

The Trial of the Warrior Woman

Unearthing Gender Bias in the Scholarship of the Viking Age

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The wide expanse on the island of Björkö stood motionless that day in 1878; but for the slight rustle in the trees bordering the grassland, the world was silent.¹ The lake was still, the grass undisturbed, broken up only by outcroppings of granite and the crests of raised earth that the plants had learned to grow around over the last thousand years. Then, from nothing, a blast ripped through the stillness, the sound reverberating endlessly. Fragments of rock perforated the air falling to the ground in a cloud of dust. As the debris settled, Hjalmar Stolpe, a Swedish archaeologist currently excavating this burial field, moved in to inspect his work.²³ What Stolpe found beneath the blown-apart rock and earth was an archaeological revelation: an elaborate Viking chamber burial, rich with grave goods that for the next century and a half would identify it as the archetypical grave of a male, high-status Viking warrior.⁴

However, the real renown of the Birka Grave 581 was in the controversy that would not take shape until 130 years later. It would begin in 2016 with the whisper of a Swedish osteologist before exploding like a blast of dynamite onto every academic and non-academic headline, creating a debate that remains open to this day. What osteologist Anna Kjellström would report in 2016, and what DNA analysis would one year later confirm is that the bones of the individual buried in this particular grave, the same bones that in the past had consistently been identified as a high-status warrior, in fact, belonged to a female.⁵

¹ Neil Price et al., “Viking Warrior Women? Reassessing Birka Chamber Grave Bj.581,” *Antiquity* 93, no. 367 (February 2019): 183, <https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2018.258>.

² Stewart Culin, “Hjalmar Stolpe,” *American Anthropologist* 8, no. 1 (1906): 150.

³ Neil Price et al., “Supplementary Material - Viking Warrior Women? Reassessing Birka Chamber Grave Bj.581,” *Antiquity* 93, no. 367 (February 2019): 5, <https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2018.258>.

⁴ Price et al., “Viking Warrior Women? Reassessing Birka Chamber Grave Bj.581” (2019): 187, <https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2018.258>.

⁵⁵ Ibid 187; Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson et al., “A Female Viking Warrior Confirmed by Genomics,” *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 164, no. 4 (2017): 853–60, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajpa.23308>; Anna Kjellström, “People in Transition: Life in the Mälaren Valley from an Osteological Perspective,” *Shetland Amenity Trust*, Lerwick, (2016): 198.

The publication of this discovery by Hestier-Jonson et al., titled “A female Viking warrior confirmed by genomics” sent shockwaves across the world of archaeology and beyond. Mainstream media was publishing articles with flashy headlines like “DNA Suggests Women Were Powerful Warriors” and “How the Female Viking Warrior Was Written Out of History.”⁶ But the substance of these articles was little more than that: a flashy headline. And for some who had carefully analyzed the study, their reactions were not supportive. A debate began to arise out of the academic criticism, in particular from two scholars, one a historian the other an archaeologist. This criticism opened up the debate that would continue as each side responded to the other and news outlets and independent history buffs evaluated both sides of what was becoming a controversy. The scholars questioned everything from the scientific method utilized by Hestier-Jonson et al. to the lack of proper citations in the paper. While there is validity in many of the criticisms made, there are underlying motivations and influences that seem to be at play and deeper issues of society and academia that can be seen on both sides of the debate.

A significant underlying problem in this case is that scholars tend to lose sight of the way that history is created. History is a record but it is not objective. It is something that must be written and formed by human beings, and therefore it is imperfect. It is often interpreted differently because of the different life experiences and predispositions of the people who created it. This can easily lead to conflicts between scholars over the correct way to create and interpret history and over what they identify as the truth. These human predispositions can also lead to parts of history being wrongly interpreted or overlooked. The trial that the academic critics put

⁶ "DNA Suggests Viking Women Were Powerful Warriors," *HISTORY*, accessed March 26, 2024, <https://www.history.com>; Holly Norton, “How the Female Viking Warrior Was Written out of History,” *The Guardian*, September 15, 2017, sec. Science, <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2017/sep/15/how-the-female-viking-warrior-was-written-out-of-history>.

the Hedenstierna-Jonson paper and their female warrior was motivated by this interference of human bias.

In the historiography of gender in Viking society, as the reaction to the Hedenstierna-Jonson et al. paper demonstrates, there are clear predispositions of researchers and scholars that shaped the methods with which they uncovered, analyzed, and told this history. While the warrior woman was put on trial by the academic world, what this paper will put on trial is not the concept and evidence itself, but the field of Viking archaeology and history itself. This paper will identify and analyze the tendencies toward bias of scholars in the Viking historiography that lead to problems in the research. It will establish what is known about this grave and the findings of the archaeologists before evaluating the controversy and reception that followed the Hedenstierna-Jonson et al. discovery. Finally, it will examine the established body of knowledge on women and gender in Viking society and delve into the profound prejudices and gender biases that are embedded within the Viking historiography. In the case of Hedenstierna-Jonson et al., the inability of scholars to understand and accept evidence from other fields and also the unchecked gender assumptions of the critics ultimately call into question the status of all knowledge of Vikings, revealing that human bias was always lurking below the surface of this historiography and just needed to be uncovered.

Unearthing a Warrior

The Birka chamber grave, Bj 581 was discovered in 1878 by Hjalmar Stolpe during his excavation of the Birka burial field.⁷ Björkö, Sweden is one in a series of islands in the massive

⁷ Price et al., “Supplementary Material,” (2019): 9.

Lake Mälaren, roughly 20 miles west of Stockholm.⁸ On the northwestern corner of the island, over 1000 years ago, stood the bustling mercantile Viking town of Birka.⁹ A significant part of the settlement was the large burial field that stretches to the north which is estimated to contain over 3000 graves, less than half of which have been excavated today.¹⁰ roughly three thousand graves. The entire region has been preserved and remains intact today as a UNESCO World Heritage site.¹¹ Stolpe was in the process of excavating the burial field and had already uncovered roughly 500 graves when he came across this one.¹² Immediately this grave was different from the others. First, it was a chamber, meaning it had four walls built into the ground, and the body, along with its grave goods had been carefully placed, seated in a chair or on a stool.¹³ This type of burial was not the only one of its kind, but it was markedly rare on the island.¹⁴ When he first found it, a large granite boulder had been on top of the roof of the chamber, caving it in. Stolpe had needed to use dynamite to remove the boulder to gain access to the chamber below.¹⁵ The boulder is believed to have been an unusually large grave marker; in its original placement, it would have been visible from the town and the water.¹⁶¹⁷

Once he had gained access to the chamber, what Stolpe found was even more incredible. In addition to the human remains, the grave was filled with a full set of elaborate weaponry

⁸ UNESCO World Heritage Centre, “Birka and Hovgården,” accessed April 25, 2024, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/555/>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Andrew Pfrenger, “‘Female Viking Warrior’ Interview with Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson,” *Saga Thing*, accessed March 19, 2024, 17:00. <https://sagathingpodcast.wordpress.com/2017/12/01/saga-brief-10-female-viking-warrior-interview-with-charlotte-hedenstierna-jonson/>.

¹¹ UNESCO World Heritage Centre, “Birka and Hovgården.”

¹² Andrew Pfrenger, “‘Female Viking Warrior’ Interview with Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson,” *Saga Thing*, 29:56.

¹³ Price et al., “Supplementary Material,” (2019): 1.

¹⁴ Ibid., 1.

¹⁵ Ibid., 5.

¹⁶ Price et al., “Viking Warrior Women? Reassessing Birka Chamber Grave Bj.581,” (2019): 187. <https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2018.258>.

¹⁷ Price et al., “Supplementary Material,” (2019): 5.

including a sword, knives, spears, and shields, as well as a gaming board and pieces and the bones of two horses.¹⁸ Roughly 1100 graves in Birka have been excavated today and of these only 75 contain any weaponry and only two graves contain an entire collection of weapons, one of which is Bj 581.¹⁹ In his notes, Stolpe described this grave as “perhaps the most remarkable of all the graves in this field.”²⁰ Stolpe asserted that based on the grave goods and the method of burial, Bj. 581 gave every indication that it held the remains of a high-status warrior and a man.²¹ The grave would continue to be identified this way throughout the next century.

In 2015 Swedish osteologist Anna Kjellström was carrying out a study on the health of Viking-era individuals who were transitioning into life in early settlements, such as Birka.²² In the process of examining the bones from different Birka burials, Kjellström found a discrepancy with the remains of Bj. 581.²³ Her osteological examination of the pelvic bones indicated that the individual was female and not male, despite what Stolpe's records had described.²⁴ This examination she performed three times in total, each time with the same result.²⁵ Her remarks on these findings, published in her 2016 paper, were brief since this had not been the focus of her research. Anticipating that her findings were “possibly controversial,” she explained that what she had observed was “a grave where the preserved bones do fit the original nineteenth-century drawings and descriptions.... a chamber grave furnished with fine armor and sacrificed horses. Nevertheless, three different osteological examinations all found that the individual was a

¹⁸ Ibid., 1-2.

¹⁹ Ibid., 184.

²⁰ Price et al., “Viking Warrior Women?,” 183.

²¹ Price et al., “Supplementary Material,” 5; Price et al., “Viking Warrior Women?,” 187; Ibid., 189.

²² Anna Kjellström, “People in Transition: Life in the Mälaren Valley from an Osteological Perspective,” *Shetland Amenity Trust*, Lerwick, (2016), 197.

²³ Ibid., 198.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Kjellström, “People in Transition: Life in the Mälaren Valley from an Osteological Perspective,” (2016), 198.

woman. Whether these are not the correct bones for this grave or whether it opens up reinterpretations of weapon graves in Birka, it is too early to say."²⁶ She acknowledges that there is no absolute certainty, but her findings begged for further reevaluation of Stolpe's original conclusions.

A Female Warrior Confirmed

Kjellström's identification was the stepping stone that led to the discovery that would truly bring this burial to fame: the DNA sequencing that would confirm the individual had been female. The original paper presenting the results of this genetic testing was published by Hedenstierna-Jonson et al., with Kjellström as an author, and was titled "A female Viking warrior confirmed by genomics."²⁷ In addition to the genetic results, the authors explain that the grave goods indicate that the individual was a high-status warrior and has been considered to be such by archaeologists and historians over time.²⁸ They clarify that the purpose of their study is not to evaluate the hypothesis that the individual was a warrior, which is not something that can be determined through genetic work.²⁹ The high-status warrior conclusion was something that had been determined by previous historians and archaeologists that they were accepting.³⁰ They also explain that previous historical records have indicated that a high-ranking Viking officer was associated with being male.³¹ But the combination of the osteological analysis and the genetic evidence is, they argue, more than enough to call this previously accepted notion into question.³²

²⁶ Ibid., 198.

²⁷ Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson et al., "A Female Viking Warrior Confirmed by Genomics," (2017).

²⁸ Ibid., 855.

²⁹ Ibid., 855.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 855.

³² Ibid., 857-858.

In an interview with the paper's first author, Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson explains that the paper was rejected by two different journals before getting published, but when it did it caused an unprecedented reaction from both academics and the public.³³ While much of the general public was eager to hear about this amazonian-esque, Viking-age-empowered woman, many of the articles that made headline news were simplified "clickbait" the writers of which, Hedenstierna-Jonson jabs, "have not read the paper, they have only read the title."³⁴ While the public was enthusiastic, the response of their academic audience was not entirely supportive. The scholarly reactions that gained the most attention was critical, coming from a small number of loud voices. The responses and debates that exploded out of this research being made public are complex and multifaceted. Both sides of the debate make valid arguments, however, there is one underlying fact that cannot be denied: nothing about the identification of this grave was ever questioned until the individual was shown to not be male. Hedenstierna-Jonson argues that this indicates that there is an underlying bias at play in our understanding and interpretation of Viking history.³⁵

Facing Judgement

One of the biggest academic critics of the paper is historian Judith Jesch. Jesch is a central figure in Viking historiography having published the 1991 book *Women in the Viking Age*, lauded as one of the first books to put together every piece of evidence on women in Viking society.³⁶ Much of Jesch's work focuses on the analysis of primary Viking literature rather than

³³ Andrew Pfrenger, "'Female Viking Warrior' Interview with Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson," 54:30.

³⁴ Ibid., 55:30.

³⁵ Andrew Pfrenger, "'Female Viking Warrior' Interview with Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson," 56:00.

³⁶ Jenny Jochens, review of *Women in the Viking Age*, by Judith Jesch, *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 92, no. 4 (1993): 957.

on the archaeological or osteological side of the historiography. In 2017 when Hedenstierna-Jonson et al. published their findings, claiming to have discovered a female Viking warrior, it is not surprising that Judith Jesch took interest. Jesch herself had even been cited in the 2017 paper for her 1991 book in their description of how historically the male sex has been associated with Viking warriors in scholarship.³⁷ In 2017 Jesch published a blog post that gained some attention, including from the authors she was criticizing. The blog post, titled “Let’s Debate Female Viking Warriors Again,” is not an academically published review but in it, Jesch gives a thorough, at times hairsplitting, criticism of the paper.

Jesch begins the post by laying out the source of her irritation with Hedenstierna-Jonson et al., identifying it from the outset as an example of what she perceives to be a larger problem in academic publishing of “sloppy” work that is more focused on “grabbing attention in order to facilitate further findings and/or claim ‘impact’” than on practicing good scholarship.³⁸ To Jesch’s mind, the paper is the product of the author’s desire to gain notoriety and funding, more than it is an effort to provide proper evidence and analysis to support a theory.³⁹ Jesch also indicates that there is another problem in the Viking discourse with people being overly interested in the concept of a female warrior, and she implies, therefore more likely to jump to conclusions from the evidence.⁴⁰ She argues that both academic and public discourse on female Viking warriors is too rooted in people’s 20th and 21st-century desires.⁴¹ She does not define these “desires” but I take that to mean modern popular interest in women being in positions of power or practicing

³⁷ Judith Jesch, “Norse and Viking Ramblings: Let’s Debate Female Viking Warriors Yet Again,” *Norse and Viking Ramblings* (blog), (September 9, 2017), <http://norseandviking.blogspot.com/2017/09/lets-debate-female-viking-warriors-yet.html>.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

violence as a reaction to the 21st (and 20th) century gendered expectation that women are subordinative and pacifist in our society.

Jesch is not alone in this understanding that modern feelings play a role in the popularity of the Viking warrior woman discourse. In a podcast interview with Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson –the very author whom Jesch criticized for having and not checking these biases– when asked why she thought people in popular culture are so fascinated by the idea of the female warrior, Hedenstierna-Jonson explained: "In a modern society and especially in a feminist view you would like the woman to be empowered and considered to be as strong as the men, that's easy to understand, but that's a popular culture view rather than a scientific view."⁴² She acknowledges the fact that the public has this desire for a Viking warrior to be real. However, she explains that this is an unscientific perspective, and therefore most likely not one that she would (intentionally) use in her scientific research.⁴³

A Critic's Prejudice

Essentially the thesis of Jesch's blog post is that the desires and preconceptions of the researchers themselves led them to neglect the use of proper methods to analyze and thoroughly evaluate every piece of evidence before publishing. Ironically however what Jesch fails to discuss or evaluate herself are her preconceived ideas of these scholars and her own bias that has influenced her judgment of this publication. A bias that led her to jump to conclusions about these authors and influenced the language she chose to use, creating a piece of work that cannot be considered to be impartial analysis.

⁴² Andrew Pfrenger, "'Female Viking Warrior' Interview with Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson."

⁴³ Ibid.

The evidence Jesch presents in her case against Hedenstierna-Jonson et al. primarily seems to boil down to a difference in their methods of scholarship, specifically their research and publication process. Her first and possibly biggest criticism is that the authors of the paper are all archaeologists or osteologists, in other words, scientists rather than historians. Jesch expresses her frustration that they do not have any author who is an expert on Viking language or texts (like herself) and yet they do cite this evidence type as it has been described in other publications.⁴⁴ To Jesch, this lack of proper analysis gives the “impression” that Hedenstierna-Jonson et al. “consider that no special expertise is required to handle this kind of evidence unlike bones, or DNA, or archaeological finds.”⁴⁵ She is heavily critical overall in what she perceives as a lack of proper analysis of historical or non-scientific relevant evidence and analysis.⁴⁶ However ultimately this is a scientific paper which is addressing one central question, and that is the question of genetics. The authors provide brief contextual evidence for their main question, as is typical of scientific papers, and this is the historical evidence that Jesch describes. Although the paper's hypothesis is scientific, the context for their genetic testing is historical and so therefore it is fitting to include enough evidence to explain the background and history of Bj.581, but not necessary to go beyond their research by evaluating the non-scientific evidence.

Jesch expresses, rather bitterly, contempt for a general trend (that she groups Hedenstierna-Jonson et al. into) of scientific research and evidence holding a higher magnitude in scholarship than non-scientific evidence.⁴⁷ “Topics that have been of concern to the humanities for decades if not centuries,” Jesch fires, “are suddenly somehow 'confirmed' by those gods, the scientists, without giving sufficient consideration of the 'non-scientific' evidence which

⁴⁴ Judith Jesch, “Norse and Viking Ramblings: Let’s Debate Female Viking Warriors Yet Again,” (2017).

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

inevitably raised the questions in the first place.”⁴⁸ While Jesch raises arguments that are not entirely baseless, certainly it seems plausible that she has experience with this pattern of a lack of appreciation for her field, it is undeniable that her judgment on this particular paper is strongly influenced by her preconceptions. She is concluding things that she cannot prove and does not have evidence to support.⁴⁹

The other critic of Hedenstierna-Jonson et al. was a peer of the authors, archaeologist Fedir Androshchuk.⁵⁰ Androshchuk’s criticism was published in 2018, following Jesch’s article, and is titled “Female Viking Revisited.”⁵¹ For the most part, Androshchuk’s arguments mirror Jesch’s and although his stated intentions of the paper are to evaluate the archaeological evidence presented in the 2017 paper, like Jesch, he works in some of his own non-archaeological opinions as well. Additionally, he sides with Jesch in her belief and frustration that these authors were seeking notoriety and lost sight of their actual research.⁵² He accuses Hedenstierna-Jonson et al. of “sensationalizing,” saying that their work should serve as a “reminder” of what to avoid doing in publishing.⁵³ Suggesting that the authors overstated their findings in order to gain notoriety is a huge assumption that both Androshchuk and Jesch make. Neither critic has any reason to support that the authors were seeking such attention by publishing. In fact, evidence from the authors themselves suggests the opposite. Of course, these were important findings but Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson explained that the attention they received was not expected and when trying to publish, they were told by the first two journals they submitted to that the paper

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Fedir Androshchuk, “Female Viking Revisited,” *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 14 (2018): 47.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., 48.

⁵³ Ibid., 48.

was "not interesting to their readers."⁵⁴ Both Jesch and Androschuk jumped to conclusions that were based on their preconceptions of what the authors were doing, without having any actual evidence.

Reassessing Birka and Responding to Criticism

The authors of the paper would later respond to these criticisms defending what they did and specifically responding to accusations made by Jesch and Androschuk. In 2019 the authors of the original article by Hedenstierna-Jonson et al. published a paper titled "Viking Warrior Women? Reassessing Birka chamber grave Bj. 581," published under the authors Neil Price et al.⁵⁵ The stated purpose of this paper was to go into "greater interpretive depth" on the identity of Bj. 581, bringing together and evaluating all pieces of evidence. This was a direct reaction to what Price et al. describe as the "unprecedented public debate" that resulted from the 2017 article.⁵⁶ Much of the paper's analysis is a clear response to the criticism made by Jesch regarding their lack of proper evaluation of historical evidence. The article includes a separate section of supplementary materials that provide additional details and background for their evidence, and in this section, they directly acknowledge the criticism.⁵⁷ In the supplementary materials, Price et al. explain that after the 2017 publication "a number of highly critical pieces" were written "leading to a new upsurge of more skeptical commentary," and here they cite Jesch's 2017 blog post and Androschuk's 2018 paper.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Andrew Pfrenger, "'Female Viking Warrior' Interview with Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson," 54:30.

⁵⁵ Price et al.

⁵⁶ Price et al., "Viking Warrior Women? Reassessing Birka Chamber Grave Bj.581," (2019): 181.

⁵⁷ Price et al., "Supplementary Material," (2019): 6.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 6.

One of the biggest criticisms that Price et al. address both in the paper and in its supplementary materials is their identification of Bj. 581 as a warrior. This was an issue for both critics. In Jesch's blog post, she was disparaging of what she took to be a hap-hazard assignment of the individual as a "high-status warrior."⁵⁹ According to Jesch, the authors provided "very little discussion or justification" that this was a high-ranking warrior.⁶⁰ Androshchuk agrees with Jesch that the authors did not make proper use of their "archaeological and written sources" to support the warrior's conclusion.⁶¹ Price et al. respond to this by reiterating what had already been stated in their original work: since the grave was first excavated in the 19th century, this burial has been understood to be a high-status warrior, which they explain is "justified by the context and contents of the grave."⁶² Even after its original discovery, they explain how it was "consistently interpreted as a high-status warrior," so much so that the grave came to be "upheld as an archetype," the "ultimate Viking."⁶³ To back this statement, they cite 13 authors, ranging from 1967 to 2016, who previously had also identified the grave in this way.⁶⁴ Additionally, in the supplementary materials, Price et al. analyze every grave good to evaluate what each item says about the individual and how each logically points to the high-status warrior conclusion.⁶⁵

In her blog, Jesch highlighted that the original analysis they provided was lacking and the authors "move rather quickly from evidence to speculation which is presented as fact."⁶⁶ There is little support for this in the paper and it is worth noting that this is another example of Jesch

⁵⁹ Judith Jesch, "Norse and Viking Ramblings: Let's Debate Female Viking Warriors Yet Again," (2017).

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Androshchuk, "Female Viking Revisited," (2018): 51.

⁶² Price et al., "Supplementary Material," (2019): 5.

⁶³ Price et al., "Viking Warrior Women?," 187.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 187.

⁶⁵ Price et al., "Supplementary Material," 1-4.

⁶⁶ Judith Jesch, "Norse and Viking Ramblings: Let's Debate Female Viking Warriors Yet Again," (2017).

demonstrating the irony of her own bias. When Previously in her article she criticized Hedenstierna-Jonson et al. for their analysis of Viking literature without consultation of a specialist, here a few paragraphs later, Jesch– who self-describes her expertise as being in Old Norse-Icelandic texts (not archaeology)– is now giving her own analysis and critique of the archaeological evaluations of actual archaeologists.⁶⁷ This hypocrisy can likely be traced to the contempt Jesch holds, as previously described, for the role archaeologists play in history.⁶⁸

Changing the hypothesis: "It's a woman, not a man"

The Price et al. article and supplementary materials provide evidence from throughout the Viking historiography to demonstrate why they did not question the warrior status of the Bj. 581 individuals in their original paper (Hedenstierna-Jonson et al. 2017), but they also put forward the fact that the warrior status had never before been interrogated until they published that the individual had been genetically female.⁶⁹ They explain that, like many before them, they maintained the understanding that this was a high-status Viking warrior.⁷⁰ The goal of their work was not to evaluate this assumption, or in scientific terminology, this was never the hypothesis they were testing.⁷¹ The “only modification” they were making to this hypothesis was that, based on the genetic proof of sex, the warrior was female.⁷² By simplifying this fact they show that any reaction that followed their publication, both positive and negative, was only made because the individual was a female. If it had been a male, which for all intents and purposes it had been for two centuries, there would have been no reaction at all and nothing would have been questioned.

⁶⁷ Ibid.; “Staff Listing - The University of Nottingham,” accessed April 25, 2024, <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/english/people/judith.jesch>.

⁶⁸ Judith Jesch, “Norse and Viking Ramblings.”

⁶⁹ Price et al., “Supplementary Material,” (2019): 6.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 5.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

In an interview with *Science* from 2017, when asked about those questioning the warrior identity of the Bj. 581, Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson reiterated this sentiment:

“... this has been known as a warrior grave since the 1880s and nobody has questioned it before. Nobody had made that comment before they knew the bones were from a woman. The archaeology has not changed. The only thing that has changed is our knowledge that it's a woman and not a man.”⁷³

In another interview from the same year, when asked to respond to Jesch's criticism, Hedenstierna-Jonson again clarified that they hadn't "changed anything in the archaeology," she repeats, "We have just found out that this is actually a woman, and it's been a woman, it's never been a man. From the day she was put into the soil or the earth, she's been a woman, we just didn't know.”⁷⁴ If the only change these authors made to the historiography of Bj. 581 was that it was a female, then why, one might ask, did the scholars' reactions turn so quickly to questioning the warrior identity, when it had never been questioned before? A very clear answer seems to emerge, one that Price et al. provide. In the supplementary materials for the 2019 paper, the authors make the crucial assertion that "the underlying theme" of the backlash they were facing "seemed to be that a female warrior was somehow a contradiction in terms, and therefore reasons must be found why our analysis was incorrect...”⁷⁵

Both Jesch and Androschuk provided feedback on Hedenstierna et al. 2017 that had some reasoning but ultimately they were suffering from their own preconceptions and the underlying bias in the scholarship. Both papers argue that the authors could have made more pointed and detailed references to and analysis of the archaeological sources that they were using in defense

⁷³ "Once This Viking Warrior Was Revealed to Be a Woman, Some Began to Question Her Battle Bona Fides," *Science*, (2017), <https://www.science.org/content/article/once-viking-warrior-was-revealed-be-woman-some-began-question-her-battle-bona-fides>.

⁷⁴ Andrew Pfrenger, "‘Female Viking Warrior’ Interview with Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson," 56:00.

⁷⁵ Price et al., "Supplementary Material," (2019): 6.

of the high-status warrior identity.⁷⁶ However, Hedenstierna et al. have stated that they never intended, or rather never thought they needed to defend the warrior identity. And yet, in the 2019 paper, they did take in this feedback and publish this missing piece. Other complaints by Jesch and Androshchuk seem far less reasonable and seem more like the bitter mutterings of scholars vying to get published in a competitive field. Such as both scholars comment that Hedenstierna-Jonson et al. were "sensationalizing" and published hastily, prioritizing their article being attention-grabbing in order to "facilitate funding" and "claim impact."⁷⁷ Both these scholars seem to have a predisposition toward the 2017 authors. In Jesch's case, as discussed previously, she seems to have a bias against the involvement of archaeologists or natural scientists in her field, believing them to think that their research and evidence types are more significant than her own.⁷⁸ There is no evidence whatsoever that Hedenstrierna-Jonson et al. have a lack of respect for the literary/linguistic historical work of scholars like Jesch.

For all of the criticism, there is an underlying factor that is difficult to deny even if it was present unintentionally and that is the gender bias that is distilled within the Viking historiography. Scholars might be highly meticulous in their research, they may be respected and seen as at the top of their field, but they are still human beings. The nature of being human is to have predispositions. But when it comes to research, scholarship, and history, we can see time and time again that when these predispositions are left unchecked, problems arise. These predispositions might be an explicit prejudice. This can be seen in the way Jesch openly admonished Hedenstierna-Jonson et al., assuming that their discovery was another case of

⁷⁶ Judith Jesch, "Norse and Viking Ramblings: Let's Debate Female Viking Warriors Yet Again," (2017); Androshchuk, "Female Viking Revisited," (2018): 51.

⁷⁷ Androshchuk, "Female Viking Revisited, 48; Judith Jesch, "Norse and Viking Ramblings: Let's Debate Female Viking Warriors Yet Again."

⁷⁸ Judith Jesch, "Norse and Viking Ramblings: Let's Debate Female Viking Warriors Yet Again."

scientific evidence being unfairly esteemed over historical evidence.⁷⁹ But these problematic predispositions can also sometimes lay out of sight, below the surface, built into the foundations of our social and academic systems. The gender bias that is ingrained into the Viking historiography illustrates this problem perfectly. It is entirely possible, even likely that Judith Jesch and Fedir Androshchuk had no awareness that they were applying a modern societal bias of gender roles when they were criticizing Hedenstierna-Jonson et al. This is not at all to say that they were personally prejudiced against women being fighters or holding power in general, just because they disagreed with the assessment made by their colleagues in the field. But rather, by questioning the warrior identity of Bj.581 only in light of the genomic result of its sex, when this identity had never before been questioned when the bones were considered male, these scholars are both feeding into and building off of the established social expectations of gender roles that are ingrained into the historiography.⁸⁰

Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson recognized this problem as soon as the paper was published and people began to react. When interviewed about her work, she stressed the importance in Viking archaeology of examining multiple perspectives.⁸¹ In explaining this she also articulated what she found to be a central problem in the research and the historiography; In Viking society, she explains, "there were typically female roles and typically male roles," but the way those roles tend to be considered is through a "modern interpretation," which is inherently flawed because we cannot equate modern gender norms to the gender roles of Viking age people.⁸² She goes on to explain that this can lead to errors in the historical record because "[scholars] tend to interpret

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Price et al., "Supplementary Material," (2019): 5; Hed jon pod (56:00); Hed-jon science interview

⁸¹ Andrew Pfrenger, "'Female Viking Warrior' Interview with Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson," 11:58.

⁸² Ibid.

archaeological contexts differently when we think they had to do with the female part of society..."⁸³ Often too much stress is placed on the context of gender, which is not reflective of how gender roles were understood in Viking society. As Hedenstierna-Jonson says, "Women are Viking age people as much as men are" and they must be interpreted in an intersectional way, otherwise their identity gets lost in the modern assumptions of researchers.⁸⁴ What the reaction to the 2017 paper reveals is that Viking scholars struggle to accept and apply this principle. The practice of relying heavily on assumptions that are rooted in 20th and 21st-century gender structures is in the fabric of Viking scholarship. When Anna Kjellsröm presented the results of her osteological analysis of Bj. 581 to her colleagues, roughly two years before the genetic results had been published, the shout heard from the back of the room was "But that can't be!"⁸⁵ It was such an impossible notion that this individual could be a female, they were so set in the normative methodology that this archaeologist could not contain their disbelief.

Gender in the Historiography

To fully unpack the systemic gender bias within this field of history, first what is known and accepted in the Viking historiography and the archaeological record about gender must be understood. It is widely known and accepted that the gender roles in Viking society primarily worked along the binary of male and female.⁸⁶ In her 1991 book, *Women in the Viking Age*, Judith Jesch explains that in rural areas, women's day-to-day lives were spent in the living quarters, working to provide food and clothing for their families.⁸⁷ Runic inscriptions,

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ *Secrets of the Dead Viking Warrior Queen*, 2020, 17:12, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UoQlwMT4XWo>.

⁸⁶ Judith Jesch, *The Viking Diaspora* (London; Routledge, 2015), 87.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 41.

particularly on memorials of Viking-age women provide evidence of this role.⁸⁸ One example of this Jesch describes is a runic inscription on a commemorative stone made by a widower for his dead wife.⁸⁹ The translation reads: "A better housewife will never come to Hassmyra to run the farm. Red Belli carved these runes. She was a good sister to Sigmund."⁹⁰ It is clear that, in the words of Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson, "Viking age society was not an equal society."⁹¹ Society was divided on gender lines and it was almost certainly patriarchal.⁹² But, as Hedenstierna-Jonson points out, like modern society, Viking society was not black and white.⁹³ Even Jesch, who was so unaccepting of the notion of a Viking warrior who was a female, acknowledges that gender-specific evidence pieces, weapons in a burial, can "occasionally be associated with the opposite gender" and the system of presupposition of gender does not have absolute accuracy.⁹⁴ It should also be noted that despite what her later writing would imply, Jesch's early work demonstrated that she was a proponent of the complex and multifaceted involvement of women in Viking age society.⁹⁵ In her 1991 book, she provides evidence of women's involvement in the home in rural areas but she also analyzes evidence that shows that in more urban centers, women took part in trade and were "a normal proportion of the population" playing and fully took part in these societies.⁹⁶

⁸⁸ Ibid., 64.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 65.

⁹¹ "Once This Viking Warrior Was Revealed to Be a Woman, Some Began to Question Her Battle Bona Fides," *Science*, (2017).

⁹² Ibid.; Eirnin Jefford Franks, "Gender in the Viking World," in *The Norse Sorceress*, ed. Leszek Gardela, Sophie Bønding, and Peter Pentz,, (Oxbow Books, 2023),31, <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.5699282.8>.

⁹³ "Once This Viking Warrior Was Revealed to Be a Woman, Some Began to Question Her Battle Bona Fides," *Science*, (2017).

⁹⁴ Judith Jesch, *The Viking Diaspora*, (2015), 89.

⁹⁵ Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge, Suffolk; Boydell Press, 1991): 39.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

In the traditional Viking historiography, the focus of research and writing has been on males.⁹⁷ Archaeologist Marianne Moen identifies that in the general field of archaeology, there was not an awareness of a gender bias until the 1960s and 1970s.⁹⁸ She explains that as a result, a pervasive assumption still exists within the field that women are “less visible” in the historical and archaeological record and therefore cannot be studied as thoroughly.⁹⁹ When in reality, she explains, these women were not “invisible,” they were merely shrouded by the biases of the “archaeologists themselves” who fostered a system that favored the histories of men.¹⁰⁰ This trend that Moen describes certainly seems to be true in Viking archaeology as well. The “tradition” of Viking archaeology is centered on the perception of a society led by men.¹⁰¹ Every aspect of male Viking life was being meticulously probed while females were left “hidden.”¹⁰² Viking history at this time was male seafarers, explorers, and robbers.¹⁰³ In popular representations to this day, the Vikings are presented as the epitome of modern masculinity; muscular men with bushy beards, wielding axes and swords.¹⁰⁴ It was not until the 20th century that Viking society was looked at through a lens broad enough to include the roles and lives of women.¹⁰⁵ Judith Jesch’s 1991 book as well as the 1996 book by historian Jenny Jochens “Women in Old Norse Society” are credited as seminal works that, for the first time in the

⁹⁷ Judith Jesch, *The Viking Diaspora*, 87.

⁹⁸ Marianne Moen, "Challenging Gender: A Reconsideration of Gender in the Viking Age Using the Mortuary Landscape" (University of Oslo: Department of Archaeology, Conservation and History, 2019), 22.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁰¹ Leszek Gardela, *The Norse Sorceress: Mind and Materiality in the Viking World* (Oxbow Books, 2023): 273, <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.5699282>.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ Judith Jesch, *The Viking Diaspora*, 87.

¹⁰⁴ Leszek Gardela, *The Norse Sorceress: Mind and Materiality in the Viking World* (2023): 273.

¹⁰⁵ Judith Jesch, *The Viking Diaspora*, 87.

historiography, were devoted to piecing together materials and evidence from the lives of Viking age women.¹⁰⁶

Since the end of the 20th century, as Viking age scholars have begun to look at the lives of Vikings through an intersectional lens, different pieces of evidence have been uncovered and shed light on both the system of gender and the lives of women in the Viking age. For instance, archaeological evidence verifies that Men and Women dressed differently, as remaining textiles from the period demonstrate.¹⁰⁷ Additionally, names are highly gendered and when used in texts and inscriptions, reliable for identifying if an individual was a man or a woman.¹⁰⁸ One of the most critical pieces of evidence utilized in identifying gender in archaeology are grave goods.

Since the earliest days of Viking age archaeology, grave goods or burial objects have been used as a primary method of identifying and contextualizing the person that was buried there. Even today with modern methods of osteology and genetic analysis, interpretation of the items a person was buried with is still a critical piece of the archaeological evidence for who an individual was and what life was like in Viking age society.¹⁰⁹ Over time, as many graves have been unearthed, formulaic methods have been established for identification, allowing researchers to know or uncover quickly the age, status, regionality, and gender of the individual they are examining.¹¹⁰ It is critical to examine the tradition of these methods to understand how they are used by archaeologists and perhaps to reveal where they are relied upon too heavily, resulting in inaccurate interpretations or pieces of evidence being obscured. The methodology that has been traditionally used to identify the gender of a Viking-age individual using burial objects is very

¹⁰⁶ Leszek Gardela, “*The Norse Sorceress: Mind and Materiality in the Viking World*”: 274.

¹⁰⁷ Judith Jesch, *The Viking Diaspora*, 89.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Edward James, “Burial and Status in the Early Medieval West,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 39 (1989): 27, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3678976>.

¹¹⁰ James, *Burial Status* (27, 39)

clear-cut and leaves little room for more than two-dimensional identification.¹¹¹ In *Women in the Viking Age*, Jesch provides a thorough outline of these methods.¹¹²

For her description of the classification for gender and sex assignment, Jesch refers to a 1984 Danish study (Sellekvold et al.) that examined Viking age burials in Denmark.¹¹³ This study compared the osteologically identified sex of individuals to the assignment of gender identity based on burial goods.¹¹⁴ From this, they create a list of what grave goods were designated female and male, which Jesch compiles and simplifies.¹¹⁵ Jesch prefaces that historically, it has been standard to use burial objects to identify the sex, (based on the gender identity), particularly in the absence of adequate skeletal remains that can be used to biologically sex an individual.¹¹⁶ The system that is accepted as the basis for the gender assumption of these individuals places different types of objects into one of two either the category of women or men:

"Men: weapons (sword, spear), axes, spurs, riding equipment stirrups, bits), blacksmith's tools (shears, hammer, tongs file), penannular brooches.

Women: (pairs of) oval brooches, disc brooches, trefoil buckles, arm rings, necklaces, caskets, spindle whorls."¹¹⁷

The pattern that is evident in this system of classification is that males can be identified by the grave goods that relate to the activities that have been defined as being 'for men' of the period by historians, such as combat and metallurgy, and females identified by those that are 'for women.' It is generally agreed in the historiography of Vikings that these are the most likely social gender structures, and as Jesch explains, the Danish study found a strong correlation between these

¹¹¹ Judith Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age* (1991), 13.

¹¹² Ibid., 13-14.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 14.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 13.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 14.

gendered objects and the skeletal sex analysis. Yet, it is critical to note that even from just this brief list of items, the "women's" versus "men's" categorization of objects distinctly complements gender structures of 20th and 21st-century society. The 'male' objects are hypermasculine, and associated with war, strength, and violence. The 'female' objects are overtly feminine, demonstrative of beauty, frivolity, and household labor. It must therefore be asked to what extent modern gender understandings play a role in scholarly analysis of a society entirely different from our own. It is the job of archaeologists and historians to interpret evidence and draw conclusions about the past, but frequently modern social norms are, regardless of a scholar's intentions, extrapolated to people of the past. Looking back at Birka, the Bj. 581 discovery was a break in the historiography of Viking gender roles, and the reaction it elicited demonstrates the implicit desire by archaeologists and historians to maintain the status quo. As an examination of the historiography indicates, this rigidity is a symptom of a deeper, systemic issue of modern gender bias in Viking age archaeology and research.

The Gender Bias

Gender, it must be established, is not and has never been innate.¹¹⁸ It is a construct of society and therefore is not universal across time and space.¹¹⁹ Historian Eirnin Jefford Franks, whose work centers around gender in the Viking age, elucidates this concept in the light of Viking archaeology.¹²⁰ She presents that "gender is culturally specific" and therefore every culture has notions of gender and has entirely different methods of presenting gender.¹²¹ Franks explains that, because of its cultural specificity, "We cannot apply our modern understandings of

¹¹⁸ Eirnin Jefford Franks, "Gender in the Viking World," in *The Norse Sorceress*, ed. Leszek Gardela, Sophie Bønding, and Peter Pentz, (2023): 31.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

gender to the past, as our genders are very different to the genders of the Viking Age.”¹²² What Franks' writing demonstrates is that we cannot rely on modern assumptions of gender roles in interpretations of Viking society, even if there are apparent similarities to our own. And yet, as Marianne Moen explains, our knowledge of the past, by nature, is constructed by people who were not from the time that history was occurring, and therefore that knowledge is inevitably subject to the context of the present.¹²³ She argues that specifically when it comes to “questions of gender” in history, historians are “influenced by the agendas, implicit or otherwise, of those who seek to untangle past societies.”¹²⁴ Moen contends that the way knowledge of the past is created is an interpretation and so it is inherently subjective.¹²⁵ The problem with this that she identifies is that frequently history and archaeology are presented as objective, she calls this the “illusion of objectivity”.¹²⁶ This “illusion” if not broken, can lead to unchecked biases in the research and historiography.¹²⁷ Looking at problems that arise from modern biases playing a role in gender identification of the past, something that must also be evaluated is the reliability of concluding sex based on socially constructed notions of gender.

When considering the gender classification system for Viking burial objects that Jesch identifies, and more generally how scholars identify sex, a feature of biology, of Viking age individuals, it is necessary to consider to what extent the sex of an individual can be determined by socio-cultural materials, such as grave goods. Judith Butler, foundational scholar of gender and queer theory, asserts that gender is constructed; it is "a kind of doing," a kind of "incessant

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Marianne Moen, "Challenging Gender: A Reconsideration of Gender in the Viking Age Using the Mortuary Landscape" (2019): 9.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 10.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

activity performed, in part, without one's knowing and without ones willing."¹²⁸ She posits that it is subject to society around us and therefore “one does not ‘do’ one’s gender alone.”¹²⁹ Eirnin Jefford Franks elaborates on Butler's theory to explain that sex is identified by "the physical" whereas gender is a "social construct" that refers to "an individual's social identity."¹³⁰ The construct of gender is created and informed by the context of society.¹³¹ Gender is determined by time and space not simply by sex, therefore one does not equate the other.¹³² In her paper unpacking gender archaeology, Marianne Moen holds that the “naturalization of gender roles,” viewing sex as the determination of gender identity, is a problematic practice and yet it is ingrained into our society.¹³³ She presents that evidence for this biological argument is inherently biased and has no validity.¹³⁴ Within archaeology, binary gender roles and gendered divisions of labor are the default when analyzing societies of the past but Moen argues, referring in particular to hunting and child care, that frequently there is little evidence in the archaeological record to support this strict gendered system.¹³⁵ In the Viking historiography, scholars rely too heavily on gender identification based on this assumption of gender roles being “naturalized” that Moen describes.¹³⁶ This assumption works in hand with the application of modern gender roles forming a robust bias embedded not only in the archaeologists, researchers, and historians themselves but also in the system that they have created.

¹²⁸ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004): 1.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Eirnin Jefford Franks, “Gender in the Viking World,” in *The Norse Sorceress*, ed. Leszek Gardela, Sophie Bønding, and Peter Pentz, (2023): 31.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Marianne Moen, "Challenging Gender: A Reconsideration of Gender in the Viking Age Using the Mortuary Landscape" (2019): 32.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

The case of Bj.581; its initial uncovering and interpretation, the genetic discovery by Hedenstierna-Jonson et al., and the reception of those findings is a fascinating story and debate that captured the world. Yet this discovery is only one example, a single page in the Viking historiography. The biases and assumptions shown by scholars in the case of Bj. 581 are symptoms of much larger underlying structures of bias that exist within the Viking historiography and in the history of archaeology. There is a clear conflict, as Judith Jesch demonstrates, that arises when scholars and scholars of history and of natural science intersect. The lack of mutual understanding of the other's field and the prejudice developed by some scholars in response was certainly an influential factor hiding below the surface of the Bj 581 controversy. Possibly even more fundamentally engrained within the historiography is the problem of gender biases and assumptions of gender roles and identities that plague the Birka case. When asked about the reaction to the publishing of "A Female Viking Warrior Confirmed by Genomics," Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson paused before reflecting: "What amazes me is that to some people it's so important that this is not a woman that they can explain it in almost any way."¹³⁷ She observed that "they seem desperate to make it, not a woman."¹³⁸ What Hedenstierna-Jonson was noticing, was a tendency to reject the notion that a female could have been a warrior, over all other evidence. She was seeing the implicit bias of the scholars and within the systematic in history and archaeology. This bias, when remained unchecked in the scholarship led to presumptions being made about Viking gender roles and identities that are made under the guise of objective evidence.

¹³⁷ Andrew Pfrenger, "'Female Viking Warrior' Interview with Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson," *Saga Thing*, accessed March 19, 2024, 56:00.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 57:51.

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