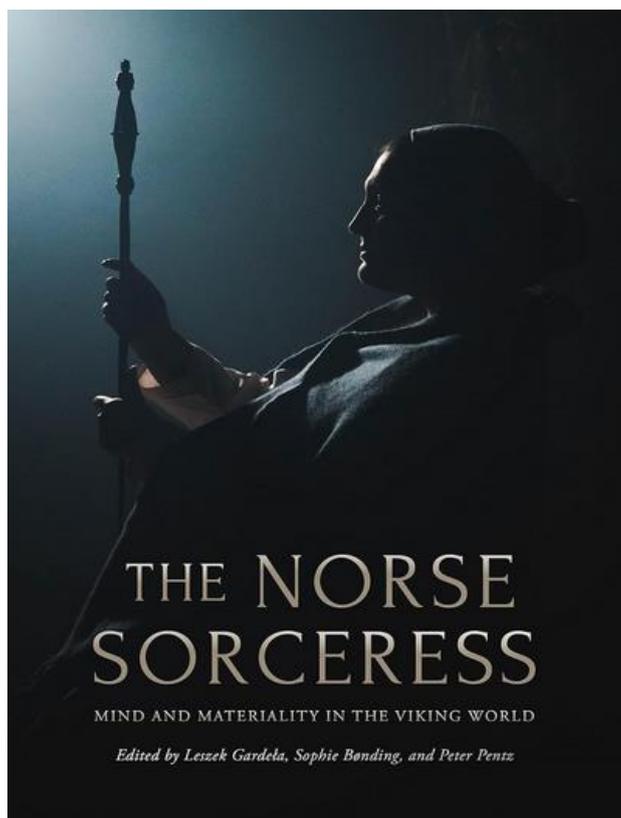


A NEW AND IN-DEPTH ANTHOLOGY ON THE FEMALE RITUAL
SPECIALISTS OF THE VIKING AGE: *THE NORSE SORCERESS – MIND AND
MATERIALITY IN THE VIKING WORLD*



GARDEŁA, Leszek; BØNDING, Sophie & PENTZ, Peter. *The Norse Sorceress: Mind and Materiality in the Viking World*. England: Oxbow Books Limited, 2023.

Victor Hugo Sampaio Alves¹

A considerable amount of time has elapsed since the release of a comprehensive book dedicated to the examination of ritual specialists or magical practices during the Viking Age. Apart from Neil Price's second edition of *The Viking Way*, published in 2019, and Clive Tolley's earlier work in 2009, *Shamanism in Norse Myth and Magic*, as well as Stephen Mitchell's

¹ Independent Scholar. Holds a PhD in Religious Studies from the Federal University of Paraíba (UFPB). Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1606-7819>. E-mail address: victorweg77@gmail.com

Witchcraft and Magic in the Nordic Middle Ages (2011), such themes appear to have been somewhat marginalized in most anthologies and encyclopedic publications on Viking Age Scandinavia. This is evident in works like Jürg Glauser, Pernille Hermann, and Stephen Mitchell's *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies* (2018), which includes only a few chapters on the remembrance of ritual performances, and in the extensive *The Pre-Christian Religions of the North* project. The latter, in its last four volumes named *History and Structures*, addresses magic, ritual, and their place in Norse pre-Christian religions. Although these works were not explicitly conceptualized to focus on magic, rituals, and the specialists practicing them, they rather emphasize the significance of these practices within the broader religious and mythological framework of Medieval Scandinavia.

Considering this context, the significance of the new publication becomes evident upon reading its title. An in-depth and updated analysis exclusively dedicated to exploring the various roles of Scandinavia's female ritual specialists, the *vǫlur*, has been long-awaited. The book, organized by three esteemed specialists in Medieval and Viking Age Scandinavia—Leszek Gardela, Sophie Bønding, and Peter Pentz—encompasses contributions from over thirty scholars. An interesting editorial choice was to invite not only well-established scholars like Terry Gunnell, Neil Price, and Karen Bek-Pedersen but also young and independent researchers who, despite remaining uninvited to major works in the field, have valuable perspectives to offer. This approach provides an opportunity for young researchers to contribute and learn from well-established authors, fostering a collaborative scholarly environment.

Another notable strength of the book lies in its interdisciplinary approach, blending religious studies, cognitive archaeology, history, and the study of mythography with a "critical blending of academic approaches" (p. ix). This approach aims to unveil "the mental and material universes of the people who inhabited Scandinavia and Iceland between the eighth and eleventh centuries AD" (p. ix), with a specific focus on women who played central roles in various aspects of Viking Age societies, particularly in ritual and magical spheres.

The book commences with introductory remarks by Neil Price, followed by the editors' introduction outlining the project's inception in 2021 and its connection to the discovery of

over thirty thousand archaeological artifacts by the National Museum of Denmark. The result of this undertaking, as the editors contend, is the book presented here.

Structured into five parts, the first, "Rituals, Myths, and Material Culture," addresses essential but broad topics. The section begins with Sophie Bønding's comprehensive presentation of the *vǫlva*'s ritual repertoire, a crucial text for anyone seeking a deeper understanding of the rituals practiced by these women. Following this, the section delves into the connections between material objects and their symbolic capacities for carrying out supernatural agencies, gender relations and constructions in the Viking World, and evidence of prophecy and divination in folklore materials.

The second part, "Places and Spaces: Rituals and their Settings," consists of ten chapters covering a range of topics from landscape issues and cultic sites to the role of women in sacrifices, including the debated cultic place in Gamla Uppsala. This part introduces lesser-explored subjects, such as processions and other rituals involving movement and dislocation in Medieval Scandinavia, as well as ritual activities within domestic work and domestic life. Elite rituals and the afterlife are also addressed.

The subsequent part, "Animals in Ritual Practices," contributes to the discussion about the role of animals in magical and ritual practices. With a general introduction by Sophie Bønding, three chapters explore avian animals, horses, and canids. Given the deep presence of animal symbolism in Norse mythology, these chapters offer insights into their significance in magical and ritual contexts. The section concludes with a chapter revisiting the Oseberg Ship, focusing on the wagon found inside it.

The last two parts constitute the core of the book. Part four, "Ritual Specialists," offers a concise yet insightful introduction by Leszek Gardela, covering necessary subjects for understanding the chapters in this section. Contributions include a critical reassessment of the Fyrkat 4 grave by Peter Pentz, an examination of textiles by Ulla Mannering and Charlotte Rimstad, and an analysis of the remains of the *vǫlva* by Else Roesdahl. Neil Price contributes a chapter on the Birka Sorcerers, Sofie Laurine Albris explores female names in pre-Christian Scandinavia from an etymological perspective, and Jeanette Varberg analyzes gender matters in relation to prophecy and magic practices in pre-Viking Age Denmark. The final two



chapters focus on the findings of a vǫlva from Gutdalen, emphasizing performance issues, and probable burial sites of ritual specialists from Sjælland.

Chapter five concentrates on "The Sorcerer's Toolkit and Other Ritual Paraphernalia," manifesting a strong inclination toward archaeological findings. While this approach is not problematic, the authors, in line with the book's proposal, consistently integrate literary sources on religion and mythology. This section associates specific archaeological evidence with attempts to uncover the mentality behind its symbolism and place in ritual and religious life. The three editors provide an extensive introduction, leading to chapters exploring necklaces, banners, masks, chairs, wheels, and chariots. The authors speculate on their possible uses within ritual structures, manipulated by the hands of the vǫlur. Chapters such as Mads Dengsø's "Miniature Chairs: On Seeresses, the Future, and Conflict" and Matthew Delvaux's "Necklaces and the Sorcerer's Toolkit in the Viking Age" offer refreshing new insights into past thematic discussions.

Noteworthy contributions include Terry Gunnell's "The Magic of the Mask" and Leszek Gardela's two chapters, "Miniature Weapons in the Viking World" and "Magic Staffs in the Viking World." In both cases, the authors, experts in their respective fields, demonstrate great expertise.

The editing process is commendable, particularly the system of cross-references marked with an arrow (→) highlighting subjects appearing in other parts of the book. This aids readers searching for specific topics or facilitates comparisons of information. However, the absence of a general and a name index poses a challenge for researchers.

While recognizing the constraints imposed by editorial limitations and rules, including book length, it seems that this would have been an opportune moment to introduce a comparative framework. Studies that compare the toolkit, performance, behavior, and worldview of the vǫlur with Saami (noaidit), Balto-Finnic (tietäjät), or even Siberian (shamans) ritual specialists abound. Therefore, a sixth part encompassing state-of-the-art comparative perspectives with at least neighboring peoples would have been valuable. Despite this suggestion, it can be confidently asserted that this book is a pivotal contribution to the study of magic and ritual in Viking Age Scandinavia. It is certain to become a reference point in the

field. Highly recommended for anyone interested in the history of magic and/or ritual in Scandinavia, from beginners to advanced specialized researchers.

Bibliographical References

GLAUSER, Jürg; HERMANN, Pernille; MITCHELL, Stephen. *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019.

MITCHELL, Stephen A. *Witchcraft and Magic in the Nordic Middle Ages*. Filadélfia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011.

PRICE, Neil. *The Viking Way: Magic and Mind in Late Iron Age Scandinavia*. Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2019.

SCHJØDT, Jens Peter; ANDRÉN, Anders; LINDOW, John. *The Pre-Christian Religions of the North: History and Structures*. Londres: Brepols, 2020.

TOLLEY, Clive. *Shamanism in Norse Myth and Magic*, v.1. Helsinque: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2009.