

THE MYTHOLOGY AND CULT OF FREYJA AND HER IMPORTANCE TO VIKING AGE WOMEN

LA MITOLOGÍA Y EL CULTO DE FREYJA Y SU IMPORTANCIA PARA LAS MUJERES DE LA EDAD VIKINGA

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Abstract: Freyja, one of the most popular goddesses of the Norse pantheon among Viking age women. Here we investigate how she is the only goddess to have her own poem in the *Poetic Edda*, and possibly the only god or goddess to have any reference to receiving cult in the poems. We compare her mythological role within the poems, with her role as Vanadís within the disir, and how that relates to the private, household, and women's sphere of worship. We investigate the cult of Freyja through the material world finds, and her strong connections to seiðr. We investigate the practice of seiðr and Freyja. Finally, we look at archaeology of women's finds to uncover whether there are any connections with the worship of Freyja.

Keywords: Freyja, cult, Norse, women

Resúmen: Freyja, una de las diosas más populares del panteón nórdico entre las mujeres de la época vikinga. Investigamos cómo ella es la única diosa que tiene su propio poema en la Edda Poética, posiblemente el único dios o diosa que tiene referencia alguna de recibir culto en los poemas. Comparamos su papel mitológico dentro de los poemas, con su papel como Vanadís dentro del disir y cómo se relaciona con la esfera privada, doméstica, de adoración de las mujeres. Investigamos el culto de Freyja a través de los hallazgos del mundo material y sus fuertes conexiones con el seiðr. Investigamos la práctica de seiðr y Freyja. Por último, observamos la arqueología de los hallazgos de mujeres para descubrir si existe ahí alguna conexión con el culto a Freyja.

Palabras clave: Freyja, culto, nórdico, mujer

Introduction

Freyja is possibly one of the two best known Norse goddesses along with Frigg. According to Snorri, she became the best known historically (2017, p. 14). Although, apart from Frigg and Freyja, and certainly according to Wylie, the rest of the Ásinjukur (Norse goddesses) are barely studied (Wylie, 2019, p. 11). In addition, other complexities arise when

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discussing the cultic ritual practices and mythology surrounding the Viking or Norse era. For instance, when defining mythology, Clunies Ross suggests it forms 'part of the intellectual fabric of a particular human culture'. In this case the Norse or Viking age community within which these myths would be known by 'the community as a whole' (2012, p. 231). However, as scholars such as Raudvere attest, there are difficulties with the way we perceive the Norse myths today. According to Raudvere, there is barely any difference between religious and mundane life within a Viking age community. They both draw a deep connection between mythology as a belief system and ritual practice (2012, p. 235). Nonetheless, she asserts there are scant sources indicating what this 'ancient worldview' looked like, compounding the issues, especially when early Christian influences are taken into consideration (*ibid*). Indeed, early Christian influences can be considered one of the key difficulties when dealing with sources of this pre-Christian time-period. Raudvere further explains, the myths of the old Norse religion were recorded by early Christians for preservation purposes, whereas, its rituals and practices ended up as misdemeanours in the *Gragas* law (2012, p. 235). Unfortunately, this means everything we study, see, touch or feel about the Norse or Viking era is filtered through a Christian lens; thereby determining what later generations should know.

The Vikings were largely a verbal community, meaning dissemination was an oral practice, and thus, remembered that way. Mythological knowledge remembered in poem form was only written down two hundred years or more by Christian males, and even then, only what they favoured. Hultgård echoes the preservation aspect, suggesting that the myths were originally a 'verbal expression of the religion' however after the shift to Christianity, Scandinavian mythology was passed down by 'many Icelandic and Norwegian families thanks to their interest in the traditions of the past' (2012, p. 213-214). The *Prose Edda* is one such example (Snorri, 2005). Thus, modern scholars can only view the Old Norse myths through an early Christian filter, including those about Freyja. Nonetheless, mythological and cultic ritual threads can still be pulled from the extant body of material, once this difficulty is acknowledged.

When focusing solely on Freyja, one must acknowledge that out of all the goddesses, only Freyja has her 'own' poem, *Hyndluljóð*; one solitary poem out of a total of nine 'god'

poems that mention goddesses (Crawford, 2015, p. 156). This attests to her popularity. No other goddess has such favour. Incidentally, this is echoed by Schjødt, stating it is remarkable that only Oðinn, Thor and Loki have more than one myth attached to them (2012, p. 219). Thus, there is little mythical evidence left, post Christianisation, and due to laws such as *Gragas*, even less noted cultic ritual practices, leaving us challenges in investigating the veneration and practices surrounding specific goddesses. Even if, as Wylie and Snorri attest, Freyja is one of the most popular, this singular goddess poem remaining infers a probable preference of the male Christians who preserved the mythological poems.

Next, when focusing solely on the role of women in mythological and ritual practices these complex issues become further complicated because, as Ljungqvist asserts, human female elite cult leaders have not been as thoroughly investigated in terms of archaeological, religious historicity, or even linguistics as human male cult leaders (2008, p. 251). Compounding the difficulty, Schjødt suggests we know even less about the beliefs and practices of the lower classes (2012, p. 221). With the sole goddess poem out of the nine god poems referencing goddesses from the *poetic edda* inferring a possible bias from Christian men's preservation, and with a present day preference for male cult leaders in archaeology, history, history of religion and linguistics, compounded by a class predisposition, it makes analysis into the cult practices surrounding Freyja and the women who may have worshiped her complex.

Given the above, there is little mythical evidence left for mythological women in mythology. There are challenges investigating the roles of both elite human women and lower-class women. This article follows the research performed for both assignments from the module '*Gender in Viking Society*' for the University of the Highlands and Islands, Scotland, utilising some of the mythological, cultic ritual, and material culture research about Freyja I have derived from those assignments. This article focuses on five possible aspects of cult surrounding Freyja, seen in primary sources, material culture, her links with the *disir*, *seiðr* and human women.

Freyja in the poetic Edda



Freyja can most clearly and with most certainty be seen in the Eddas. Many scholars have long thought the eddic poems represent transcriptions of earlier oral compositions, with a few of them further believing the poems were composed in pagan times (Orton, 2007, p. 308). Hultgård suggests the 'worldview of ancient Scandinavia is unknown. Eddic poems such as the *Völuspá*, *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Grimnismál* give selected but reliable information, whereas Snorri's description should be read more critically (Hultgård, 2012, p. 214). Therefore, I will focus on the *Poetic Edda*. However, the *Prose Edda* is useful to glean extra information, such as Freyja coming as a hostage after the Aesir-Vanir War (Snorri, 2017, p. 8). The goddess Frigg is married to Odin (Snorri, 2017, p. 7) and is supposed to be the foremost goddess, according to Snorri in his *Prose Edda*, closely followed by Saga, although he does suggest 'Freyja, along with Frigg is the most noble' (Snorri, 2005, p. 42). Yet, in the *Ynglinga saga* Snorri suggests Freyja is the most popular (2017, p. 14). Therefore, Snorri gives a mixed picture of where Freyja fits within the goddess hierarchy, and certainly within the top two to three within the Norse pantheon. However, with the survival of the *Hyndluljóð*, as the only goddess poem remaining out of the nine goddess poems, we can perhaps see her achieving first position on the human popularity front.

Seiðr, a type of magic performed by gods and humans, started as Freyja's prerogative, which is described in the *Ynglinga saga*, where it states the Freyja taught the Aesir magic (seiðr), with Oðinn, and once taught, became a Master of It (Snorri, 2017, p. 8). In the *Poetic Edda*, Freyja's practice of seiðr is confirmed by Loki identifying her by the derogatory term 'witch' in *Lokesenna*:

32 Loki said
Silence Freyja
You are a witch
And have dealt many curses.
(Crawford 2015, p. 107)

Nonetheless, she is also the one goddess the primary sources suggest is a ritual goddess. The *Heimskringla* describes her as a 'sacrificial priestess', who kept up with the sacrifices her entire life (Snorri, 2017, p. 8 & 14). Sacrifices appear to be a central part of cultic practices, discussed later. Freyja appears to be one of the few gods with a cult dedicated solely to her, similar to Oðinn. According to Schjødt, Freyja was one of the few goddesses who had a major



role in religious cult (2012, p.221). In *Hyndluljóð* there is one of the few written examples of ritual sacrifice and it is to Freyja as the receiver of cultic ritual:

10 Ottar made me
 An altar of stone
 And the stones of that temple
 Glisten like glass
 Reddened with fresh blood
 From sacrificed Oxen
 Ottar believed faithfully
 In the Goddess
 (*Hyndluljóð*, Crawford 2015, p. 158)

Nonetheless, Freyja as a receiver of cultic ritual practice conflates well with her a magic/ Seiðr goddess and practitioner in her own right. An example of her as a practitioner can be seen clearly in stanzas 3&4 of *Thrymskvitha*, where she lends Loki her magic feathered cloak.

3 Then they went
 To Freyja's lovely home
 And the first thing
 Loki said was this:
 Freyja, would you lend me your feather suit
 To help us get
 Thor's hammer back?
 (*Thrymskvitha*, Crawford 2015, p. 115)

4 Freyja said:
 I would give it to you
 Even if it were made of gold
 I would loan it to you
 Even if it were made of silver
 (*Thrymskvitha*, Crawford 2015, p. 115)

Both the above show her as a proficient and powerful magic-user, happy to lend out her magical items, but equally, a powerful goddess when angered:

13 Freyja was angry
 She snorted so hard
 That the homes of the gods shook all around them,
 Her necklace Brisingamen
 Trembled on her neck:
 (*Thrymskvitha*, Crawford 2015 p. 117)



Also, in *Hyndluljóð*:

47 I will strike a fire
 Around you giant woman,
 Make it so you cannot leave here
 In the night
 Like a ewe with your ram
 (*Hyndluljóð*, Crawford 2015, p. 166)

However, Freyja is not just the goddess of seiðr, she is also the goddess of death, as seen in the *Grimnismál*:

14 Freyja rules
 In the ninth land, Folkvang-
 That is where she arranges seats
 She chooses half the dead
 Who die in battle
 And Odin takes the other half
 (Crawford 2015, p. 63)

Here, she not only takes half the battle-slain like Oðinn, she makes the first selection. Therefore, it can be inferred from the Eddas she is equal to the god Oðinn, both in magic and regarding the dead; she is a receiver of cultic ritual practice, like Oðinn. However, modern perception sees her as less powerful than Oðinn, and it is true that far less is known about her. This could be due to a two-fold issue, according to scholars such as Brovsky and Wylie. The first, according to Brovsky, who is translating Mundal, is that women played a far greater part in oral literature before they were 'locked out of the male dominated literature culture' ((Mundal, 1983, p. 11). In Brovsky, 1999, p. 10)). Mundal further suggests that as the oral tradition lost its prestige, women were excluded from intellectual spheres, thus making their contributions invisible ((Mundal 1983, p. 23) in Brovsky 1999, p. 10)). Perhaps having the effect of making the prestige and contributions of the goddesses contained with those former oral traditions less valuable. Secondly, according to Wylie, there is a modern androcentric, Christianised, misogynistic bias affecting research on the goddesses (2019, p.11). Ljungqvist puts this more succinctly: 'since written sources are written by men narrating for men' (2008, p. 251). Therefore, Freyja's contributions, both at the time that Christian men began to write

down the eddas and sagas, and again in the current era, may have been overlooked in favour of the strong male god Oðinn, as was expected in a Christianised society. However, if what these scholars say is true, Freya may be just under researched, and therefore any cult activities attached to her also under researched.

Examples of Freyja in the material world

The first example of evidence of a dedicated cult to Freyja may not just appear in eddic poetry and written sources. Oðinn is often seen as having a cult dedicated to him in the material culture through the representation of his cult following of *Berserkers* and *Ulfheðnir*, in panels and guldgubber where figures are often represented with bear or wolf heads such as the *Torslunda plaque* (Price, 2019, p.308). The main attribute of seiðr appears to be the staff (Price, 2012, p. 245) It's not too huge a stretch of the imagination to see what appears to be a woman in a long cloak holding a seiðr staff on the Isle of Man runestone fragment 123. This could be an example of cult reference to Freyja in the material world.



Isle of Man runestone Kirk Michael VII, fragment 123: *Michael 123 is a stone cross fragment in Kirk Michael on the Isle of Man. It depicts a woman in a trailing dress with a staff in her hand on the upper part. The lower part depicts a tethered, saddled horse. The side of the cross includes a runic inscription in short-twig runes. It reads:...*

: [ai](f)(t)(i)(r) * (m)(u)... * (u)... This has been transliterated as ... *eptir mu- ...*, meaning '... in memory of Mu- ...'. Gardela (2016)

This conflates with Swedish Folklore, where Orion's belt is sometimes known as Freyja's distaff (Price, 2019, p. 339). Likewise, Ellis Davidson suggests similar pictures represent cultic following on the Oseburg tapestry, with women with swine and bird heads representing Freyja's version of *Berserkers* and *Ulfhednir*, while a lady on a horse may be a representation of Freyja herself (1998, p. 109-110). Similarly, material evidence suggested by Nordvig (2022) suggests Denmark's Tisso figurine may be another example of Freyja, due to the representation of Freyja's famous pendent *Brisingamen*, mentioned in stanza 13 *Thrymskviða* (Crawford, 2015, p. 117). Therefore, it could be argued there is material evidence of the possible cult worship of Freyja in existence in the Isle of Man, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. Although like all material culture, I and other scholars have made inferences from existing evidence, there are no definitive answers as to whether any of the material culture is in fact reflective of a cult of Freyja. However, it is highly suggestive of one.

Freyja as a member of the disir

The collective spirits sometimes associated with warfare and fertility, the *Disir*, must be mentioned as there are hints they were also receivers of cult (Raudvere, 2012, p. 236). Freyja is often given the role of both a war and a fertility goddess, with a strong connection to death (Schjødt, 2012, p. 221). According to Simek, *disir* were helpful beings that some call deities (n.d, p. 478). Raudvere suggests they are assigned to a lower realm even though they play a 'vital role in everyday ritual life', being understood to have functioned as protection, prosperity, and good-fortune deities, with some texts suggesting they were guardian spirits (2012, p. 240) Simek also asserts *disir* were minor deities who were not only a matter of the female domain, but of the family domain and were venerated with sacrificial gifts (ibid). That said, Freyja was known as *Vanadis*; *Disir* of the *Vanir* (Raudvere, 2012, p. 240). This infers she may have been some sort of goddess of the *disir* (ibid). Näsström, a recognised expert in Freyja, goes even further suggesting a great connection between the *Vanir* and the *Disir*, with Freyja being the 'Great *Dis*', hence the name *Vanadis* (2003, p. 109). Therefore, it can be inferred Freyja was not just part of the collective known as the *Disir*, but the head *Dis*. As we shall uncover,

the *Disir* were especially important in the private worship in the feminine sphere in the hearth and home, but also two larger *blóts*.

As we have already acknowledged, the *Disir* are a 'collective of female deities involved in fate and prosperity of a specific place' often recipients of a ritual called a *disablót*. (Raudvere, 2012, p. 240). Hultgård further asserts these goddesses, *disir*, 'seemed to play an important part in private worship' (Hultgård, 2012, p. 213). As a private function, this role seems to be invisible. Nonetheless, Snorri, in the *Ynglinga saga* may suggest Freyja as eventually becoming the most popular of all the gods, the longest lasting in giving and receiving cult in her role as '*húsfreyja* (mistress of the household) if she is in charge of the dwelling' (2017, p. 14). This closely links Freyja as a deity of the household, which again, leads to private worship and the women's sphere.

The *dísirblót*, the big sacrificial ritual assigned to the *disir*, where they may have been specific receivers of cult, may have been in wintertime, showing similarities of fertility rituals (Raudvere, 2012, p. 240). If we remember the Norse only ran two seasons, Summer and Winter, the wintertime *dísirblót* could be held in October and still be considered in winter, early winter, but winter, nonetheless. Näsström asserts the *dísirblót* took place in early October at 'Winternights' (2003, p. 103). However, she also mentions there was a cult of the *Disir* at Uppsala where an important *dísirblót* 'for all the people of the kingdom to gather and sacrifice' (ibid, pp. 106-7) There was also a *Disthing* which in heathen times took place between the 23rd February and 31st March, which is an important spring ritual that took place in Uppsala dedicated to the *disir*, apparently even mentioned by Adam of Bremen...that he found repulsive due to the nature of the ritual sacrifices (ibid, pp. 106-7, Rasmussen, 2019, p. 84-85). According to Rasmussen, Freyja as Vanadís may also have been part of this celebration, later known as the 'mythical Queen Disa' (2019, p. 84). which only conflates what Näsström suggests. It could be argued that *disir* rituals were at the beginning and end of what was Norse winter (late autumn and Winter). Clearly, the *disir* had a fundamental ritual role in Viking age society, especially in the female and family domain. Is this why Freyja, as a probable leader of the *disir*, Vanadís, was such a popular goddess in the Viking era, and such a receiver of cultic sacrifice? Or is it because *seiðr* is her preserve and she appears to be the

goddess of that? Or both? Is she mainly popular among women because the *Disir* and *seiðr* are part of the Norse women's world? The evidence is too fragmentary and scant to know for sure. However, what little there is leans that way. More research is needed in this area to answer these questions, but Freyja as leader of the cult of the *Disir* is a good start.

Freyja as goddess of seiðr

The biggest link to cultic practice may come through Oðinn, (Price, 2019, p. 34). Oðinn may have become master of *seiðr*, but it was the goddess Freyja that taught it to him (Friðriksdottir, 2009, p. 416, Price, p. 2012, p. 34 & 245, Snorri, 2017, p. 8). Although authors like Price ascribe *seiðr* and other magics like *galdr*, *gandr* and *útseita* as Oðinnic sorcery (2019, p. 34-5). *Seiðr* is often used as an overriding term for all the brands of 'magic' mentioned above. However, as Snorri describes in the *Ynglinga saga*, it was Freyja who taught him the 'black magic', as it is described in my translation (2017, p. 8). Thus, *seiðr* is really Freyja's prerogative. Despite Price's assertions, according to Friðriksdottir, *seiðr* is specifically connected to Freyja and apart from Oðinn, who 'practices it to gain knowledge of the future', *seiðr* was 'almost exclusively the territory of women (2009, p. 416). As Snorri later suggests in the *Ynglinga saga*, Freyja was the longest lived of all the gods, and became the best known. She continued to practice sacrifices [cult] and was known as *húsfreyja* (mistress of a household) (Snorri, 2017, p.14). Therefore, it can be asserted that Freyja was a popular goddess, long worshiped within multitudes of households, and may be linked with her *disir* aspect. Nonetheless, reading between the lines of what Snorri infers, she continued to be a popular goddess participating in cult long after popularity of the other gods had waned. Maybe, as discussed above, this was because she was worshipped within the women's sphere in the private household. This perspective is echoed precisely by Ellis Davidson, where she further suggests Freyja 'continued to have importance for women in their daily life' (1998, p. 10).

Unfortunately, we do not know what historic *seiðr* looks like. There are few descriptions in text. One of the best examples is Thorbjorg Little Völva in *Erik the Red's saga* (Embleton, n.d, p. 16-20). It describes the visit Thorbjorg to the farmstead of Thorkell to perform a *seiðr* soothsaying ritual to determine if the sickness and famine would be over soon (ibid). The passage also describes the preparations for vólva (practitioner) how a special high seat was



prepared for her with a cushion filled with hen's feather's, she was made porridge of kid's milk and the heart of all animals available at the farmstead and tables were cleared away for the ceremony (ibid, p. 16-17). The section describes what the völvá was wearing:

Then she arrived around the evening,
with the man who was sent to meet her
when she was ready, she had over her a blue
mantle, which was set with stones in the lap.

She had glass beads on her neck,
and on her head a hood of black lambskin,
lined with white cat skin

And she had in her hand a staff,
which had a knob on top.
It was set with brass and had stones set about
the knob

She wore a girdle with a large skin purse,
and she kept her magic in there, which she
needed to have knowledge of.

She had calf skin shoes lined with fur
with long laces with pewter knobs
on the ends

She had cat skin gloves on her hands
and they were white and furry inside
(Embleton, n.d., p. 17)

This description is fascinating, as the staff appears to represent the cultic practice of seiðr, but as we have seen with the Isle of Man runestone, it may have been used to represent the cult of Freyja herself. The next link to Freyja is the cat skin items of clothing. Cats were said to be sacred to Freyja as her chariot was pulled by them (Ellis Davidson, 1998, p. 51, Orton, 2007, p. 304). As Ellis Davidson suggests about the Oseberg elite female being a 'Priestess of Freyja' due to interpreting the aspects of the Oseberg tapestry as material evidence of a cult of Freyja (1998, p. 109-110), it could suggest Thorbjorg little Völvá is at least *fulltrúi* 'confident' or *ástvinr* a 'close friend' of Freyja, meaning she had a genuine personal devotion (Hultgård, 2012, p. 213). Sadly, there is very little description of the ritual itself, only that she wears specific clothing for her 'enchantments' and she asks for women who had the 'wisdom of the

enchantments needed, which were called warlock songs’ in the translation I have (Embelton, n.d., p. 18). After a discussion with a Christian woman, being the only person who knows them, the ritual goes ahead with Gudrid reciting the ‘warlock song’, and with women in a circle, with Thorbjorg on the high seat (ibid, p. 19). Despite a beautiful description of what Thorbjorg wears upon arrival, the description of the ritual is cursory. We have no idea what happens to the men during the ritual, and this could be the issue. It is thought that all the sagas bar the possible exception of the *Laxadæla saga*, (Kunz, 2001, p. 275) were written by Christian men, sometimes as much as 200 years after the time they describe (Gansum, 2008, p. 142). Thus, if the men were not present at the ritual, they may not have known precisely what happened and thus the description has been glossed over, thus losing the much-needed intricacies: the words of the song, and whether deity was invoked. Finally, the sacrifice of the hearts of all the various animals on the farmstead for the Völva, as a kind of receiver of cult, is reminiscent of Freyja receiving cult from Ottar in *Hyndluljóð*:

10 Ottar made me
 An altar of stone
 And the stones of that temple
 Glisten like glass
 Reddened with fresh blood
 From sacrificed Oxen
 Ottar believed faithfully
 In the Goddess
 (*Hyndluljóð*, Crawford, 2015, p. 158)

Although here it does not say whether Ottar uses the heart of the Oxen or not, nonetheless, similarities are involved. Therefore, unfortunately there are no examples left of what the ‘warlock songs’ lyrics contain, whether they invoked deity within the song, or whether the description in *Erik the Red’s saga* simply misses the practitioner invoked deity before the ritual, or during. If they did then, from what she was wearing and carrying; Thorbjorg appears to have aligned herself as a ‘friend of Freyja’ where that deity could have been Freyja as goddess of seiðr. Consequently, from this example, we do not know for certain if the practice of seiðr rituals was part of a cult of Freyja, despite the similarities and inferences linking Thorbjorg to her. In text, this is one of the clearest examples still in existence, but it is also fraught with all the aforementioned difficulties in the introduction, such as the male

Christian filter. Again, this frustrates the academic enquiry into precisely what went on, due to the apparent need to edit both at the time of writing and possibly later. The best we can do is to infer from what little there is left to us.

The women's world of seiðr and cult practices: Freyja's possible influence on human women

In the human world in the Viking age there appears to be little or no distinction 'between women performing magic in mythical text to those in secular texts'. Relatably, women as the human counterpart to the *völva* in the *Völuspá*, reflecting a 'pre-Christian oral tradition, where women's wisdom and prophetic abilities were honoured and revered (Friðriksdóttir, 2009, p. 415-416). Friðriksdóttir suggests the practice of seiðr [magic], was specifically connected to Freyja, as mentioned above, and was almost exclusively the dominion of women (*ibid*, p. 416). She further asserts that in mythology, seiðr was used by Norse worshippers to summon and/or communicate with supernatural beings, and for its divinatory and soothsaying qualities to achieve the practitioner's goal (*ibid*). Hultgård states the help of the human *völva* appears to be asked for in real life when difficult and uncertain situations occurred (2012, p. 217-218), similar to the consulting of Thorbjorg Little *Völva* in *Erik the Red's saga* above (Embleton, n.d, p. 16). Therefore, *völv*as/seiðr practitioners appeared to be mainly women in the human realm. Seiðr may have originally been the prerogative of the gods, Óðinn learned his powers from Freyja, with the two deities embodying Norse magic (Price, 2012, p. 245), but seiðr was also learned by humans and it became the primary province of women (*ibid*). In the *disir* section, we saw that Freyja was very popular within the female, private, household sphere. The question remains, was she worshiped at all in the public sphere, other than the two large *disirblóts*?

In the Norse human world, there does not seem to be a professional priest or druid class as there is elsewhere at this time. Religious ritual functions appear to have been performed by various persons alongside their other in roles society (Hultgård, 2012, p. 416). Nonetheless. As Ljungqvist asserts, female elite cult leaders have not been as thoroughly investigated as their male counterparts from the perspective of archaeology, history of religion and linguistics (2008, p. 251). Schjødt contends we know even less about the lower classes (2012, p. 221).



There is evidence for names for female religious ritual leaders designated *gyðja* (*gyðjur pl.*) or *hofgyðjur* as opposed to the male *goði*, who could oversee a *hof*, or sacred building, where rituals take place (Sundqvist, 2012, p. 180). These of course could be to any god(dess). A *hof*, according to Sundqvist this is where sacrificial rituals such as *biðia*, *blóta*, *senda* and *sóa* like the one mentioned in *Hyndluljóð* to Freyja may have taken place (*ibid*, p. 190), but also where meat could have been cooked and consumed in the hall (*hof*) and a communion meal and libations made, often known by the term *blóta* (*ibid*, p. 191). Sundqvist asserts examples of *hofgyðjur* can be found in both the *Kristni saga* and *Flateyjarbók*, who mention a *gyðja* 'Friðgerðr was performing sacrifices at the "altar/platform' (2012, p. 181). *Flateyjarbók* also being the source of the *Hyndluljóð*. Meanwhile, he suggests the *Landnámabók* and *Vatnsdæla saga* state Þuriðr gyðja Sölmundardóttir connected to the farm of Hof in Vatnsdalr, Þorlaugr gyðja Hrólfsdóttir, was related to the *hof* sanctuary at Reykjardal in south-western Iceland, while Þuriðr hofgyðja Véþórmsdóttir was connected to sanctuaries situated in Bakkárholt (*ibid*, p. 180). Thus, it appears linguistically and literarily, women could be in charge of the oversight and the running of ritual in the *hof*, even if this was not common. A woman in charge may have increased the likelihood of a ritual being associated with Freyja, as would attest to Freyja's aforementioned popularity, but neither would guarantee it. Without evidence, such a material culture like a godpole or idol to Freyja for that particular *hof*, similar to the godpole or idol to her brother Freyr at the temple at Old Uppsala (Gräslund, 2012, p. 250), would be difficult to determine that cult was offered to Freyja publicly. Nonetheless, Ellis Davidson suggests the elite mature female buried in the Oseberg boat burial in Norway could have been a 'priestess of Freyja', due to some of the symbology observed within the finds, such as the Oseberg tapestry and what may be supposedly missing due to grave robbing (1998, p. 110-111).

Despite this feminine positivity, what remains are small threads in largely male cult actives, since the written sources are written by men, narrating for men (Ljungqvist, 2008, p. 251). With reference to the archeology, he suggests male burials have had more attention because they are more eye-catching, which compounds the issue (*ibid*). Nonetheless, there is archaeological evidence for female cult leaders and ritual connection (*ibid*). Although, again not directly related to Freyja, they are often associated with *seiðr*, Freyja's preserve. Thor's hammer and fire steels are found on ring amulets on both male and female burials, however

drinking horns are only attributed to women carrying those amulet sets (ibid, p. 257). Other miniatures, all very stylised, such as shields, horse, axe, chair, and swords, can be found on the amulet rings, with some also having figurines seeming to be directly copied from picture stones, including women caring horns (ibid, p. 258). As we saw with Thorbjorg, the high seat, or chair is part of the seiðr ritual. These miniatures are only found in women's graves according to Ljungqvist (ibid). In high status, elite burials the above objects are found with items associated with magic such as the seiðr staff, important for religious practices (ibid, p. 258-259). Ljungqvist asserts that the combinations of magical items with the miniatures such as shield, horse, axe, chair, and sword are because ritual practitioners were also elite women (ibid, p. 258-259&262).

Nevertheless, I agree with Schjødt (2012) that we just know less about the lower classes. I propose that lower class women were equally active ritually, especially in the worship of Freyja and the *disir* which Simek argued above were in the private, women's sphere of ritual worship. What I suggest is they may have the miniatures as Ljungqvist suggests as evidence of cult connection, but for lower class women, any larger objects like seiðr staff would have been passed down from mother to daughter or other female family member, as the cost to replace such precious items for lower classes would be too great. Thus, lower class women would not have been buried with them. It would not be that only elite women were cult leaders, just that they were the only ones rich enough to be buried with all their ritual items instead of passing them on. However, whether they were cult leaders to Freyja still needs to be seen. With such little evidence by this point, it is very hard to tell if lower class women are cult leaders at all let alone to whom, even though when discussing *Disir*, it was inferred that was a household level prerogative at the very least. Even though Freyja, as discussed, was very heavily involved with the *disir* as Vanadís. Then there is the question whether cult leader would be an accurate term. If most households worshiped the *disir* and Freyja was the leader or Great Dís of the *disir*, it may be that she was basically the head goddess the cult of female worship. Alongside this, with her seiðr aspects it may be that seiðr was more widespread among human practitioners than originally proposed from archaeological findings. If many females were buried with the miniatures but only the elites with the staffs, this would suggest more women were practicing that originally proposed of all classes. Thus, instead of cult



leaders maybe cult practitioners or adherents would be a better description. As they would not be leading a huge congregation as a female hof leader would but a small household or two as each household or family may well have had their own originally.

One final out of the box thought, when discussing these five seemingly unconnected aspects of the reverence of a cult of Freyja, more exist, is they may well have at one point been connected or at least more connected. The evidence at this point just is not there yet. However, if Freyja was indeed the great Dis, leading the cult of *disir*, in the sacred, private, female sphere of the Norse world, why wouldn't the aspects of seiðr practice be an outwards example of cultic practice, with examples such as the Isle of Man rune stone and the Oseburg tapestry material world being representations? Of course, we can never know for sure, but future research may help.

Conclusion

Freyja was obviously an important goddess in the Norse religion in the Viking age. In the *Poetic Edda* we find she is the only goddess to have her own poem, and this is the only poem to reference a god or goddess as a receiver of cultic sacrifice. I think this is significant, given the extant of poetry left to modern day. It strongly infers her as a goddess with a dedicated cult in her own right. With the Isle of Man runestone and Oseberg tapestry, we may have examples of material world representations of cultic followings of Freyja. We see significant inference of leadership of the *disir* in her role as Vanadís, the Great Dís, and how important the worship of the *disir* may be in the private, household, woman's spheres of the Viking world, with even hints that it might have outlived the early years of Christianisation, when the popularity of the other gods had waned. However, the more we move away from mythological into archaeological and into the human world, the more the link with Freyja becomes tenuous, despite how commentators like Snorri describe how popular she was. This leads me to question whether Ljungqvist's assertions are correct, and that little interest has been given to women's finds so far, other than staffs, which proclaim them as seiðr practitioners. Even so, this does not declare them as some sort of priestess, *fulltrúi* or *ástvinr* of Freyja. The link is primarily showing her as the goddess of seiðr and others as practitioner. Without knowing if Freyja was somehow invoked in seiðr rituals, maybe within the song used,

the link is tenuous at best. As seen with Thorbjorg little Völva in *Erik the Red's saga*, the detail into seiðr ritual is not explicit enough to say either way. What can be said was Freyja was an important, popular goddess, probably a leader of her own cult, certainly a receiver of cultic sacrifice, maybe followed by many women in the private sphere of the household as leader of the disir, and quite probably revered in two major disir ritual celebrations *dísirblót* and *disting*. Nonetheless, without further research into these five seemingly unconnected aspects of Freyja and cult within mythology, and her importance to Viking Age women, we can never be sure if they are connected at all. Is Freyja, as the great Dis, connected to her as the teacher of seiðr, or is the private feminine sphere a red herring, and not a connection at all? Currently, there is just not enough evidence. The threads of this argument are very small. Hopefully one day, more evidence will uncover further certainties about her cult.

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