

Quinn Millegan

L. Keldorf

Western Civilization: History 101

13 November 2015

Topic: *Women in Viking Society*

EQ: *What was the role and place of women in Viking Age society, circa 700-1100 CE?*

Women of the Viking Age

Freydis came out and saw them retreating. She shouted to them, ‘ Why are you running away from these puny fellows, fine men as you are! It looks to me as if you should be able to cut them down like cattle* If I had weapons, I think I could fight better than any of you! ‘ They paid no attention to what she was saying. She tried to follow, but had trouble keeping up with them, for she was with child. She went after them into the woods, and the savages started towards her. In front of her lay a dead man, Thorbrand, Snorri's son, whose head had been crushed by a flat rock. Beside him lay his sword, and she picked it up to defend herself. When the savages approached, she pulled out her breasts from under her dress and slapped them with the naked sword. At this the savages were so appalled that they ran down to their boats and rowed away. – Saga of Erik The Red (Haugen)

With the arguable and disputed exception of the Norse shield maiden, as seen above in the lore and also in the form of Valkyries in the mythology of the Northmen, there was never such a thing as a female Viking, *strictly speaking*. However, women did contribute quite heavily in the settlement and exploration of the Vikings in addition to their largely domestic roles. Even

though men had the upper hand, women influenced the Viking expansion by maintaining a relatively large amount of power through their involvement in settlement, maintaining land and property, and religious rites and the subsequent impact they had on Norse culture.

It should be noted that, to the typical person reading this paper, there exists a few foreign, misleading, or confusing terminologies and words. For instance, the terms ‘Norse’ and ‘Viking,’ in the context of the Viking or Norse society, are used interchangeably. ‘Norse’ refers to ancient inhabitants of Scandinavia, as opposed to ‘Nordic,’ which refers to the modern inhabitants of Scandinavia. The term, ‘Viking,’ in the context of Viking Age or society refers to the period of Norse expansion through pillage and plunder, circa 700-1100 CE. A ‘Viking’ may also refer to the Norse warriors fighting for various factions, notably rarely united, during the Viking Age. In addition, the use of the largely archaic symbol, ð, or eth, is used. This is usually pronounced as ‘th’ as in ‘then’ or ‘this.’

The Norse ‘saga’ is a word for a group of epic writing, pertaining to mostly ancient, pre-Christian Scandinavia. These works of ancient Norse culture arose in Medieval times out of Iceland after having been mostly Christianized (“Norse”). These sagas compile heroic tales with an episodic cohesion and are often very seemingly absurd in the modern perspective. The stories pertaining to acts of heroism display feuds of honor taken to every level (Stevens, Wolf, and Denzin). For example, to take *The Saga of The Volsungs* into perspective, at one point, Sinfjolti – son of the last two Volsungs (siblings who conceived Sinfjolti through trickery) –, basically says, ‘This drink is poison, I can clearly tell,’ and another man responds, ‘no big deal, you can just filter it through your mustache,’ and Sinfjolti says, ‘great idea,’ and then he dies because that was a horrible plan.

Marriage within Norse society is a telling account of the status of women within this society. The place in society they held was the position from which they accomplished any influential actions. According to Else Roesdahl, Professor at Aarhus University in the School of Culture and Society, “marriage was an alliance between equals,” however, within Norse society, mythology aside, women were not treated equally in the sense of marriage. This equality refers to the rules regarding marriage between members of the same social classes. Pagan marriage laws and customs suggest a fundamental connection within their society between marriage and property. This pagan “marriage by purchase” was, in general practice, a transaction between the groom and father of the bride (Jochens 20). Except in the case of one law where, “If several brothers were in charge of a sister's marriage, but could not agree, the advice of the one who concurred with her inclination was to be followed,” the women had virtually no say or involvement in their marriages (Jochens 27).

To effectively understand the influence women had upon Viking society and the Viking age as a whole, one must grasp the central social construct of *Norse paganism*. With this structure, as with most – if not all – religions was a guiding construct of their society with morals, rules, and code. To give a quick synopsis of Norse mythology, essentially, there lies a three-tiered, tricentric realm. The universe was imagined like three consecutive discs floating atop each other, each its own realm. The first was Asgard, home of the gods, goddesses, and the famous home of dead warriors, Valhalla. The middle tier was Midgard, essentially earth, the land of the mortals – humans, dwarves, and frost giants. These two tiers were connected by a fiery rainbow bridge of dreams. The last tier was Niflheim. This could effectively be called the underworld – what a modern lens might attribute to that of Hell. The central citadel was even

named after its half black, half white she-monster, Hel. As with aforementioned ‘sagas,’ much of the mythological stories are seemingly odd. This is partially due to the lack of sufficient sources to piece them together. To put the folklore in perspective, the male character, Loki, can be found, on multiple occasions, turning into a female horse to seduce and give birth to the children of other horses – which didn’t end up being foals. It should also be noted that, among the main gods in the Pantheon is Odin, the allfather and one of the most revered gods in the polytheistic worship. Then there is Freyja, goddess of fertility. She is Odin’s *equal* in Asgard and was also widely worshipped across the Scandinavian realm well into the late first millennium CE (Crossley-Holland; Roesdahl).

The existence of Valkyries should also be mentioned when describing Norse mythology towards understanding women in Viking society. Valkyries are thought to be the inspiration to the shield maiden, a female who chooses to fight alongside Viking brethren, found in many of the sagas. Valkyries were warrior virgins who were servants of the Allfather god, Odin, and were often accounted for in Valhalla – essentially, warrior heaven. Valkyries supposedly chose which warriors lived and died in battle (Dubois 79-80). The shield maiden, however, has a largely disputed existence and may be a romanticism of the Valkyrie characters perpetuated within the Norse sagas and other sources. One mention appears in the Saga of Erik The Red, in the quote beginning the introduction of this paper. This is Leif Erikson's pregnant half sister who decides to take up arms (Haugen). Another mention appears in a record of a successful attack of Byzantine Bulgaria by Sviatoslav I of Kiev in 971 CE revealing that among the fallen Varangians – Norse mercenaries employed by the Byzantine Empire – were, to great surprise, women (Harrison). The only other significant mention was from Danish theologian and historian, Saxo

Grammaticus, in *The Danish History*, which mentions the following:

Now out of the town of Sle, under the captains Hetha (Heid) and Wisna, with Hakon Cut-cheek came Tummi the Sailmaker. On these captains, who had the bodies of women, nature bestowed the souls of men. Webiorg was also inspired with the same spirit, and was attended by Bo (Bui) Bramason and Brat the Jute, thirsting for war (Grammaticus).

Many scholars disregard the proposition of the shield maiden due to sheer lack of evidence. In this sense, however, women were revered in theory, but, although still influential, the picture laid out by the documents left behind paints a different picture of women in Viking society as the counterpart to the warriors abroad.

Having a significant association with Norse paganism, women did hold roles pertaining to rituals and religious rites. Women were often associated with lore and witchcraft. They were said to be related to spiritual manipulation in the malevolent sense of the phrase (DuBois 134). In the *Saga of the Volsungs*, a she-wolf kills all of the shackled Volsung brothers, except for one. Some men are said to “say that this same she-wolf was the mother of King Siggeir, who had turned herself into this likeness by troll's lore and witchcraft” (Morris 89). Many of the same women who were portrayed as witches, allowed themselves to become masters of medicine, much like Anglo-Saxon healers (Morris 99). Norse paganism was host to goðis, essentially priests, while women sometimes held the position of gyðja, essentially priestesses. The gyðja was a rare occurrence and is seldom mentioned, however, women were crucial to religious rites in the household (Dubois 66). Sometimes, women would also become what was known as a Völva. These were shamanic seeresses that performed what was known as seiðer – a form of magic dealing with one’s destiny (“Seider”).

Women were required in order to make long-term settlement possible, as well as the maintenance of pre-existing territory. Places like Iceland were even uninhabited and required women if any settlement were to be made and maintain a population. Settlement of other areas with established populations required Norse women to create a definite cultural identity. In the case of the settlement of Iceland, the few women, who accompanied the settlers took upon them the task of populating Iceland; however, the conditions in Iceland and its frontier required every settler, regardless of sex, to work hard all the time (Jochens 98). Success of the Vikings vast expansion, pillage, and plunder required a stable homeland, so the fighting men required someone to maintain farms, households, and land left behind during raids. This allowed for a great amount of responsibility and trust put upon women to, not only keep lands for their husbands and leaders, but also to make sure their communities kept thriving. (Jesch, Judith “Viking Women”).

Women were respected and held their own in Viking society, status-wise. This respect is evident through the parts of Norse culture women were imprinted upon. Women often had authority of their own as well as a place of respect within their own social strata. Some of the women achieved exceptional status and power. In the 9th century CE, Aud the 'deep-minded' sets the stage for women of this type. Born to a Norwegian from the Hebrides, she married a prominent Dubliner (Dublin was known as Dyflinn to the Vikings) Viking warrior. She took control of her family's affairs and wealth after all male inheritors perished. In Iceland, after awarding land to followers, she became known as an important settler of Iceland. (Jesch, Judith. “Viking Women”; Jesch, Judith. *Women*). As well, given credence to the fact of the nuclear family's importance within Viking society, many monuments, including stones at Jelling in

Denmark (seen below)– raised by King Gorm (Gormr) for his wife, Queen Thyrvé, and by King Haraldr (Harald Bluetooth) for his mother, Queen Thyrvé – were created with reverence towards Norse women (Roesdahl 59).



(Jelling)



(Casiopeia)

The large stone reads: “King Haraldr ordered this monument made in memory of Gormr, his father, and in memory of Thyrvé, his mother; that Haraldr who won for himself all of Denmark and Norway and made the Danes Christian” The small stone reads: “King Gormr made this monument in memory of Thyrvé, his wife, Denmark's adornment” (Rundata).

Even in the afterlife women were treated with the same amount of respect as their male counterparts, being given extravagance if their walk in life was notable (Roesdahl 59; Dubois 72). In typical Norse burial for people of stature, women were often seen with respectable garments, including ornate brooches of material, such as gilt bronze to hold up woolen and linen garments. Notably, the Oseberg Queen is an extravagant example, obviously an important woman and buried in 834 with an ornate ship (pictured below) and large numbers of elaborate goods (Jesch, Judith. “Viking Women”; Colm).

*(Dalbéra)**(Karamell)*

This burial was found in the typical mound-style Norse grave just as any other prominent member of society would have been buried (Colm).

Without women, quite obviously, the Scandinavian culture would have died out with one generation, as it takes two to tango – in the sense of reproduction, settlement, and collaboratively establishing a society. This research of the impact and influence of women in Viking age society informs people today of the culture of the ancient Norse peoples, which was spread to and imposed upon raided nations, and which thrived during the Viking era. The consequences of the role women played in Norse society present themselves in norms such as the gender gap seen in modern Scandinavia, as well as culturally northern European immigrants around the world. Anglicised nations remain in the shadow of values, like Victorian-era restrictions on women's bodies and modesty, while, even today, the relatively progressive views towards women are seen throughout Scandinavian countries. According to the World Economic Forum (abbreviated WEF), Iceland, Finland, Norway, and Sweden are the top four countries with the smallest gender gap, with Denmark following close in eighth place. Five years in a row, Iceland has had the world's smallest gender gap according to WEF ("Where's the Best"). Iceland even had the

world's first lesbian head-of-state ("Why Scandinavian") as well as being the third happiest country in the world, just behind *Denmark* (Lavine). This is telling of the influence of the respect for women seen even in the modern world.

Works Consulted

Byock, Jesse L. *Viking Age Iceland*. London: Penguin, 2001. Print.

Casiopeia. *Jelling Kl Stein 2*. N.d. *Wikimedia Commons*. Web. 1 Nov. 2015.

Colm. "The Oseberg Viking Ship Burial." *Irish Archaeology*. Irish Archaeology, 3 Sep. 2012. Web. 11 Nov. 2015.

Crossley-Holland, Kevin. *The Norse Myths*. New York: Pantheon, 1980. Print.

Dalbéra, Jean-Pierre. *Le bateau viking d'Oseberg*. 27 July 2010. *Flickr*. Web. 1 Nov. 2015.

DuBois, Thomas A. *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age*. Philadelphia: U. of Penn. Press, 1999. Print.

Evans, David A. H. *Hávamál*. London: Viking Society for Northern Research, U College, 1986. Print.

Foote, Peter and David M. Wilson. *The Viking Achievement*. London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1990. Print.

Foss, Arild S. "Don't Underestimate Viking Women." *ScienceNordic*. Sciencenordic.com, 2 Jan. 2013. Web. 25 Oct. 2015.

Fridriksdottir, Johanna Katrin. *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words, and Power*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013. Print.

Graham-Campbell, James, and Colleen E. Batey. *Vikings in Scotland: An Archaeological Survey*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1998. Print.

Graham-Campbell, James, Richard Hall, Judith Jesch, and David N. Parsons, eds. *Vikings and*

- the Danelaw: Select Papers from the Proceedings of the Thirteenth Viking Congress, Nottingham and York, 21-30 August 1997*. Oxford: Oxbow, 2001. Print.
- Grammaticus, Saxo. *The Danish History, Books I-IX*. Trans. Oliver Elton. N.p.: n.p., 2006. *Project Gutenberg*. Web. 1 Nov. 2015.
- Harrison, Dick and Kristina Svensson. *Vikingaliv*. Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, 2007. PDF.
- Haugen, Einar, and Arthur Middleton Reeves. *Voyages to Vinland, the First American Saga*. New York: A.A. Knopf, 1942. Print.
- Hollander, Lee M. *The Poetic Edda*. Austin: U of Texas, 1962. Print.
- James, Edward. "Overview: The Vikings, 800 to 1066" *BBC News*. BBC, 29 Mar. 2011. Web. 25 Oct. 2015.
- Jelling Rune Stone, Text Side*. N.d. *Viking Society*. Web. 1 Nov. 2015.
- Jesch, Judith. *Women in the Viking Age*. Woodbridge: Boydell, 1991. Print.
- Jesch, Judith. "Viking Women." *BBC News*. BBC, 29 Mar. 2011. Web. 25 Oct. 2015.
- Jochens, Jenny. *Women in Old Norse Society*. New York: Cornell UP, 1995. Print.
- Karamell. *Osebergskipet-Detail*. 2005. *Wikimedia Commons*. Web. 1 Nov. 2015.
- Lavine, Robert. "Iceland: Superlative Happiness on a Cold Little Rock." *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, 11 Aug. 2012. Web. 11 Nov. 2015.
- Milek, Karen. "The Roles Of Pit Houses And Gendered Spaces On Viking-Age Farmsteads In Iceland." *Medieval Archaeology* 56.1 (2012): 85-130. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 5 Nov. 2015.
- Morris, William, and Erikr Magnusson, trans. *The Saga of the Volsungs*. Ed. Ernest Rhys. London: Walter Scott, 1888. E-book.

"Norse Sagas." *Viking Source*. N.p., n.d. Web. 11 Nov. 2015.

Northern World, Volume 52 : Ideology and Power in the Viking and Middle Ages : Scandinavia, Iceland, Ireland, Orkney and the Faeroes. Leiden, NLD: Brill Academic Publishers, 2011. ProQuest ebrary. Web. 4 November 2015.

Owen, O. A., and Magnar Dalland. *Scar: A Viking Age Boat Burial on Sanday, Orkney*. East Linton: Tuckwell in Association with Historic Scotland, 1999. Print.

Page, RI. *Chronicles of the Vikings: Records, Memorials and Myths*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995. Print.

Roesdahl, Else. *The Vikings*. London: Penguin, 2001. Print.

Rundata. Computer software. *Ladda Ned Samnordisk Runtexdatabas*. Vers. 3.1. Uppsala Universitet, n.d. Web. 7 Nov. 2015. <<http://www.nordiska.uu.se/forskn/samnord.htm>>.

"Seidr." *Norse Mythology for Smart People*. N.p., n.d. Web. 11 Nov. 2015.

Stevens, Patrick J., Kirsten Wolf, and Johanna Denzin eds. *Islandica: Romance and Love in late Medieval and Early Modern Iceland*. Vol. 54. New York: Cornell University Library, 2008. Print.

Sturluson, Snorri. *Heimskringla*. Trans. Samuel Laing. London: JM Dent, 1930. Print.

"Where's the Best Place to Be a Woman?" *BBC News*. BBC, 24 Oct. 2013. Web. 11 Nov. 2015.

"Why Scandinavian women make the rest of the world jealous" *Reuters*. Thomson Reuters, 31 Oct. 2013. Web. 11 Nov. 2015.

Wicker, Nancy L. "Christianization, Female Infanticide, And The Abundance Of Female Burials At Viking Age Birka In Sweden." *Journal Of The History Of Sexuality* 21.2 (2012): 245-262. *Professional Development Collection*. Web. 5 Nov. 2015.

Williams, Gareth, Peter Pentz, and Matthias Wemhoff, eds. *Vikings: Life and Legend*. New York: Cornell UP, 2014. Print.

Wolf, Kirsten. *Daily Life of the Vikings*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004. Print.

Wolf, Kirsten. *The Old Norse-Icelandic Legend of Saint Barbara*. Toronto, Ont., Canada: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2000. Print.

"Women Doctors in the Viking Age". "Women Doctors in the Viking Age". *The British Medical Journal* 1.2925 (1917): 95–95. Web. 4 November 2015.

"Viking women participated in earliest invasions of Britain." *Renaissance Magazine* 17.5 (2012): 16. *General OneFile*. Web. 5 Nov. 2015.