

CONFERENCE REPORT: WOMEN OF THE VIKING WORLD

INFORME DE CONFERENCIA: MUJERES DEL MUNDO VIKINGO



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Many words have been spilled in the debate about women's roles and position in Viking-Age Scandinavia. The by now classic question in historical research about women in this period is how their roles changed with the introduction of Christianity; whether the conversion meant limitations to the more independent position and flexible societal roles of women in pre-Christian Scandinavia, or whether the new religion was inherently more equal (as regards theology and life after death) (Jesch, 1991; Jochens, 1995; Sawyer, 2005). For literary scholars, particularly in saga studies, the stereotypical representation of women in the *Íslendingasögur* on the one hand (as inciters or whettors) and the quite different roles of women

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in the *Fornaldarsögur* (shieldmaidens) and *Samtidarsögur* have shaped interests for decades (Clover, 1986; Jochens, 1986; Mundal, 1994; Jochens, 1996).

Recent years have seen the advent of a new focus in Viking Studies research on women, particularly within archaeology, reconsidering the possibility of female Viking warriors and the evidence of women's graves containing weapons and other equipment traditionally interpreted as signaling the presumed male sex of the buried individual. With the 2017 publication of the article on grave Bj. 581 from Birka on the island of Björkö, Lake Mälaren (Sweden) (Hedenstierna-Jonson et al., 2017), which confirmed by DNA-analysis the female sex of the skeleton buried in the renowned grave, interest exploded. Followed up by later studies (Price et al., 2019) and wider investigations into the topic (Gardela, 2021), this case fundamentally challenged long-established distinctions between women's lived experience in the Viking Age and the fantastical or imaginary female figures of myth, legend, and saga (Clover, 1986; Jochens, 1986; Jesch, 1991).

These conversations were continued at the *Women of the Viking World* conference in August of 2024. Over the course of two days, the Central Teaching Hub at the University of Liverpool (UK) became the stage for a conference on the women of the Viking World, gathering scholars from nearly twenty countries, and organized by a trio of inspired postgraduate students at the same university: Ian Russell, Elizabeth West, and Hannah Evans. They had at an early stage secured the participation of Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson as (sole) keynote speaker, a culminating event to which organizers and participants all looked forward with much anticipation.

The first day featured four sessions, on "Exploring Identity", "Settlements and Migration", "Viking Women in Britain and Ireland", and on "Emotion and Consciousness". These sessions all featured both archaeological and literary perspectives, and several papers put different types of sources next to each other and in conversation to explore new avenues of research and reconsider established frames of reference.

While Chelsi Slotten, using a collection of materials from Danish Viking Age graves, combined osteological approaches with gender and mortuary theory to evaluate the lived experience, performance, and social construction of gender, Stephen H. Harrison also problematized the signaling of gender and the links between gender and status. Both were

careful to acknowledge the sheer number of graves which have not survived, been discovered, or recovered, and the large proportion of ungendered graves in the known burial record, complicating the conclusions we can reach in statistical analyses (and echoing some of the influential work published by Marianne Moen, e.g. 2019). Slotten's analysis resulted in a clear conclusion: that age had greater relevance for the quality and quantity of grave goods than gender. Furthermore, the gender expressed in graves is an idealized social construct, and the lived experience – inscribed in the bones – relating to trauma, pathology and dentition, are not significantly distinct for male and female individuals. Harrison similarly found a strong connection between gender and status, concluding that well-furnished graves are deliberately 'signaling gender'.

Ambra Ventura's paper was one which attempted to nuance and problematize earlier scholarship on the depiction of women and female figures in the corpus of Icelandic sagas. Her efforts to reevaluate these stereotypes could be seen leading to the proposal of other 'types', which potentially demonstrates that the relationship between literary tropes and social realities is still up for debate. In conversation with Keith Ruiters' scholarship (2018), Ventura discussed other recurring patterns of behavior in the sagas and how these demonstrate a morally grounded systemic social pressure to conform to societal norms. Two other papers with a literary focus rounded out the day, firstly Juliane Witte's fascinating analysis of scripts for female anger in Old Norse-Icelandic Literature, in which she returned to the angry women of the sagas. Witte's paper arguably reinforced the ideas of recognizable and recurring patterns of behavior among female figures in the sagas. Distinguishing between the performative and the private female anger, she applied a *recalibrational theory of anger* to the saga narratives. Witte showed how female anger could be a recognizable feature of incitement, but was strongly curtailed by convention, and how, being demonstrative, it had a staged effect as part of a performative convention. Francesca Squitieri's study on animalism in the prophetic dreams of women in *Völsunga Saga* – wherein she argued prophetic dreams are used as a subtle means of guiding audience interpretations – was followed during the second day by Irina Manea's exposition about female agency and transgression in *Hrólfs saga kraka*.

While many papers focused on (naturally) Scandinavia, Iceland, Britain or Ireland, others ventured into less explored territory. The geographical concentration could perhaps ideally have been widened further, but there were at least exceptions to the north and west-

leaning focus. Eleanor McDonald-Dick's paper "Varangian Wives" sought to shine new light on women and Scandinavian settlement in early Rus (specifically in Staraja Ladoga) by putting the archaeological finds in conversation with runestones erected in Viking-Age Sweden. Her talk partly built on the prevalence of runestones erected by women in mid-Sweden during the late Viking Age – women who remained at home and managed their estates in the absence of men. In this, her approach can be contrasted to that of Jackie Truitt, who examined the artefactual afterlife of Queen Thyra and the Jelling dynasty. Thyra's importance was highlighted by reference to the high proportion of the overall very few Viking-Age runestones in Denmark which mention women, that actually refer to Thyra (four out of a total ten), making her the most memorialized person in Viking-Age Denmark, regardless of sex. In Danica Ramsey-Brimberg's paper, eight Manx memorial stones mentioning women were referenced, as she used this example to demonstrate that women were not superfluous or passive actors.

Some papers also considered the interaction and intermingling of members of the Scandinavian diaspora, to use Judith Jesch's term (2015), with other groups in the areas where they settled during the Viking Age. Genna Scott discussed women and settlement in the Outer Hebrides, examining the relationships between Pictish and Norse women and the assimilation of Pictish women into Viking settlements, while encampments were considered as temporary settlements and transient communities where different communities interacted by Elizabeth West in her paper about Aldwark, Repton, and Torksey. Further to this aspect, Sarah Vincent discussed Hiberno-Norse intermarriage and alliances in Viking-Age Ireland, and demonstrated how women by their actions participated in the intermingling of Irish and Scandinavian communities.

The keynote lecture by Hedenstierna-Jonson reminded the audience of the fate of 'ordinary' people and how easy it is for research to become limited to societal elites. Hedenstierna-Jonson's has certainly become a more well-known, even household name, given her involvement in uncovering the gender of the individual buried in the warrior grave Bj. 581 at Birka, Björkö, Sweden. Since the publication of the 2017 article, this has received an enormous amount of attention, and of course the female warrior at Birka featured in many talks and conversations at the conference. The Birka warrior grave (Bj. 581) featured in many talks, also alongside other female burials with weapons, like those in Nordre Kjølén, Aunvoll

and Bogøvej, discussed by Costanza Micchichè. However, Hedenstierna-Jonson had worked on both martial and trading aspects of Birka for quite some time before this, and her work on the urban woman, recognizing the importance of women to trade and crafts in the urban milieu, goes back at least to 2014 (Hedenstierna-Jonson and Kjellström, 2014). The urban context also featured in Rebecca Boyd's paper, which focused on women's work in Viking-Age towns in Ireland.

Hedenstierna-Jonson's keynote lecture elevated the discussion of stereotypes surrounding Vikings from internal historiographical debates to the wider societal and historical implications of the image of the Viking, by framing her talk within the context of impact of Vikings on the formation of national identities in the national romantic period. The level of abstraction on contextualization of course varied between individual talks and different sessions, but a common frame of reference for archaeologists as well as historians and saga scholars became apparent throughout the conference, not limited to classical works in the field of studies on Viking women, but also more recent work in several disciplines (e.g. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, 2013; 2020; Gardeła, 2021), which helped spur interdisciplinary exchange.

The second day of the conference otherwise featured sessions on "Space, Work, and Trade", "Powerful Women and Leadership", and "Influence and Agency of Women in Literature". Shanna Bryman problematized the assumption of scholars that when dealing with burials signaling power, powerful men have been taken to have held political positions yet women seen upholding religious positions. Hedenstierna-Jonson later returned to this point by reinforcing the notion that we don't need to change our interpretation of an object because of the gender of the interred, e.g. taking the same object to be a political symbol for a man (a spire) but a religious symbol for a woman (a staff). Bryman discussed some of the above-mentioned examples of burials of women with weapons, alongside other Birka graves (Bj. 644 and Bj. 834) using the lens of leadership, defined as having followers and having influence; something she identified in the archaeological record by reference to symbols and objects signaling *visible* leadership.

Hedenstierna-Jonson's apt remark, that there might possibly be more exceptions to some perceived norms than there are examples of the norm itself, will have sparked some ideas about how we can rethink what we consider normative versus transgressive about

Viking-Age society. Are contemporary researchers still too attached to some notions we have inherited from earlier generations of scholars, ranging back to Victorian times? Perhaps scholars in Viking studies are still in the process of shedding those biases and unburdening themselves of some long-standing assumptions.

If the conference aimed to provide an arena for exchange of ideas between disciplines about recent and currently ongoing research projects within Viking Studies, it was most definitely a success. The presenters showed the relevance of prioritizing the study of the women in the Viking world, both in their lived experiences, as evidenced by the archaeological studies, and in the literary representation and depiction of women. Whether this divide itself is possible to bridge cannot be resolved so easily, and the conference hopefully spurs further attempts to engender clarifying research into these areas.

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