, scientists took a gene sequencing and with it came a new, incredible certainty: this alleged warrior from tomb Bj 581, was not what was thought for 139

years. A ten-member research team from Stockholm University reported in the American Journal of Physical Anthropology that no male warrior was buried in the tomb. There was definitely a woman in grave Bj 581.

What would have provided decades ago still for irritation, aroused now under the scientists rather pure enthusiasm. It has long been known that women could accompany high ranks in the often martial organization of Viking society. It is also known that there were "Viking shieldmaidens". All this can be read here and there in the surviving sagas and legends of the Vikings.

Even in series these Shieldmaiden are revered, for example in the series "Vikings". The Shield-maiden Tori or Lagerta were brave, upright and loyal warriors who fought for their people and their family. But in the course of Christianization, the role of women changed almost all over the world. After the last pagans were massacred and forcibly converted, the role of women from then on was to have children. They were to take care of the upbringing and the household, in addition to cooking, cleaning and submitting to their husband.

This continued for years, deep into modern times. One day, courageous women stood up and began to fight for their rights again. They appealed for equal rights and equal opportunities, just as it used to be many hundreds of years ago.

This is their story - the story of the Shieldmaid from Tomb Bj 581.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sweden: Viking warrior of Birka was a woman - DER SPIEGEL

# Chapter 1

## *A long way*

A cold wind blows across the land, high snow covers the landscape and testifies to a long and icy winter that has not yet arrived in full force. The lakes are frozen and the forests are covered with bare trees. If you are very still and listen carefully, you hear nothing, - only the whistling of the wind. These are the sounds of winter.

A trek of merchants and jugglers has come to rest in a small Frisian village in the year 873. For days they have been traveling in the freezing cold, their beards and their cloaks covered with ice. Now they are basking in the warmth right in front of a big fire, but they all know that they will soon have to set off again. Their way leads them to the southeast, their destination is the Orient, where trade flourishes and where one business deal follows the next.

Many traders see there their only chance to make important contacts and enough business to get through the year. Most are just out to be able to feed their families and offer them something now and then. Others only see the profit. They want everything they can get their hands on and are not afraid to go over dead bodies if they want something. But to achieve all this, the men realize that their venture is a journey into the unknown, for many dangers and challenges lie in their path.

A large merchant sits by the fire, deep in thought; he is the wealthiest in the trek. His eyes wide open, he stares into the flames, going over the rest of the journey in his mind. He knows it will not be easy, yet he is very optimistic.

After all, he has a strong troop behind him and they all know what they want. Pure life is raging around him. Until now, he thinks to himself. His cup is hardly empty when a maid refills it with mead. Men and women are laughing and enjoying themselves. Children run around and seem carefree to him.

He rubs his long beard. "If you all only knew," he mumbles, taking a sip from his cup. Worry spreads through him, for he was sure that many of the inhabitants would not survive the harsh winter. When they arrived here, he was told that the village must have had a very bad harvest - these are not good conditions for a winter.

After a long time he tears himself away from the flames and lets his gaze wander through all the people, not far from him he notices a sturdy peasant boy. The boy immediately gains his attention, sitting with his parents and his

three siblings, just having a meal. The merchant is sure that this boy would be of valuable service to him in a few years, as far as his parents will enter into a trade with him.

At first glance, the boy seems to be in good health. Quite the opposite of his three siblings, who have hardly anything on their ribs. The trader suspects that they will probably not survive the winter, especially the infant, who is sucking at the breast of his slender and exhausted mother.

"Hey, farmer," the merchant calls out, beckoning the astonished-looking man toward him. "Come here, I want to make you a deal." Thus he begins a long conversation with the peasant. The merchant knows how and with what words he can convince his customers. He knows something about what he does and is sure that he can propose a good deal to this man as well.

A few hours later, the wagon train moves on, with the farmer's boy among them in the merchant's wagon. So he was able to convince the boy's father with a goat, a buck and three chickens, and he was also able to convey to him that this would ensure the family's survival through the winter.

The merchant must admit that it was not an easy birth and that at the beginning of the conversation the farmer did not want to give his boy away under any circumstances, but the longer the merchant talked at him, the more he gave in.

When the merchant lifts the boy into the wagon, he learns that his name is Björn. Saying goodbye to his parents and siblings is very difficult for him. In the eyes of his parents there is sadness and gratitude at the same time. Sadness because they are losing their son, gratitude because they now know they can get the rest of the family through the winter.

Björn looks out of the covered wagon with tears in his eyes and waves to his family until they retire to their house. It is the house where Björn was born and grew up. It is the house that has given him shelter, warmth and peace, and it is the house he will probably never see again in his life.

He snuffles and wipes his nose with his hand. In the meantime, it has begun to snow and darkness is already making itself felt on the horizon. Björn watches his home village grow smaller and smaller with every step the horses take, and he doesn't miss the chance to look at his old life until it disappears behind a hill.

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Many years have passed since then, but to Björn it sometimes seems as if it was all just yesterday. In the past years there was hardly a day when he did not think of his family, and there was hardly a night when he did not dream of the terrible parting. Although he has now become a strong man, the pain of loss still sits deep in his heart.

Some days he condemns his family for trading him for food back then, but for the most part he can understand why they acted the way they did. He probably wouldn't do it any differently today. Björn hasn't fared badly in recent years. Like a king, he sits on his horse with his head held high. A magnificent animal, as he likes to call it. He is dressed just as impressively. His high status as a warrior is betrayed by his robust leather doublet with a chain mail shirt, plus a helmet that he wears protectively on his head. In addition to a longsword, he possesses a battle axe and bow and arrow. Björn's journey has been long, full of adventure, pain and hardship, but also full of love, happiness and joy, but that is another story.

In his mind he goes back to the evening when he last saw his homeland from afar. With a sad look he now stares at the ruins of his settlement. Nothing more than rubble remains of his old home.

A small smile appears on his thin lips when he sees the sea behind the ruins. Just like when he was a little boy, he hears the sound and feels the fresh sea breeze on his skin. He closes his eyes briefly and thinks back to the fishing trips with his beloved father. Björn is finally home after such a long time. Tears gather in his eyes. If he were not alone, he would say it was because of the frigid wind, but it is more because of the sad sight he sees. How could it have come to this? Rubbing his eyes, he dismounts his horse with a loud sigh and ties it to a lonely tree that has stood on this hill for as long as he could remember.

Björn desperately needs to get some relief. It's always a risk to do one's business in the open, so he does it the way he once learned from a great warrior of the Varangian Guard at the court of the Emperor of Byzantium.

"Thrust your sword into the ground beside you so you can see exactly what is happening behind you, but be careful not to forget what is happening in front of you and around you. You must always have your eyes everywhere."

Harald, that was the warrior's name, plunged his sword into the ground, pointed his index finger at his eyes, then at the surroundings. "You never know if there's a vagabond lurking somewhere to murder you or rob you." He nodded. "And make sure the wind comes from behind you, because usually



those bastards stink so bad you can smell them before you hear them."

Such vital advice is something Björn takes very much to heart, and fortunately for him, it burns itself right into his brain so he never forgets it. Björn has had a queasy feeling all day. Since his last rest in the valley, half a day's ride from his settlement, he can't shake the feeling that someone is following him. But thanks to his good training, he can hide such perceptions very well.

The day is dreary and a certain melancholy hangs over the area as he goes about his long-awaited business. Suddenly, an eerie silence falls, sending a cold shiver down Björn's spine.

"Something's wrong here," he mutters, frowning and swallowing loudly. His horse whinnies softly and becomes nervous. His gaze swings quickly to the left, then to the right. He perceives a crackling sound, perhaps from an animal, but perhaps also from a human being. He cannot recognize it.

Three breaths later, he catches a bestial stench, followed shortly by a shadow in his longsword, which he had rammed into the ground. Björn suddenly realizes that he is no longer alone.

At the same moment he hears a loud battle cry from the attacker. He then perceives an axe whizzing directly towards his head. Björn's reflexes are very good, with a quick movement forward, he grabs his sword.

Shortly after, he spins around. Because his pants are pulled down, there is no question of lightness and speed. Already he catches sight of the stinking attacker directly above him, hatred and anger written in his eyes.

Björn does not hesitate, he lashes out with his sword, but hits him only lightly on the shoulder. The attacker laughs maliciously and bends over Björn. He opens his mouth to say something. Björn is overcome with disgust when he sees the rotting teeth and a decaying smell hits him. Before the man can get a word in edgewise, Björn raises his upper body and slams his head full force against the attacker's. This time it is easy for him to fight him off. The man yelps, staggers backwards and lands right in Björn's turd.

"Why now?" curses Björn. "Can't even take a dump in peace." With an elegant leap, he jumps up and quickly pulls up his pants. Suddenly he hears a second man standing a meter in front of him, armed with a club, completely taken aback. Björn breathes heavily. "Seriously? Another one?" He doesn't flinch for long. To avoid a long and useless back and forth fight, he lunges with his sword. The long and sharp blade cleanly cuts off the man's head from his shoulders.

Already when Björn saw him, his death sentence was pronounced, he had no

chance to react or fight back at all. As the head falls, you can still see the expression of bewilderment on the face. You can see that the second attacker is disappointed by this failed attack and you can see how he mourns his prey. The horse alone would have given them a carefree time for a long time. As soon as the head hits the ground, the man's mouth snaps shut. Now he has no worries either, Björn thinks to himself.

The attacker, who first wallows in Björn's poop for a while before he manages to get up, now stands before him armed with his axe. "You shouldn't have done that," he says through clenched teeth. His chest rises and falls with excitement, fear and anger. "You're going to die now."

Björn knows that this is an empty promise and he knows that the attacker has no chance against him. He already realized that when he fell backwards from his head-butt, as if a catapult had hit him. Besides, he talks way too much. In a fight one should rather let actions speak and Björn implements this statement now. Before the man can strike with his axe, he thrusts his sword into his stomach. The man's movements freeze immediately, he stares at Björn with wide eyes. He wants to say something, but the gush of blood coming out of his mouth prevents this.

Björn shows no remorse. On the contrary, killing some people enriches him. As he twists his blade in the man's body and pulls it out, the assassin falls forward, his face landing in the turd again. He gasps for air, coughing and panting like an old dog. With a powerful kick to the back of his neck, Björn snaps his neck, finally restoring calm. He takes a deep breath and is a bit annoyed by the polluted air, which is usually so fresh.

In the short time of the fight, his horse has remained calm. After all, Azzam has seen several fights, Björn could and can always rely on him. He is a true friend.

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