

**“The Lives of Women in the Viking Age: The Role of Critical Feminist and Historical
Assessment.”**

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History 383

November 3, 2014

This essay will examine the roles of women in Viking culture, and discuss many of the freedoms they may have enjoyed, as compared to women in other European cultures from the same time period. Various sources, as well as archaeological evidence, suggests that Viking women may have enjoyed a higher degree of political and social freedom, and could often act independently when making decisions regarding their own lives and the future of their communities. Additionally, the representation of women in Viking sagas and poetry, both mortal and supernatural, is often favourable. Female figures depicted in the sagas are seen as strong, intelligent, and attractive. They usually wield and possess a high degree of power and demand respect from their communities. However, what is known regarding gender roles in Viking culture is largely based on documents that were written centuries later, and even some of the physical evidence cannot fully explain what it must have actually been like for women living in Viking communities. It can also be argued that the very study of these ancient cultures has been, traditionally, seen through a set of stereotypes regarding gender that ignore the contribution of women and overemphasize the contribution of men.

One of the difficulties in discussing Viking culture is that the majority of the primary sources were not written by Scandinavians. Birgit Sawyer, in "Women as Bridge Builders," explains that "most comments on women in prehistoric Scandinavia, like comments on pre-Christian circumstances in general, are based on Christian texts written centuries later."¹ These Christian writers exhibited their own biases in these accounts, as for them, much of Viking culture must have seemed unnatural and barbaric. As a result, she suggests that two different versions of Viking women are described in these texts. The first, "based on Icelandic sagas,

¹ Birgit Sawyer, "Women as Bridge Builders: The Role of Women in Viking-Age Scandinavia" in *People and Places in Northern Europe, 500-1600: Essays in Honour of Peter Hayes Sawyer* edited by Ian N. Wood and Niels Lund. (United Kingdom: Boydell & Brewer, 1991): 214.

represents women as free, proud and independent, whose characteristic roles are as powerful wives and queens, or even as the much-feared amazons or 'shield-maidens'.² The other, "based on the provincial laws," depicts women more as "oppressed and powerless" and whose function is "to be an object of activity of men."³ These two depictions of women are obviously drastically different, which causes some difficulty in attempting to ascertain an accurate portrayal of women's lives in Viking Scandinavia. This is not isolated to the discussion of Viking culture, as many ancient pagan societies were viewed through a similar set of preconceived ideas. Overall, this difficulty seems to plague most modern scholarship on this subject, and historians often struggle to interpret the available evidence. This is one of the reasons why it is so important to have a variety of reputable sources to draw from, especially when discussing issues like gender and gender roles.

Preconceived ideas of what Viking culture entailed have also greatly impacted the way in which women are studied, something which Judith Jesch, in her book *Women in the Viking Age*, examines. Jesch argues that "Vikings are irredeemably male in the popular imagination."⁴ Movies, television, art, and fictional books have all contributed to the common conception of a Viking as a strong and menacing male warrior, hairy, unwashed, and senselessly violent. The Vikings of popular culture "maim and murder, rob, pillage and destroy, rape and enslave, venting their fury on defenceless monks and women in particular."⁵ But Jesch argues that that representation of Viking culture "is the historical myth."⁶ It is no wonder that the Vikings have so captured the imaginations of many modern people – Viking society functions as a fascinating

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Judith Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*. (United Kingdom: The Boydell Press, 1991): 1.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

extreme to what most people deal with in their modern lives. Jesch argues that “myths tend to simplify, and a concentration on bloodthirsty Vikings ignores the more complex historical pattern.”⁷ While Vikings did participate in brutal wars and raids, they also had to function as a real society. Jesch makes a note about recent attempts to “redress” how Vikings are popularly seen, in particular, through an exhibition at the British Museum that sought to expose a more well-rounded understanding of Viking culture.⁸ The study of Viking women is a central part of this, and more and more, it is becoming clear that women are an integral part of revising Viking history.

Kirsten Wolf examines not only the roles of women, but also their religious and memorial customs in, *Daily Life of Vikings*. In her study of Viking culture, she has been able to expand on the possible roles and statuses of these early Scandinavian women, using a variety of sources. Part of that study has involved archaeological research, and in this, Wolf has found that “Viking-age graves indicate that women, especially older ones, commanded considerable respect.”⁹ This is evidenced by the quality and quantity of grave goods found in these burial sites. Wolf explains that “many of the richest burials in Scandinavia are of women, the most famous being the Oseberg ship-burial on the shores of Oslo fjord in Norway.”¹⁰ Perhaps one of the most famous Viking ships overall, the Oseberg ship raises some interesting questions regarding the importance of some female figures in Viking society. Clearly, in some instances, women were afforded a respect similar to that bestowed upon highly respected men. Women were also able to leave distinctive marks in their cultural and physical landscapes. Wolf suggests that Viking women must have “enjoyed a measure of freedom of action,” and that evidence of

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 2.

⁹ Kirsten Wolf, *Daily Life of the Vikings*. (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2004): 13.

¹⁰ Ibid.

this can be found in “several rune stones in Scandinavia [that] were raised at the initiative of women and some moreover by women in memory of women.”¹¹ One of the most famous examples of this is the Dynna Stone, “which was erected by a woman in memory of her daughter.”¹² These actions imply that there was a degree of independence for women in Viking society, in that they were able to take initiative in official memorial arrangements and were also commemorated by their communities when they died. Overall, these archaeological findings seem to suggest that Viking women played a larger role in the activities of their communities, and many were greatly honoured after their deaths.

The political character of Viking culture also included the contribution of women in some areas. Jesse Byock provides a more general description of gender roles in politics in her book *Viking Age Iceland* and explains that “freeborn Icelandic women had legal responsibilities which were often comparable to those of men.”¹³ Specifically, Icelandic Viking women “maintained a measure of control over their own lives,” which included the “right to own property.”¹⁴ Byock notes that while most women “played no substantial role in open political life,” they did take part in many of the peripheral activities that politics involved.¹⁵ Women were active in the official decisions involving feuds and other conflicts between family groups.¹⁶ Additionally, Norse sagas and poetry “reveal ways in which women of property-holding families set in motion actions that escalated or prolonged feuds.”¹⁷ It is likely that these events, although placed in a semi-fictional storyline, were based on real interactions in Viking communities. Divorce was also permissible

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Jesse Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*. (London: Penguin Books, 2001): 196.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

in Viking culture, and could be requested by either person in the union.¹⁸ Byock explains that some of the reasons for which a divorce would be granted include “when a husband wanted to take a wife’s property out of the country against her will; when violence had been committed by either party against the other; in compatibility; or when the husband wore feminine clothing.”¹⁹ This is especially progressive when compared to the rights of women in many other cultures from the same time, in which women often had to remain in unhappy marriages for societal or religious reasons.

Other archaeological studies have also found a significant amount of female Viking burial sites, although what this means to the established history of Viking culture is sometimes unclear. Shane MacLeod’s study of female burial sites in southern England, for example, raises some interesting questions regarding the potential role of Viking women in battle. In “Warriors and Women,” MacLeod discusses the numerous female burials that date to a period in which the only Vikings present in England were involved in military campaigns. He suggests that these burials “are highly suggestive of women accompanying the great army to England,” but what capacity they served in the army is debated.²⁰ On the one hand, women may have accompanied the Viking armies to assist with domestic duties and the treatment of the wounded, or they may have come along to aid in the establishment of permanent settlements.²¹ A more controversial interpretation of this study might be that Viking women were actively involved in battle. Ultimately, MacLeod concludes that a reassessment of burial sites using more advanced technological tools, as well as the re-examination of other previous historical studies, is in

¹⁸ Ibid., 320.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Shane MacLeod, “Warriors and Women: The Sex Ratio of Norse Migrants to Eastern England up to 900 AD” in *Early Medieval Europe*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (2011): 351.

²¹ Ibid., 352-353.

order.²² Regardless of the results, the concept of an actual Viking warrior who was a woman is a fascinating and exciting proposition.

Accounts of interactions with Viking communities written by foreigners also offer an interesting glimpse into their lives, and evidence specifically related to the role of women has been taken from a variety of these primary and historical sources. Wolf explains that accounts of foreigners who interacted with Viking communities often included details regarding the “independent behavior of Scandinavian women.”²³ In one such account, written by Al-Ghazal, “a ninth-century poet and diplomat from Andalusia,” he marvels at the “frankness and flirtatiousness of high-ranking Norse women.”²⁴ Furthermore, Ya’qub al-Turtushi, “a tenth-century merchant or diplomat also from Andalusia,” commented on the Viking women’s right to request a divorce if they found that the union was “unsatisfactory.”²⁵ Clearly, this was not common practice in the cultures these men came from, as it merited discussion in their accounts. According to Wolf, Viking women also played significant roles as “the primary practitioners of magical medicine,” suggesting that women had a variety of freedoms, in choosing occupations, as well as choosing to leave unhappy marriages. That being said, there were still defined gender roles in their domestic environments. Wolf explains that “women managed those of the couple’s affairs that pertained within the house, while men were in charge of everything outside and represented the family in society at large.”²⁶ So while in many ways the Vikings were highly progressive in their establishment of equality for gender roles, in other ways they appear to be very much like the majority of other early masculine European cultures.

²² Ibid., 353.

²³ Wolf, 14.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 10.

One of the most comprehensive writings about Viking culture and religion comes from their Eddic poetry, and sagas. Helen Damico examines Wealhtheow, the queen character in the epic poem *Beowulf*. She notes that while Wealhtheow is a minor character in the narrative, “the poet’s treatment of the queen elevates her to the status of a major figure.”²⁷ The way in which she is described establishes “Heorot’s queen as a commanding figure, while her exemplary traits – bounteousness, imposing stature, dignity, and excellence of mind – render her as idealized a queen figure as Grendel’s mother is an archetype of corruption.”²⁸ This serves to illustrate that it was common in Viking folklore to attribute heroic qualities to not only male characters, but to the female characters as well. Another representation of a strong female figure in Viking lore is the Valkyrie. Damico explains that “in Nordic heroic literature, they appear as human maidens, born of royal or heroic families, with supernatural powers and attributes.”²⁹ The Valkyries, while not gods, still wield an impressive amount of power. They “serve as intermediaries between men and the deity,” Odin, and “they function as advisors, guides, and arrangers of destinies.”³⁰ In Viking folklore, the Valkyries are most often seen as those that decide the fate of warriors in battle, acting upon the orders of Odin.³¹ In fact, it seems that the majority of female figures in Old Norse poetry and sagas, such as Freya, share the same qualities, like honour, strength, and heroism, and these traits imply a higher regard for women in Viking culture, in general. Furthermore, these kinds of figures also appear in texts not strictly thought of as Norse. Damico suggests that “the figure of a female battle-spirit... was a phenomenon of Anglo-Saxon culture”

²⁷ Helen Damico, *Beowulf's Wealhtheow and the Valkyrie Tradition*. (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984): 4.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 38.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

as well.³² In this way, Norse folklore and its character structures can be seen as influencing more than just Scandinavian literature.

Religious imagery also contained many depictions of statuesque and/or strong women. Damico notes that “memorial stone and pendants represent the battle-maid... [as] a welcoming figure at the courtyard at Valhalla.”³³ She is described as “silver-gilt, with cup or drinking-horn outstretched, the vessel itself emblematic of the joy, fulfillment, and abundance the warrior will enjoy in Odin’s heavenly abode.”³⁴ This kind of female figure, especially when holding a drinking vessel, is common in Norse imagery. However, “to what extent the welcoming drink-bearing figure on the gravestones and pendants was an accurate representation of Old Norse religious belief,” and not just a “graphic illustration of the valkyrie-figure formulaically constructed by the skalds is” is unclear.³⁵ Regardless, Damico argues that it must all be connected, as this kind of image is so commonly used in a variety of Viking lore, art, and religious icons. She suggests that “the celebrations at Valhalla memorialized in stone and the merrymaking of the *einherjar*, with the ever-present drink-bearing female figure, recounted by the poets” must be tied together in some way.³⁶ The dominant placement of female figures in Viking religious art suggests that, at least in regards to the supernatural realm, they were not completely excluded.

Petra Nordin sees the study of early cultures like the Vikings as being difficult, partly because of the established way in which a great deal of history is approached – from a specifically male point of view. In her article “Wealthy Women and Absent Men,” Nordin

³² Ibid., 53.

³³ Ibid., 53-54.

³⁴ Ibid., 54.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

suggests that “when we talk today of symbols, religion and status we must remember that these have been developed in a male dominant society.”³⁷ As a result, Nordin cautions that historians must examine evidence from these cultures keeping in mind that the majority of information available has been interpreted by men, who perhaps overemphasize the amount of control or influence that men exercised. She notes that “matriarchal and matrilineal societies do exist,” but traditionally men have dominated the political sphere.³⁸ In examining burial sites, however, evidence of Viking women who held some degree of power in their communities has been discovered. Nordin asks, “If the circumstances were such that during the early Iron Age people lived in a society where women dominated both the everyday life and carried out the collective cultural rites within the framework of society, and perhaps even were leaders – what would the archaeological material be like?”³⁹ The study of women in almost any ancient culture, and even more modern ones, is challenging, as history is typically seen through the “male” perspective. Nordin’s argument seems to suggest that a fundamental re-evaluation of the way in which we interpret history is needed. This “male” approach to history impacts the way in which we view art, literature, historical documents, and the symbolism apparent in these things. Nordin explains that

studies of symbolism that are affected by our ways of thinking and that incorporate values developed from our contemporary society work toward legitimizing the idea that society has always been of a particular mode, and they also legitimize the idea that the

³⁷ Petra Nordin, “Wealthy Women and Absent Men: Gender in Early Iron Age Burial-Grounds in Östergötland” in *Dealing with the Dead: Archaeological Perspectives on Prehistoric Scandinavian Burial Ritual* edited by Tore Artelius and Fredrik Svanberg. (Sweden: The Swedish National Heritage Board and The Museum of National Antiquities in Sweden, 2005): 233.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

relation between men and women is static and unchanging for all eternity – a biological (and physical) restriction in which women are always subordinate to men.⁴⁰

In many ways, this is why feminist disciplines have developed approaches to subjects that question the histories and opinions that have been established thus far. As much as historians try to stay impartial when writing about history, it is often difficult to separate personal biases and beliefs from complex descriptions regarding gender and religion.

In conclusion, the study of archaeological findings, as well as primary sources, has greatly contributed to what is known about early Viking history and culture. That being said, much is still being discovered about the role of women in Viking society, folklore, and culture. The contemporary discovery of archaeological information, the critical readings of folklore and sagas, as well as the role of mythology for these, and the feminist review of typical male bias in understanding women's roles in Viking culture have all offered contributions to a revisionary process of considering the strength of their status and contributions. It is obvious that this process of reassessment is far from completed and the main strengths of critical and feminist historical methodology will continue to clarify the accuracy of women's lives in early Scandinavia.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 234.

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