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Female Leaders: A Re-evaluation of Women During the Viking Age

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Female Leaders: A Re-evaluation of Women During the Viking Age

by

Sorayda Santos

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts Anthropology, Hunter College
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Thesis Sponsor:

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Date

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Figure 1: Grave Bj.660 from Birka, Sweden. Woman's grave, with staff, in the book "The Viking Way Religion and War in the Later Iron Age of Scandinavia" by Neil Price. Drawing by Þórhallur Thráinsson.

DEDICATION

To my grandparents. Thank you for believing in me and always supporting me.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Thomas McGovern. Tom, thank you for helping me finish this thesis. I am forever in your debt. George Hambrecht, thank you for being a wonderful second reader. Thanks to Sonia, for helping me check for any grammatical mistakes. Thank you to the Hunter College Anthropology department for allowing me to return and complete this thesis. Leo Coleman, thank you for taking the time to answer all of the questions and guide me through the process. To my parents, family, and friends, thank you for being a source of support and strength.

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Map 1: Krzewin´ska M, Bjørnstad G, Skoglund P, Olason PI, Bill J, Go´therstro´m A, Hagelberg E. 2015 Mitochondrial DNA variation in the Viking age population of Norway. *Phil. Trans. R. Soc. B* 370: 20130384.

I. Introduction

In 2017 an international team of researchers using newly available ancient DNA (aDNA) and Strontium isotopic analyses combined with traditional osteological measures confirmed the female sex of a Swedish Viking Age burial at Birka whose rich grave goods included a full set of weapons, two horses, and a gaming board (Hedenstierna-Jonson et al. 2017). First excavated in the late 19th century, grave Bj 581 had been identified as male gendered based on the weapon-rich grave goods marking the burial of an honored high-status warrior. The conclusive identification of the body as female (based on both aDNA and traditional osteological markers) created a great deal of publicity. Connections to women warriors appearing in the popular TV “Vikings” series were drawn, and articles attacking the automatic conflation of sex and gender took up this example, but criticism also followed. Judith Jesch, one of the leading literary

scholars writing on women in the Viking Age (Jesch 1991, 2001, 2013, 2015) has attacked the notion of widespread participation of women in warfare in her on line blog and faulted the interdisciplinary study for under-using the literary and documentary evidence for gender roles in the Viking Age. The status and possible roles of women in Scandinavian Viking Age society thus remains an active and controversial research topic of broad significance that continues to draw interdisciplinary investigation.

This thesis seeks to place this controversy in a broader context by reviewing available evidence and producing an overview of the current status of research. It seeks to investigate the proposition that some women in the Viking Age were actually leaders and thrived in their own right. Gender and class interacted in Viking Age society, and both the archaeological and literary records are likely to be biased towards the better off, but multiple lines of evidence now can be combined to provide a broad assessment of the range and nature of status roles available to Viking Age women.

It has been argued that in the Viking Age elite free women had the rights and privileges that many women today have; some women traveled and settled in other lands, others fought along their male counterparts, and others were merchants. Women of means had the luxury of being financially independent (either by way of divorce or being widowed). The average Norse woman had the right to divorce her husband and take what she brought into the marriage for herself. Lower class women were not as fortunate as women of means. That is not to say that they did not find opportunities and lead. Women who were slaves could potentially gain their freedom from their owners. The following thesis will explore the role of women in Viking Age society, assembling the current written and archaeological evidence for the range of status roles open to women.

II. Objects, Symbols, and Gender

“People put pieces of themselves into their possessions” (Prehal 2011:3). One’s possessions can be utilitarian items as well as items that identify status, gender, aspirations, and ethnicity. The material record preserves artifacts created by past peoples; helping today’s scholars recreate the lives of past peoples as well as their cultures. It is the hope of archaeologists that they are accurately recreating the lives of past people by bringing together research from different multidisciplinary areas (Bauer 2002:41).

“Symbols are used in material culture to refer... to an object or situation in which a direct, primary, or literal meaning also designates another indirect, secondary and figurative meaning” (Hodder 1982:11). In other words, symbols represent ideas or beliefs in visual form. Symbols can be used to decorate possessions and show others how the owner of the items feels about the symbol being represented. Some of the most popular symbols in the Norse world include *Valknut* (slain warriors), *Aegishjalmur* (Helm of Awe), and *Mjölknir* (Thor’s hammer). These symbols have been found in the possessions that were left behind by the Norse people and have been used to help scholars identify the creators of the items, as well as add to what is known about them.

One major area for gender related symbolism in material culture is dress and ornament. Viking Age women regularly wore twin broaches holding up their apron dress, and these were often linked by strings of beads in a highly visible display of gender, ethnicity, and wealth. Broaches and beads were regularly included as grave goods, and the normal twin-broach set has regularly been used to identify female burials. Other items of personal jewelry and rings of keys also regularly appear as part of female grave goods. These objects had symbolic as well as

practical function in life, and their regular inclusion in burial had clear significance for the living. While the everyday outfit of a woman was simple, women of means had access to better quality materials (gold and silver rather than bronze or copper alloy) and more possessions to symbolize their wealth. Broaches, other jewelry, and keys will be discussed below as indicators of status and gender.



Figure 4: Left: Viking Age broaches with beads, National Museum of Denmark

Figure 5: Right: Tri-lobate Broach, National Museum of Denmark

a. Broaches

Broaches were both utilitarian and decorative items for women. Women needed two broaches to hold up their clothing, attached to an apron-like dress on both shoulders. Broaches were usually made of bronze, but examples in silver or gold are occasionally found in the richest burials. The predominant design for broaches was oval and/or “tortoise-shaped” (Figure 4 left), but other box-like or tri-lobate forms also exist, possibly signaling ethnicity as well as gender and status (Jesch 1991). The graves of women are often found with broaches and the remains of

the clothing in which they were buried. Higher-end materials are associated with women of means, while poor quality textiles are linked to women of lower classes (Jesch 1991).

Males also used single broaches to hold up their clothing, usually a cloak. The style of the broach was different from those used by women and paired tortoise broaches are never found in male burials. These highly decorated and visually prominent pieces of jewelry thus seem to have signaled gender and status in life and death. Women of status regularly took valuable objects with them into their graves.

b. Other Jewelry

Some of the other jewelry that has been found in female graves include armbands, necklaces, and pendants (Jesch 1991). While the clothing that women wore was simple, they did display their own likes and dislikes via their jewelry. Women of means are found in the material record with more jewelry than women of lower classes. Jewelry was often engraved. This will be discussed in a later section discussing ancestral veneration and means.

Viking jewelry is made out of different mediums. Both males and females used jewelry made of beads, some imported from great distances, others made of local materials. Beads themselves are made of different materials, such as glass, amber, polished stone, and bone. It is interesting to note that in her study at the cemetery of Ire on the Baltic Island of Gotland, Lena Thunmark-Nylen found that men were buried with jewelry made of beads. The colors on the beads were very specific, red and/or red and green, and the assemblage itself is different than those associated with females (Thunmark-Nylen, 2000). Other scholars have found similar patterns during the Viking Age in the graves of males, the color and pattern being specific to the region (O'Sullivan 2015). Beads thus seem to have had significance in the Viking Age and their display may have signaled gender among other messages.

c. Keys

During the Viking Age, it has been said that women were in charge of the home (Redon 2017). Not only did women cook food for their family, they also managed the food inventory and supplies (Simpson 1967). Women decided what was consumed and when. It was their responsibility to ensure that their family had enough food supplies to last until the next harvest. To make sure that the food supplies were safe and not consumed rapidly, food was locked in pantries (Erikson 2013). The woman of the house kept the key to the food storage with her (Clover 1993). It actually became a part of her daily outfit and both symbolized her position in the household hierarchy and maintained her actual control of access to key resources (Redon 2017). Keys during the Viking Age were not standardized, but were often decorated and provided with means for suspension as part of personal display. Keys were different and those with means could afford keys of better quality.

“Keys found in the graves of Scandinavian women in the first millennium A.D. not only express that the place of women was mostly indoors... but they also show role transformed into power, and responsibility for the household economy and feasts made women powerful” (Gräslund 2001).

Not all scholars agree that keys are indicative of the place of the woman in the household. (Pantmann 2011). It is the belief of some scholars that keys were merely indicative of the Norse belief of the afterlife (Pantmman 2001, Lund 2016). Doors connected the living to the afterlife; they crossed the door into the next realm. Keys were placed with the dead to allow them to re-enter the world of the living (Lund 2016). It is argued by these scholars that keys are found all over the Viking realm. While this may be true, in his analysis of burials of Viking warrior women, Reddon found that keys were exclusively found in the burials of women (2017). If the

former theory were correct, the burials of male warriors would also contain keys. While keys may have been widespread artifacts in the Viking age, their differential inclusion in female burials strongly suggests a gendered status symbolism and the daily power of female householders to issue or withhold food and drink.

d. Women in Art

Women were depicted in art during the Viking Age. One of the most famous examples is the tapestry found in the Osberg Ship burial. The tapestry itself depicts the burial of the Osburg queen (Redon 2017). While not all of the figures in the tapestry have been identified, there are at least 5 women depicted (they were identified as women because of their clothing). Of the 5 women, there is at least 1 who is holding a spear. Some refer to this woman holding a spear as a Valkyrie. At times, Valkyries and seids (women who have the gift of prophecy) are thought to be one and the same (Redon 2017).

The picture stones of Gotland also depict women. In these stones, women are seen participating in a feast. A woman holds a horn used to drink mead. The same stone also depicts women who are androgynous and/or might be of the third sex. It is important to note that women are represented in art and are not always participating in tasks that are considered within the traditional sphere of womanhood.

III. Evidence of Written Records

a. Runic Inscriptions

Prior to the arrival of Christianity, the people of Scandinavia recorded their information using the runic alphabet of *fupark*. Runes were scratched onto wood, metal, or stone. Scratching runes into those mediums was time consuming; so much so that it limited the amount of information that was recorded. While there are thousands of examples of runes from the Viking Age, both in Scandinavia and other areas visited, because of the often-perishable material that the runes were recorded onto, the preservation is uneven (Jesch 1991). Those runes that are legible and often made to identify or memorialize individuals are often informative about gender relationships and the public demonstration of gender roles.

Runes were inscribed onto material possessions. Women owned jewelry that was inscribed with either their names or those of an ancestor. Women kept this inscribed jewelry for sentimental reasons, but also as a reflection of accumulated inter-generational status and personal honor (Jesch 1991). This use of inscribed artifacts made the point that women venerated each other and that female as well as male ancestors conferred status on their descendants.

In Denmark, Norway, and Sweden women commissioned commemorative stones celebrating their deceased loved ones. The memorial stones followed a specific pattern: each first recorded the person who had the stone created, then mentioned the deceased person, followed by the relationship between the two, and closing with other information about the life of the deceased (Jesch 1991). The memorial stones of Denmark are interesting, as they have a relatively high number of women from large lineages being noted as the commissioner of the stone (Gräslund 2001). Several women had multiple stones created for different family members, showing both that these women had the power and resources to display their status, and that it

was seen as honorable and socially effective for women to play a leading role in lineage prestige building and monumental memorialization

b. Contemporary Non-Norse Sources

The Vikings traveled extensively and encountered foreigners. Likewise, foreigners visited Scandinavia and documented their experiences and thoughts on certain events. Ibn Fadlan was an Arab merchant who encountered the Rus on the Volga River. Ibn did not speak the local language and relied on his interpreter to translate the events that he was witnessing (Jesch 1991:87). His focus tended to be on personal hygiene, and he found the Rus fairly repellant as well as pagan. Ibn Fadlan recorded an interesting observation about women. “Each woman wears on either breast a box of iron, silver, copper, or gold; the value of the box indicates the wealth of the husband” (Jesch 1991:120). Ibn Fadlan also recorded a dramatic funeral ceremony of a Rus chieftain that included human sacrifice of a slave girl by a female magic practitioner. While there has been a common assumption that the Rus he encountered hundreds of miles from the Norse homelands were Scandinavian in origin, there is no confirmation of their ethnicity and many current scholars are doubtful about the identities of the pagan slave traders Ibn Fadlan encountered (Price 2010).

Ibrahim b. Yaqub was a Jewish trader active in the 10th century CE. During his travels he came upon one of the most important Viking trading ports, *Schleswig*. While there, Yaqud wrote about a custom that he found quite odd. He noted that women had the right to divorce if they wished and received the support of the community (Jesch 1991:87). As this went against the beliefs of his own people, he noted it. This contemporary observation supports the evidence of

the later Icelandic law codes and seems to indicate that Viking age women generally enjoyed rights not available elsewhere.

c. Later Written Sources

While the runic evidence is limited to fairly short messages, these were created during the Viking Age by contemporary actors fully embedded in the culture of the period. The scattered contemporary written observations of Norse society by outsiders are potentially biased or ill-informed outsider viewpoints but at least they were composed by people who lived in the Viking age.

The far larger body of written material (usually in Latin or Old Norse using Latin letters on vellum) that provides the rich literary record of the Icelandic sagas and lawcodes is the product medieval Icelandic scholars long after the end of the Viking age who lived in a very different social and religious environment. While some Icelandic sources describe the Viking Age in Iceland and other parts of the Norse world, these manuscripts were produced hundreds of years after the events described and may well introduce anachronistic medieval viewpoints. While saga scholarship and the literary record has dominated the debates about the role of women, archaeology and material culture studies are increasingly providing evidence that seems to both confirm and challenge the traditional understanding of gender roles in the Viking Age.

As the Birka warrior burial case illustrates, this has created lasting tension between archaeologists dealing with the indirect evidence of preserved material culture and paleoenvironmental data and saga scholars whose rich but non-contemporary literary sources have had such a major impact on our understanding of men and women in the Viking age.

Several scholars are actively working to bridge the gap. Prehal has worked “to apply critical thinking to the Icelandic corpus to gain new understandings of past thought” (Prehal

2011:5). As Hodder has stressed: “There is a need for archaeologists to integrate theories and ideas from a wide range of studies concerned with structure, meaning and social action” (Hodder 1982:299). It is not enough to simply use one avenue of thought, and despite the many unresolved problems associated with both archaeology and sagas. Instead, the research that different archaeologists are conducting must be united to put together a comprehensive and holistic view of the Norse people.

Because of the focus of this thesis, not all of this extensive Icelandic documentary material will be addressed or discussed equally. In order to better understand the topic of women as leaders the focus will be the prose and poetic Eddas, Sagas of Icelanders, *Íslendingasögur*, the Icelandic Law codes of *Grágás* and *Jónsbok*.

The majority of what we know about Norse mythology prior to the arrival of Christianity comes from the two Icelandic collections of pre-Christian stories and tales called *Edda*. For the most part, we do not know the original authors, Snorri Sturluson, the collector of the *Prose & Poetic Edda*. Snorri (d.1261 AD) was a highly educated Christian Icelandic chieftain with an interest in poetry and history who systematically collected tales of the pre-Christian gods and pieces of the complex Viking age poetry that had been orally transmitted and which formed the model for then- contemporary poetry in medieval Iceland. Snorri preserved a rich set of stories about gods and goddesses that bear considerable similarity to the Classical Olympian pantheon. Considerable debate has centered on the degree to which Snorri consciously cleaned up and rationalized an originally far more localized and incoherent set of beliefs and folk tales into grand epics (Price 2010).

That said, Snorri’s goddesses are powerful and play a major role in legends, as do female trolls and giantesses. While the chief god of the Norse was male, there were female gods, such as

Freyja. Freyja was the goddess of death, fertility, love, and war. The goddess Hel was in charge of delivering punishment and pain to those who misbehaved. When people passed away heroically, they went to Valhalla. When one died on the battlefield, it was a female warrior Valkyrie that collected the soul of the warrior and delivered it to Valhalla. Women were in positions of power in the mythology of the Norse people as recorded by Snorri and repeated in folktales deriving from the pre-Christian traditions. In later Icelandic folklore female trolls are powerful characters, sometimes embodying natural forces of flood and landslide (Sigurdurdottir et al 2019).

- i. *Eddas* contain complex poems commemorating major events or praising elites that were delivered by *skálds* (poets) in public performance and later written down and ultimately collected by Snorri. Skaldic poetry employs a complex specialized language and verse structure that is hard to alter and thus was considered to provide a credible record of the past by Snorri and his contemporaries. While the majority of *skálds* were male, there are known female *skálds* (Jesch 1991). The female *skálds* preserved in the historical record were from wealthier families; meaning they had the luxury to engage in activities that they loved instead of doing what was needed for survival. Women who were not wealthy had to work for a living.
- ii. The *Landnámabók*. The *Landnámabók* is a catalogue containing the names of the first settlers of Iceland. It was first written centuries after the 9th century colonization, and has been suggested to include many anachronistic “re-writings” of history to justify later land claims and lineage status. The catalogue lists the names of a few women who made the trip on their own, without any male relatives (Jesch 1991:82). There is also evidence of women

becoming widows at sea and therefore taking their own futures into their own hands. The most famous female settler was *Auðr* daughter of Ketill Flatnose. *Auðr* visited the British Isles and eventually settled in Iceland (Jesch 1991:82). What is most interesting about her is that she was able to thrive without a husband and son, and that she was celebrated as an early Christian convert and thus a lineage-enhancing role model at the time of the Landnámabók compilation.

- iii. *The Icelandic Sagas*. Women are portrayed both negatively and positively in most of the sagas. Women are depicted as scheming, deceiving, and traitorous, but also can be important and respected leaders, key players in dramatic events, and (importantly) valued as ancestors by the later saga-writers. The *Laxdoela* saga “has the broadest range of female characters, all drawn to catch the reader’s attention” (Jesch 1991:193). A female settler, a slave turned princess, and a beautiful woman. What is interesting about the women in this particular saga is that they all are seen as powerful and in control of their future. This has led some to speculate that this saga was written by a woman or at least for the female population (Jesch 1991:193). In the two sagas describing voyages to Greenland and Vinland (Eirik the Red’s Saga and the Greenlander’s saga, together often referred to as the Vinland Sagas (Sigurdsson 2008) women play a key role in the events. Tjodhilde the wife of Eirik the Red is credited with establishing the first Christian church in Greenland (much to the dismay of her pagan husband). Eirik’s daughter Freydis is depicted both heroically standing off the Native American “Skraeling” (when the men have fled) and later brutally murdering the other women on the expedition to Vinland. Still more dramatic is the story of Gudrid Thorbjarnardóttir, who was an early settler of both Greenland and Vinland, married three successive chieftain husbands, gave birth to the first European child in Vinland, completed a

pilgrimage to Rome and ended up as the abbess of the first nunnery in Iceland. She has been described as the real heroine of the Vinland Sagas, and provided an illustrious ancestress for the later Icelandic lineage who probably commissioned the writing of the Greenlanders Saga (Brown 2007). Women were not bound. They were responsible for their own future and embraced it.

iv. *Mythology*

a. *Law*. The people of Iceland wrote down their laws as early as the medieval period.

The earliest Icelandic law books are the *Grágás* and *Jónsbok*. In both of these law books the compilers of the decided to highlight and document the laws most important to them. The focus tended to be on the home and the division of space. The shielings of Iceland have become an important area of research within the last 10 years. Current research by Clover (1993) sheds light on the importance of the shielings and the role of women in the shielings. Women inhabited the shielings during the summer months. Because of the law, the shielings had to be within walking distance from the main household. The law itself was not biased towards males. It did not limit women from engaging in activities. Laws were written so that they impacted all people and women could potentially be involved at all levels of the legal process. The shieling had to be within walking distance for all; it did not say that if women could not walk the distance they were not allowed to be in the shieling. There were no laws that were written to stop women from being equal members of society. Women had the right to divorce, own lawn, and handle their finances should they have any. Women were even involved in settling disputes when no male in the lineage could claim responsibility.

b. *The Marriage of Literature, Law, and Archaeology*. It is through the marriage of the literature, law, and archaeology that a better understanding of the Norse people, specifically women, is emerging. A comprehensive understanding can only be created if all aspects are explored and validated. The historical record is only complete when the archaeology of the region is carried out and a comprehensive holistic view of the people is created.

IV. Social Structure and Women's Roles in Everyday Life

In order to understand the place that women had during the Viking Age, it is important to understand the Social Strata during that time period. By understanding the hierarchy during the period, one is able to understand if women were limited in what they could do and what they could aspire to.

a. Social Strata

In the Norse world, the king ruled over his people. The king collected taxes and ensured that his people were protected and had a decent quality of life (Chartrand 2006). Following the king on the lower social strata were the *jarls* (the nobles and or elite class). They owned land and at times leased it to farmers. The *bondi* were the average everyday people. Below the *bondi* were the *thrall*, these were the slaves who had no rights.

b. Everyday Life

“Although life in the late Iron Age was full of tensions and dangers, it appears that people still found time to have moments of cheerfulness and pleasure” (Gardela 2012: 234). Some of the leisure activities that people took part in include playing ball games, wrestling, stone

lifting, skiing and skating, horse fighting, and board games. It is assumed that women could participate in any of these leisure activities (Gardela 2012: 234).

Eating and drinking were among the favorite pastimes of the Norse people. Feasts were organized for different occasions – weddings, funerals, religious ceremonies or larger gatherings. Most feasts took place during the autumn and winter months, as food was more abundant and there was less to do. During these meetings, “both men and women ate and drank, sometimes to excess” (Gardela 2012:242). Feasts could last for days. Women were active participants and were not restricted.

Most Norse people were farmers. What they grew depended on where they lived and what could be grown there. What could not be grown was traded for. The Norse people had an extensive trade network. While a young male was not Viking at birth, as he aged, he could participate in raiding parties. Once the man outgrew the hardship involved with raiding, it is possible that he became a farmer, merchant, or craftsman (Jesch 2013). At the age of 12, a boy officially became a male. Women achieved adulthood at puberty. During the Viking Age, the average age at the time of death was in the 40s, meaning, that women were not held back by anything aside from their own biological clock. That is, assuming that she wanted to marry and marry at a certain age.

c. War

There are many theories as to why the Great Viking army formed. At this time, there is no definitive answer to this question. Some have suggested that men joined raiding parties because they needed to raise the funds to pay for the dowries of their future brides (Raffield, Price, and Collard 2017). It is believed that these raiding parties were comprised of individuals who

pledged their allegiance to their local chieftain or king. It was this leader who was responsible for feeding, equipping and rewarding his followers (Raffield 2016). The army itself was composed of these multiple leaders who all worked together, and was made up of mostly men from different areas of Scandinavia (Chenery et al. 2014). The majority of the men fell into the age range of 18-45 (Jarman et al. 2018). No one group within the army was the same size. Size was determined by the amount that could fit in boats. It is estimated that each subset of the army had anywhere between 100 to 200 men.

A common misconception about the Viking Army is that women and children were not a part of the group. Burials for both women and children have been found among the remains of warriors at different sites known to have been used during battles (Raffield 2016). Some have speculated that women accompanied warriors to help nurse injured warriors and feed the warriors. There is no evidence at this time to support the idea of the female Norse nurse (British Medical Journal 1917).

Because raiding parties were gone for long periods of time, some scholars have suggested that families followed the males along the raiding campaigns (Raffield 2016). Women and their children did what was needed to ensure that the Vikings had what was necessary to be successful on the battlefield. It is assumed that women partook in the same activities that they would have back home.

The remains of Viking warriors are often found with weapons that are indicative of their role in the Viking raiding parties (axe, spear, sword, etc). The remains of these warriors display visible sharp-force trauma (Loe et al. 2014). There is now evidence that women also fought alongside their male counterparts. The most famous example is referred to as the Birka Warrior. In 2017, Hendenstierna-Jonson and her team were able to positively identify the Birka warrior as

female using DNA analysis (Hendenstierna-Jonson et al. 2017). The Birka warrior was found with a complete set of armor needed in combat. What is interesting about this particular site is that its evidence challenges statements dismissing as pure fiction the fierce Viking woman represented in the Sagas (cf., Gardeta 2013, Jesch 1991). The Birka, however, did not have any visible wounds on her bones. Below is a visual representation of the burial of the Birka Warrior.



Figure 4: Female Viking Warrior: : Reconstruction of grave Bj 581 drawn by Porhallur Pransson. CR Neil Price.

d. Women and Marriage

While women might not be at the forefront of Norse Literature, that does not mean they were the invisible sex or the weaker sex. Women controlled many aspects of their lives. Not much has been written about the roles and responsibilities of girls. It is assumed that girls helped around the home and engaged in leisurely activities as time permitted. Girls of means, married as early as age 12. While they might have married, the marriage most likely remained unconsummated until the girl reached the age of puberty, as they were not fertile until the age of

20 (Shapland, Lewis, and Watts 2016). As girls were not capable of bearing children, the marriage took place to create strong bonds between the families involved in the union.

Prior to marriage, if a woman had reached puberty she was learning and training for when she took control of her own home. That period of time is referred to as maidenhood. During this transitional period, women had more freedom than at any other point in their lives, giving them the opportunity to win their future and explore opportunities that they might not have when they marry. Once a woman married, she was officially considered an adult and had to move to her husband's family's estate (Shapland, Lewis, and Watts 2016).

In order for a couple to become engaged, the father of the bride-to-be had to agree to the match. Most matches occurred between people of equal social status. There are known instances in which the father of the bride accepted an offer from a wealthier suitor. While financial motivators were important, it should be noted that fathers did refuse suitors on their daughters' behalf. For example, a violent man who was a danger to his daughter and the community (Jochens 1995). Women had the right to refuse any offers without any repercussions.

There were few rules as it pertained to marriage in the Norse world prior to the arrival of Christian missionaries. After the arrival of the missionaries, marriage involved matching people of equal wealth. Marriage was prohibited amongst the poor, as they could struggle to pay their debt. Free women who had the children of slaves could not leave their children any inheritance. If a man married a slave, he could give her freedom (Jochens 1995).

While marriage was common, it was not uncommon to take on multiple partners and have relations outside of the marriage. Men, especially those of a higher social status, were known to have several concubines and lovers. Women also engaged in activities outside of their marriage. Men traveled and could be away from the home for long periods of time. Some

husbands would return, while others did not. Women did what they could to ensure their survival as well as that of their children.

Divorce and widowhood occurred in the Norse world. Marriage ended in either divorce or widowhood. Divorce was more popular prior to the arrival of Christian missionaries. It was fairly easy to obtain a divorce. Women themselves could file for divorce. Women who divorced and were still in their child bearing years would most likely re-marry. Widows could re-marry if they wanted. Oftentimes, older widows did not re-marry as they enjoyed the opportunities available to them. Property was distributed equally after a divorce, and a widow was allowed to inherit the wealth of her husband.

Women who married were expected to procreate. In Iceland, children could be identified using a bilateral descent lineage. When a woman was from a more prominent family than her husband, she would be included in the genealogical chain (Jochens 1995). When a woman would become pregnant, she could either tell the father of the child or not. If she told the father, he would either accept the child or deny it. Women who did not have their children recognized would care for their children alone. Women did not take time off after childbirth. There is nothing in the literature that looks down upon single mothers or anything of that nature. Women tracked their pregnancies and only had children during regularly space intervals.

Prior to the conversion of the Norse people to Christianity, Norse men had the ability to reject their children. Wives had a better chance of having their children recognized by the father than a mistress had of having her children recognized. Some of the other considerations that could affect approval included sex, health, and the current number of children that the father already had.

Certain colonies in Scandinavia lacked women. Female slaves were imported to ensure the survival of the colony. In the early records, some of the names of the mothers are missing, suggesting that slaves were the mothers of these children and that the father decided to leave the name off as the mother was not a free woman (Jochens 1995).

Violence against grown women did occur. At this point in time, there is little known about this topic. Shapland, Lewis, and Watts discuss this topic in their 2016 paper about what it meant to be a woman in Europe during the Medieval Period. Evidence for violence against women is seen in the osteological record. Bones show at what point in time the women experienced the injury and how it healed.

e. Female Infanticide

The soil in Scandinavia is not ideal for the preservation of remains. As a result, not all remains can be sexed when they are found. Nancy L. Wicker conducted archaeological research at the site of Birka in Sweden. At Birka, researchers have found that there are more burials for women than there are for men (Wicker 2012). Wicker proposes two different ideas as to why this may be. The first being missionary activity on the island, and the second being female infanticide (Wicker 2012). Wicker references sagas to support her idea of preference for male babies.

Of the 1016 burials that were analyzed, they were only able to assign sex to 415. Of the 416, there were 246 females (60 percent), and 169 males (40 percent) (Wicker 2012). More men were found in chamber graves than females. Chamber graves have the higher-end grave good worth than non-chamber graves. Female graves tended to have goods than were indicative of the sex. Infants and children made up 2% of the total burials. Children cannot be sexed based on their bones, as they do not develop indicators of sex until they reach puberty (Bass 1971). At this time, there is no proof that female infanticide took place. The site of Birka is a perfect example

of a site which is not representative of an entire population. In fact, Birka is an interesting case study as it shows that there are multiple ways to venerate the dead.

f. The Third-Sex

Exploring gender fluidity in the Norse has become a topic of interest within the last few years. Very little is known about this topic and what is known comes from writings influenced by Christian ideology (Raninen 2008). Nevertheless, the topic will be addressed briefly. Prior to getting into that discussion, sex and gender need to be discussed. Sex are the reproductive organs that one is born with, while gender is the social and cultural traits that human beings identify with, meaning that even if someone is born with female reproductive organs, they may identify as male or of the third-sex. The “one gender model” was proposed by Carol J. Clover (1993). In this model, there is only the normative male. That is then broken up into two levels, the biological males and the females who performed vigorous male activities. This model is used by some scholars. The author of this thesis does not agree or disagree with that model. What is important is that women might have had the potential to take on male roles and identities and take charge of their future, following the path for their own success and being leaders.

Ing-Marie Back Danielsson, another scholar interested in gender during the Viking Age, suggests that the constant self is not fixed but rather fluid (Back Danielsson 2007). “Instead of a stable selfhood being contained inside of a separate body, the Scandinavian person was extended and dispersed onto his/her social relations was in a constant state of flux” (Back Danielsson 2007).

Raninen suggests that the main form on capital in the Norse world was honor. “The male identity was defined and publicly controlled according to an aggressive, martial value system” (Raninen 2008). Loss of honor would lead to violence. The Norse family unit was led by a free

male. If there was no free male of age, a female could lead (i.e., widow, eldest daughter, or third-sex). If a family lacked a son, an unmarried daughter could assume the role (Clover 1986). At this time, there is no evidence of men assuming the roles traditionally associated with women (Raninen 2008).

V. Women Leaders

A very basic definition of a leader is a person who can command change and lead over a group of people. Women during the Viking Age were not restricted on the basis of sex. Women had the ability to inherit property, work in commercial centers, could specialize in a craft, travel, and be in charge of their own lives. There are many instances in which women could take control of their lives and impact the lives of those who depended on them. The power and abilities that women had go beyond what is thought of as traditional power in society, it extends into the home sphere and how they were able to impact the activities going on outside of the home.

a. Land Owners

Women could come into marriage owning land. Her husband managed her land while they were together or while he was alive. If he passed away, a woman would reclaim her land and manage it as she wished. There is not much known about how women managed their land. Legal records show that women owned land and how they came to possess it.

b. Merchants

“The Viking Age coincided with the development and expansion of markets and towns throughout Europe” (Jesch 1991:38). The three Viking Age centers all specialized in different items and therefore each had their own specialties and trading partners. Those living near those markets and towns became wealthier than those living in more remote areas with less power.

Burials at these trading centers have an equal representation of women. The burials of women have burial goods associated with being active participants in the industry (e.g., weights and balances) (Jesch 1991:39). This brings in the idea of women specializing in trade, being a part of a trading family, and having a career devoted to being a tradeswoman (Stalsberg 1987). They were not excluded because of their sex or gender. Women living outside of large towns also participated in seasonal trade. Much less is known about these tradeswomen living outside of the major trading centers.

c. Craftsmen

In the Viking Age and medieval Iceland, the main arenas for everyday living, economic activities, and social interactions were the buildings and outdoor spaces in the homefields of dispersed farmsteads” (Milek 2012:85). Each main dwelling had several smaller outbuildings linked to it (i.e., hay barns, sheep houses, smithies, and additional storage spaces, *jarðhús*). The *jarðhús* was a sunken pit house. It is believed that women used the *jarðhús* during the summer months. At the *jarðhús* it is believed that women produced clothes. Archaeologists on excavations in Scandinavia have found the remains of the tools used to work textiles and produce clothes in the hearths of the *jarðhús*.

“The idea that the *jarðhús* or Icelandic pit house may have functioned as women’s work places was first put forward by Guðmundur Ólafsson following his excavation of the pit houses at Grelutóttir and Hjálmsstaðir, which contained several spinning and weaving implements” (Milek 2012:92). Recent research also supports that idea of the *jarðhús* (earth house or pit house) as a gendered work space. Each pit house had a stone hearth or oven against a wall and work

space. In that hearth or oven, there is evidence of the debris that are the result of craft production (e.g., stone weights and spindle whorls) (Milek 2012:103).

“Both the archaeological and the literary evidence point to the fact that women primarily carried out textile production in Viking-Age Iceland. In furnished burials in Scandinavia and the North Atlantic region, the most common implements found in women’s graves relate to textile production, including wool combs, spindle whorls, loom weights, weaving swords, weaving tablets, needles, glass linen smoothers and whalebone smoothing boards” (Milek 2012:119). Women of all ages and socioeconomic backgrounds could partake in textile production. Textiles were worn by all people and clothing was time-consuming to produce, as there were four main production stages (Stirling and Milek 2015). Women not only had to source the raw materials, they also had to produce the clothing for their families. While women’s clothing was not elaborate, those of men were. Men’s clothing would also be made of raw materials that women’s clothing was not made of. All shoes were made of leather. Shoes for colder seasons also had fur. Textile production was time-consuming and became a primary source of wealth and power for women (Gräslund 2001). When women married and moved with their new family they created these important kinship-based trade networks (Gräslund 2001). Because women were responsible for every aspect of textile production, they would financially benefit from the sale and/or trade of their goods. This elevated their role in the community and created power for them in their community. This activity was only carried out by women and men played no role in it.

d. Explorers

It is hard to prove that women were explorers in their own right. The sagas do not mention a woman who led expeditions nor is there any archaeological evidence for this. Women

did travel and they definitely impacted the areas where they visited and inhabited. Norse names are very unique, especially those assigned to women. The names of women of Scandinavian descent impacted modern day Yorkshire and Lincolnshire, England. These two regions have many namesakes influenced by Scandinavian female colonists (Jesch 1991:77).

Women are known to have left their ancestral lands in search of better opportunities, as illustrated by the record of Audr in the Landnamabok. Women who migrated could potentially earn money, acquire knowledge and skills, and enjoy their freedom (Shapland, Lewis, and Watts 2016). This access to land, money, and skills also impacted the partner that women took on and how their marriage worked (Shapland, Lewis, and Watts 2016).

IV. Conclusions

Throughout history, sex and gender have impacted the way in which people have been seen. For some, it has even limited what they could or could not do. While gender studies have become more prevalent in archaeology, they are not the norm. Therefore, it is important that interdisciplinary investigations continue to take place and that aspects of the past which have been under investigated come to the forefront. Grave Bj 581 in Birka has been game changing in the realm of archaeology, as it has impacted the way in which women in the Viking world have been viewed. While some are proponents of the female Viking Warrior, others caution against letting modern day thoughts and television create a fictional representation of women during the Viking Age. This debate has spread to other aspects of women's lives.

Viking Age literature and accounts of foreigners who interacted with the Norse people support the idea of strong independent women. The types of limitations that impacted society during that time period dealt with freedom and wealth. Freedom and wealth negatively impacted

men. Male slaves had to buy their freedom or remain in servitude their entire lives. Men who wanted to gain wealth had to join expeditions to acquire the money needed to start their own families and obtain land.

Not all women had control over their lives. Some women were slaves and were at the mercy of their owners. Women could gain their freedom and their descendants could be born free people. The ideas that women were teaching at home were reaching their communities in many ways. Even if they were bound to their homes, the reach extended beyond.

Women could be artists, business people, explorer's, warriors, or home makers. Women ran and organized their family units to ensure their survival. Women were leaders and the evidence of it has shown itself in different aspects of the archaeological record.

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