1. Introduction

The focus of this thesis will be to discuss the presence of female warriors in the Viking age. Though there are definitely archaeological findings of females buried with weapons and other artefacts related to warfare it is hard to say if these were actual warriors and how common or uncommon they were. By looking into written sources and comparing them to archaeological sources of mainly Viking age graves and analyse those that contain women with weapons, I hope to be able to shed some light on the phenomenon of female warrior graves from the Viking age.

1.1. Background

There has been a lot of research done about Viking age society in Scandinavia and the Norse influenced parts of western Europe and the eastern regions of Russia, Ukraine and beyond, but the consensus with scholars about women in the Viking age seems to often simply confine them to household roles.\(^1\) While female warriors appeared to have existed, these are often relegated to the fringe and the unusual of what it meant to be a woman with modern traditional gender roles probably playing an effect in the interpretations, which mainly identifies the warrior lifestyle to that of a man. When a person does not conform to the expectations of their gender roles it often leads to strong reactions from the society around them and so we can examine the definitions and theoretical limits of acceptable behaviour in contemporary sources.\(^2\)

A problem with Viking age research of older archaeological excavations is that often times, the leading archaeologists did not bother performing osteological analyses on the human remains found in graves and simply determined the gender of the buried person by looking at the grave goods\(^3\), this leads one to think of the probability of pre-determined gender roles of the archaeologists own times to have influenced their interpretations. Elisabeth Arwill-Nordbladh wrote a short book on gender research in archaeology and provided an interesting example of gender bias in a series of articles written about an archaeological find. In 1999 an extraordinary find was made in a cave in southern France, a pair of children's

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\(^1\) This is discussed in more detail in chapter 2.
\(^2\) McLaughlin 1990: 193
footprints had been preserved in the mud floor, 26000 years ago. The newspapers of the time reported them as from a boy around 10 years old who probably scraped animal bones together with his father. The tracks were from a child but somewhere between finding the footprints and reporting them, the child had become a boy. The cave also had extensive cave paintings which leads to an idea of hunting and magic being associated with the cave, and since these activities were thought of as masculine, the child became a boy which then became a boy and his father (though no adult footprints were found). The women were here completely absent, invisible, and the find was determined to be male due to a perceived masculine activity.

While it is not possible at this time to re-examine every single Viking age grave with modern technologies and osteological analyses with the precept of these possible mistakes, it does good to bear in mind that there may have been a lot more women in warrior graves than we know. My work will mostly include finds that have been osteologically sexed and are with minimal doubt women in warrior type graves. There are many types of distinctions between men and women, common people and royal/noble people and how their graves were composed. Due to the religious beliefs of the ancient Norse, graves were often filled with grave goods that the dead could use in the afterlife - gold, silver and other valuable items, weapons, tools and household items - which were to be brought by the dead into the afterlife. The social status of a person was also reflected in their grave goods, the poor would have very little in death as they had in life while the rich could have horses, their favourite pet and sometimes even slaves accompanying them to the grave and warriors would be buried with their weapons.

A Viking warrior must have been proud of their combat exploits and even though most Norsemen who participated in raids and battles were also farmers, their graves are filled with weapons and loot. Though most graves from the Viking age are not warrior graves, the ones that are, come mostly from men. Men and women both had their roles in society and it is not impossible to think that these roles could change or be switched, men have been found with household items and women with warrior equipment in their graves; these are the exceptions to the rules that I want to explore, in this case focusing on the women with warrior equipment rather than the men with household items. It is also highly possible that all those buried with

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warrior equipment were not actually warriors but aspired to be or wanted to be perceived as such and thus their graves could simply show what they wanted to show, not what they actually were, this goes for both men and women. It is also thought that in the case of gender crossings between men and women, men who behaved like women were often subjected to humiliation and shame while women who behaved like men were often seen in a positive way and were accorded honour. Through history, the warrior mentality and lifestyle is not limited to men and there have been many examples of female warriors, from semi-mythological amazons, to female samurai and other female warriors of different times and cultures so it's not impossible to think that even Viking age Scandinavia had it’s share of women warriors.

1.1.1. Women warriors of other cultures

To give the reader an idea of the concept of female warriors throughout history I want to give a few examples of their occurrences in different times and places.

There have been many women throughout history that have become legends through their military exploits, and many cultures have been utilizing female warriors from the ancient world up the modern world. There are also many mythological and semi-mythological representations of female warriors, Amazons being the most notable and recognizable but also ancient queens and empresses, pirates and other legendary female heroes. I will not bring up these mythological representations but instead focus on those which are considered historical, but it’s worth knowing that there has, for a long time, existed a tradition of representing women in warrior roles in stories, myths and legends.

The Ancient Greek writer Herodotus wrote about the Sauromatae, descendants of the ancient Scythians and described their women as participating in hunting and fighting alongside their male counterparts. Excavations of their graves in the Eurasian steppes confirmed his description as female skeletons were found to be buried with bronze tipped arrows and daggers, their legs showed signs of being bowlegged, which shows that they were often horse mounted, and some skeletons showed combat inflicted damage. The common female graves contained what would be expected, feminine items such as beads and jewellery but the aforementioned bowlegged women with warrior equipment were found in the same

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6 Moen 2010: 76.
cemeteries. These Scythian warrior women have been interpreted as horse mounted archers who would be in the back of the fighting force launching arrows at the enemy, engaging in battle while simultaneously being at a safe distance from close up melee combat, possibly to ensure that the Scythians could utilise women in battle while still protecting their reproductive assets.\textsuperscript{7}

In the great war between Persia and Greece, a woman known as Artemisia I of Caria commanded a fleet of 5 ships for the Persians which were said to have been the best ships in the Persian fleet after those of Sidon. She was praised for her intelligence and cunning and was one of King Xerxes most trusted military advisors.\textsuperscript{8} The histories, written by Herodotus in 440 BC, contained detailed accounts of the Greeks war with the Persians and when speaking of the Persian military, Herodotus talks about Artemisia. He does not feel the need to mention any of the other Persian captains by name other than her because he found it a wonder that a woman fought against Greece and that she followed the army under no compulsion. “She was the leader of the men of Halicarnassus and Cos and Nisyrus and Calydnos, and provided five ships”\textsuperscript{9} The idea of a woman fighting, especially fighting against Greece, caused the Athenians to put a bounty for her capture of ten thousand drachmas and Xerxes himself was said to have been so impressed by her that he supposedly exclaimed “My men have become women and my women men”.\textsuperscript{10}

During the Viking age, when the Norse came to the British Isles the native population were not ready to give up their territory to these invaders and great battles were fought. In the early 10th C. the daughter of Alfred the great of Wessex, Aethelflaed, assumed the role of “Lady of the Mercians” when her husband died and actively participated in attacks on Scandinavian settlements in northern England together with her brother Alfred. Aethelflaed and her exploits are recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles and the Mercian Register “She fought the Danes in her own name until her death, at which point her realm passed under direct

\textsuperscript{7} Streatfield 2016: 3f.
\textsuperscript{8} Morris & Powell 2010: 264.
\textsuperscript{9} Herodotus. 7.99.
\textsuperscript{10} Herodotus. 8.93.
The middle ages saw many women participating in battle and Aethelflaed was but one of many. 12

During the feudal period of Japan, early 12th to late 14th C. there were female samurai named Onna-Bugeisha. These were not expected to participate in campaigns like their male counterparts (though this happened at times) but were instead left in charge of the defence of the homestead and towns from thieves and raiders during times of war. They were trained by their husbands or their lords and equipped with a Naginata, a polearm weapon, in order to provide military security to the lords base while the army was away. 13

These are just a few examples of women holding military roles that put them in direct contact with an enemy force, something that is obviously not unique to the men of their respective societies, however few they were in comparison to their male counterparts, they still existed.

1.2. Purpose and research questions

The main purpose of this thesis is to explore the female warriors of the Viking age and see how common they were in general as well as between different regions. I also want to find out if there are any differences in terms of composition between warrior graves and find an explanation as to why they might be different. And finally by looking at the written sources I want to compare them to the archaeological sources.

My main questions can be summarized as:

1. How many female warrior graves can we identify at the moment and where are they?
2. What criteria can we use to determine whether or not someone was a warrior and what other possible types of identities can be interpreted through weapon graves?
3. What do the written sources tell us about women warriors and how does it compare to the archaeological sources?

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12 See McLaughlin 1990.
1.3. Theory

The nature of this thesis draws quite heavily on the aspects of gender and identity. Gender studies and the different approaches one can have to it within other theories will be the main focus I will have when interpreting the archaeological and written sources.

When making interpretations we as humans often have a need to categorize and structure everything into orders and boxes of recognition which makes things that do not fit into our pre-existing ideas of how something should be, something to be “fixed”. The theory of Structuralism explains this as an effect of mostly language and cultural bias since different languages hold different words to describe for example gender.\(^{14}\) If something appears to cross the gender barriers we have in a language or culture we try to lump them into either a desire to join the other gender or imagine a third option that other languages other than English hold in order to structure what we think we know.

Though I would not label this thesis as feminist in nature there are definitely aspects of feminist theory that will be applied. Feminism has gone through many different theoretical approaches since it’s initial inception in the late 18th century.\(^ {15}\) In the start it was solely about women gaining equal political and judicial rights as men by gaining the right to vote. With time however, feminists realized that this was not enough to gain true equality between the sexes. Although I do not intend to give the reader a complete history lesson on feminism I will rather say that there are many different approaches to it that evolved through time.\(^ {16}\) The aspect of feminism I’m most interested in is that of the radical, postmodern and psychoanalytic feminism of the second wave of feminism in the 1960’s which sought to understand the processes that made women into \textit{women} in our society.\(^ {17}\) Arguments as to what makes women \textit{women} range from the aspect of birthing which turns women into mothers which in itself submits them to men, to psychological differences in the way that boys and girls are raised in ways that encourages boys to be strong, competitive and emotionally distant while girls on the other hand are raised to be more sensitive, less competitive and submissive.

\(^{14}\) McGowan 2013: 14.
\(^{15}\) Hekman 2013: 96.
\(^{16}\) To further explore the contribution of feminism in archaeology, please see for example: Sorensen 1988 and Gilchrist 1993.
\(^{17}\) Hekman 2013: 97.
Postmodern perspectives reject the ideas of universal truths and instead say that truth is a matter of perspective that changes over time, including the discourse of gender identity, which is created by society. This is an interesting viewpoint which helps to explore the perspectives we have on women and the concept of gender, how the ideas of what it means to be a woman changes over time and so we should not be constrained to the modern perceptions held by our own society.

This leads us to gender theory which in its early stages related mostly to sexual orientation and its different representations in gender identities and forms of acceptance throughout history. Gender theorists recognize the differences shown throughout different cultures in history in terms of sexual desire. For example, comparisons can be made between ancient greek culture in literature and history and the sexuality in the Roman era to the new rules and regulations of the new Christian era on what was and wasn’t acceptable sexual and domestic relations. The emphasis in early Christianity was to distinguish itself from pre-Christian views and norms and establish well-defined rules on male-female marriage, sexual relations and domestic roles while defining male-male and female-female relations as socially unacceptable. With the rise of social sciences came the scrutinization of individual humans, social groups and entire populations in order to describe and ascribe their function. People were then examined and valued against the idealized norm of white, bourgeois, Christian and law-abiding men. Other sciences, including history and archaeology, also applied these values when examining social subgroups not complicit with these idealized norms such as religious minorities, non-whites, the working class, criminals, and women. The early concepts that arose with the social sciences does provide an interesting insight into what could have gone into early archaeological interpretations of sites that did not conform to the norms of the times. Even children were assigned gender roles defined by the material culture found with their bones, even though osteological determinations of sex on children's skeletons are literally impossible to make at such an early age as all the biological indicators of sex does not appear until puberty. In modern archaeology, gender theory combined with feminist theory has started to grow since the 1980’s, called the archaeology of gender and it has

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18 Hekman 2013: 100.
19 Hekman 2013: 102.
20 Hall 2013: 108.
21 Hall 2013: 110.
sought to correct male bias in archaeology, critique the structures of archaeological practice, reassess the history of archaeology and a male bias in academic study within archaeology and other sciences.23 Most importantly I feel is the growing interest in studying gender in the archaeological record. The archaeology of gender puts heavy emphasis on the difference between biological sex and gender identity. Biological sex being what we are born as, male or female biological attributes, while gender being culturally and socially constructed.24 This means that some activities, clothing, and objects would have culturally specific gender requirements; traditional ideas could for example be that men hunted and women gathered, men fought and women cared for children, men wore pants and women dresses etc. As we discussed earlier, these ideas of what men and women should or should not do (or wear, or use etc.) are relative to their context; temporal, geographical and cultural contexts all matter when interpreting what something should or should not be related to which gender.25 This though, does also begs the question of how many genders there really are, is it only male and female, is there a third option, a fourth, more? Gender in itself being a construct of society, in our modern western world we are accustomed to a dualistic idea of male and female genders with some who cross into the other, but never into something entirely different.26 In some cultures, three genders were common, male, female and something in between, for example priest/religious official.27

Another matter of importance is to explain how appropriate it is to speak of gender instead of identity, are they the same or different? Gender as itself relates directly to biological sex, there are men and women, and gender defines which is which in a social context. Identity on the other hand, is in a way also related to gender as it relates to the same type of roles that gender attempts to define, but instead focuses on the individual contexts which outweighs the societal context. What identity a person had in the individual context, whether it was in terms of their sexuality, age, race, family roles (wed, unwed, mother, daughter, son, brother, sister, father etc.), profession and many others can be much broader than the societal context of gender which is an identity in itself applied on a broader spectrum in the context of the

23 Johnson 2010: 125.
24 Johnson 2010: 129.
society in which it exists e.g. a mother is a mother regardless of the social context while gender is defined differently depending on the society.\(^\text{28}\)

The way we define gender and identity is often based on the material culture we surround ourselves with and since archaeology is in it’s core a science based on material culture, we make interpretations based on the artefacts we find. When making interpretations and doing research on past cultures, we look at the material remains we find since textual sources are often non-existent, and when they do exist, there are several problems with them. The study of textual sources is relegated to historians and whatever is not known from written sources are handed off to archaeologists to fill in the blanks. Early archaeology was indeed seen as a sub-science of history but many archaeologists of later times have rejected this concept and instead see archaeology as, worst case, complementary to history or, best case, more important than history as written texts often reflect biased versions of the past, written by those in power and reflecting the perspectives of the higher echelons of society, leaving the lower classes unheard. Archaeologists see archaeology as the voice of the voiceless and minorities of different types are brought to the forefront, the common people, the poor people and those on the fringe of society. With material remains we are able to reconstruct cultures who did not have a written history or complement those who did, we are able to determine certain things about the people who used the items, their social status, their roles in society, their religious beliefs and much more. In this thesis the material culture related to the warrior identity and the human remains in their context will be the main focus of study with the women warriors, in the fringe of their social setting, being brought out to the forefront.

The last topic of theory I will bring up is that of ideology. As we see in today's world, religious and political dogma is a driving factor in conflicts around the world. Different opinions, ideas and beliefs that are inherently incompatible with each other causes at best, friction, at worst, war. The Viking age was a time of massive changes occurring in Europe, Christianity in the south and paganism in the north. It is possible that these religious differences played a role in determining and continuing conflict in the Viking age as religious and political differences enables a dualistic view of “us” and “them” justifying the motivations warriors had to go abroad.

\(^{28}\) Bahn 2008: 220.
1.4 Method

The brunt of the archaeological analyses done in this thesis will be by closely examining a number of grave sites as case studies that represent either different locations, different compositions and different times with the connecting factor of being osteologically sexed women with warrior equipment dated to the Viking age. Since I will not have access to the direct sources I will be limited to the work and analyses made by the leading excavators of each case study, but I will make my own interpretations which might or might not fall in line with theirs.

Since graves were the final resting place of people there are many things that can be learned from them; the skeletal remains can show the nutrition of the person, prolonged diseases that left marks on the bones or trauma induced damages. The composition of the grave goods (if found) can tell a lot about the person’s life and social status, their main occupation, their country of origin and cultural exchanges. There are some problems with this however, since the dead did not bury themselves, the compositions we see were made by the living and thus they could represent a biased version of the dead, a perceived reality instead of an actual reality.29 By analysing the graves and looking at the origin of grave goods compared to the origin of the person, cultural exchanges can be interpreted. Stylistic and religious indicators of cultural belonging can show how a person might have travelled and brought their culture with them or in some cases, mixed their culture with that of the native populations. Typological analyses of items can be used to establish a chronology and of course a stratigraphical analysis can be used to determine the process of making the grave; were there more than one person buried in the same location, are they contemporary or do they represent two or more instances of use? Even though a warrior grave does not always represent a warrior's grave I will still look at the combinations of women and warrior items in graves and then determine the likelihood of these women actually being warriors instead of those performing the burial trying to mimic or present these women as such. I will look for swords, axes, spears, bows (and arrows) and shields that were are all items used by the Vikings in their battles and left to the warrior in his or her grave to use in the afterlife. Ian Peirce established a typology on Viking age swords in the style of Ewart Oakeshott's previous

29 Parker Pearson 1999: 3.
typology on medieval swords, this has and will be used for dating purposes in the analysis and interpretation of the swords found in female graves.

By looking at the wear and tear of the weapons found it can be determined if they were used in actual combat, analysing the weapons and looking beyond the damage caused by corrosion and the process of excavation, any dents or jagged edges on a sword could indicate whether or not the weapon had seen extensive use in combat, either by the person buried with it or by someone else. Modern technologies could also find traces of blood and other bodily fluids even after being cleaned and underground for millennia but since I will relying on reports and findings of other archaeologists, their methods used will be my main source and due to budget restraints facing all archaeological work, this type of high end analysis is less likely to have been used.

Beside graves and grave goods, other archaeological sources will be used in the form of imagery, such as Gotlandic picture stones and different individual types of finds. By researching archaeological data I will look for any individual finds that can be linked to female warriors, either through imagery or by functionality. Runestones mentioning women are not that common and runestones talking about female warriors are non-existent. But picture stones often have scenes carved into them that can be compared to written sources on Norse mythology such as the Icelandic sagas. Archaeological knowledge on male and female dress can be cross-referenced to pictorial representations of individuals and then used to determine if there are any references to women taking part in battles, either mythological or historical.

I will draw from a selection of the Icelandic sagas as well as other sources from the times the sagas describe and after to see how often female warriors were described and use this when looking for possible motivations as to why women might have participated in battles and what these sources tell us about female warriors such as legendary shieldmaiden Lagertha, Brynhildur the Valkyrie and others.

Other stories might not actively speak of shieldmaidens or Valkyries but rather speak of women who exacted revenge for ill deeds committed against them or who took up arms in

30 See chapter 3.4.
32 Volsunga saga.
times of necessity such as in the case of Freydis, daughter of Eirik the Red, who fearlessly took up a sword to defend her camp in Vinland from marauding natives. I will also bring these stories up for examples of female participation in combat during times of necessity.

Some myths do have a basis in reality, either perceived or real and thus it is not impossible to think of the sagas as having a basis in stories of real people. Since many sagas are considered to be of high historicity, it is likely that any female fighters mentioned together with their male counterparts did indeed exist in some cases. If a woman warrior is mentioned in other written sources of the time, it is possible that she was based on some truth depending on the historicity of said source. And in the least, could these stories of female warriors have served as some sort of inspiration for women to take up the sword, much like modern books, movies and other types of media can make people aspire to certain professions or attributes.

1.4.1. Warriors in gender and identity

As mentioned earlier there is a difference between identity and gender, while we can think of “warrior” as an identity held by those who chose that lifestyle or profession, in the English language a warrior is a warrior regardless of gender unless you specify before the word, but as we can see with the study of language, they differ in many ways, especially with the gender denominations. For example, in Latin “Warrior” is gendered, bellator for a male warrior and bellatrix for a female one. In Swedish and Icelandic however, the term warrior is gender neutral, krigare and striðsmaður respectively, with an added gender specification before the word to denote if the warrior is female, kvinnlig krigare and kona striðsmaður. So in this case, the difference between identity and gender is one of linguistic definition which is based on a broader cultural bias.

1.4.2. Osteology - Sexing bones

While material culture can be used to determine gender in a social context, bones can be (among other things) used to determine the biological sex. While the skeletal morphology of certain primates give us a near perfect way of determining sex, humans are harder to determine 100%, we have far fewer differences between the sexes in terms of skeletal

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33 Eirik the Red’s saga: verse 11.
34 Such as the discovery of Troy by Heinrich Schliemann: Schliemann 1875.
morphology. What osteologists look for in human skeletal remains are mostly features in the skull and the pelvis. In general an estimation can be made by observing the size and robustness of the skull. Essentially, men’s skulls are more robust and bigger, while women's skulls have softer and smaller features in areas such as the eyebrow ridges, the glabellar regions, the temporals, and nuchal lines. Women also tend to have more bossed frontal and parietal bones. The same applies with the pelvis, with the male pelvis having more robust and having thicker ridges and subpubic concavities than the female. However, the pelvis in women are adapted to childbirthing with a bigger and wider subpubic angle, ventral arc and pelvic inlet. Other parts of the skeleton can also be used like the teeth and bones of the extremities, but these are often far harder to make an accurate estimation with while the skull and pelvis are mostly accurate. A great deal of the expectation of osteological sexing has to do with the preservation of the bones and estimations are not always 100% accurate, but at the moment, they are an inexpensive and good source to use to determine sex with the remains that we have. It bears to remember however, that humans across the globe are not uniform, there are regional and sometimes local differences that need to be considered.

1.4.3. Geographical and temporal limitations

I will look into all the Scandinavian countries of Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Iceland as well the Norse influenced areas of Britain, Ireland and France. The eastern expanse of Russia, Ukraine and beyond will be excluded due to the massiveness of the area as well as language barriers. Since i can read and translate most Scandinavian languages these areas will not be too hard to examine.

The core Scandinavian countries had a lot of visitors from far away lands that described their encounters with the Norse as well as Christian missionaries who also described the lands that they visited, these textual sources have proven invaluable for research on Viking age Scandinavia. Iceland has a rich source of texts in the form of Eddas and Sagas which, although mostly written down post-Viking age, does provide valuable insights into the Viking age.

The Entirety of Scandinavia coupled with Scandinavian influenced areas would be too large of an area to be able to examine too closely at this moment and therefore I will search for a certain amount of case studies from the different areas while limiting myself to a few areas of importance and a certain amount of case studies from the regions and times. While limiting my area to western Europe I feel it is still very important to recognize that the eastern expanse of Viking exploration and settlement also contains an immense amount of information on the Viking age and archaeological excavations in Russia and Ukraine showed a high amount of female burials, 60% of Scandinavian graves in Russia were female.\textsuperscript{38} However, it is best not to delve too deep into both areas of expansion at this time and instead focus on one.

The era known as the Viking age is defined differently depending on the location but is usually regarded as starting in the late 8th C. with the first attack in England by Norse raiders.\textsuperscript{39} Although attacks to the eastern regions is well attested before this date, the first attack in western Europe first caused scholars to label the time period the Viking age. Since western Europe will be the focal point in this thesis, this will be when my main focus will start. The end of the Viking age also differs heavily between areas but it is mostly agreed to be somewhere around 1050 AD when Christianity started to be the main religion for the Norsemen in many areas, but even here the adoption of Christianity is that of varying dates with Denmark being the first Scandinavian country to adopt Christianity as the state religion in the 10th C. with Norway following soon after, Iceland formally adopting it in the year 1000 through an Alþing decision and Sweden being the last to do so, in the first half of the 12th C.\textsuperscript{40} This brings a roughly 300 year period between the start and the end of the Viking age.

Ideally, we would supplement our archaeological findings with contemporary written sources, but unfortunately there aren't that many to begin with. The contemporary writings on Viking activity in the British Isles and continental Europe are described in annals and chronicles. These, though written mostly during the time they describe, are sometimes biased and contain information that might be fabricated in different ways. With Christian chroniclers describing, often violent, contact with a heathen people, there is bound to be exaggerations. Even with the

\textsuperscript{38} Jesch 1991: 36.

\textsuperscript{39} Haywood 1995: 54.

\textsuperscript{40} Brink 1990: 78.
possibility of misinformation in these sources, I will be looking into them, albeit with a critical eye.

There are some written sources I will look into that were written down hundreds of years after the Viking age. Saxo Grammaticus will be the first of these, he wrote the history of the Danes in the 12th C. Though there are some exaggerations and bias bound to be in his text, like the contemporary sources, I will look at them also with a critical eye. The Icelandic Sagas were mostly written down in the 13th and 14th centuries but many are thought to have been originally created with oral tradition far earlier than that and many depict Viking age events and people of historical and semi-historical provenance while some go back even further to pre-Viking age stories and mythological heroes. The different sagas will also be looked at in regards to the predisposed ideas of the writers and their historicity and possible bias.

1.4.4. Etymology

For the purposes of simplicity I will refer to the names of people, gods and places in their English versions rather than Swedish or Icelandic. All Nordic languages originate from the common old Norse language of the Viking age and although Icelandic and Faroese are the closest to it, all the languages have evolved and changed over time, meaning even if I chose to write the Icelandic names, they are not equal to the old names. Therefore it is simply easier to go with the English versions.

There is some controversy regarding the usage of the terms Viking and Viking age. Viking is a word mostly used for those Scandinavians who went pillaging and raiding on sea and land and does not include traders and settlers, though some of these sometimes raided as well. The exact origin of the word Viking is contested but the main theory is that the word itself come from older words of contemporary written sources in old English that translated to pirate or raider. Though the Viking raiders were but a small part of the Scandinavian culture in this time they nonetheless made a big enough impact to give the name to the era. I will use the term Viking age when referring to this period because it has become such a commonplace name for this era, even though some scholars find this term misleading and want to change it. I will use the terms Norseman/Norsemen when speaking of the general population of the

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41 Haywood 1995: 94.
42 Williams 2008: 193.
Viking age and only refer to the non-gender specific warriors as Vikings and the female warriors as female Vikings or female/women warriors. For the title I chose the term Female warriors in order to make the distinction early on between regular women and warrior women.

Sometimes the term Shieldmaiden is used in the sagas to denote both Valkyries and human female warriors. The term Valkyrie is mostly used when referring to the deities who brought fallen warriors from the battlefield to Valhalla but they are also known as battle-, shield- and wish-maidens.\(^43\) Shieldmaiden and Valkyrie will only be used when they are referenced as so in written sources, otherwise female Viking or female warrior is adequate and more fitting.

1.4.5. Layout

I have divided this thesis into a total of 6 chapters (including the bibliography) with several subchapters. The upcoming chapter 2 will deal with the current thoughts on female gender roles in the Viking age from recent literature and what they have to say on female warriors. Chapter 3 will be focused on the primary written sources on the subject, Icelandic sagas, Irish annals, contemporary writings on the Vikings and other written and pictorial sources. Chapter 4 will be the biggest and most important part of this thesis, here I will list several instances of female weapon graves from the Viking age and present them as separate case studies with all the available information we have of them. I will try to find examples from as many of the Norse influenced areas and see if there is a higher amount in some and fewer (or none) in some. Here I will also bring up other artefacts that are not connected with graves but that have relevance to female warriors. Chapter 5 will be where I analyse these finds together with the written sources and explain what conclusions can be made from the archaeological sources and the written sources and hopefully answer my research questions.

\(^{43}\) Guerber 1909: 22.
2. Previous research

Although literature on the Viking age is extensive, there hasn't been too much dedicated to the specific topic of female warriors in the Viking age. When it comes to the women of the Viking age, they are often relegated to a single chapter where the social roles of women compared to that of the men are described. I will give the reader a few examples of literature on the Viking age and their descriptions of men and women from this time, from general textbooks on the Viking age, to specific works and articles on female warriors within and outside the Viking age.

*The Penguin historical atlas of the Vikings* is a book written by John Haywood in 1995 and has been used as course literature for university courses on the Viking age, it provides a good basic overview of the Viking age in terms of chronology and the society of the ancient Norse. The book is quite short, 144 pages including indexes and extra information, out of these pages only 2 are dedicated to the women of the Viking age. Here he writes that “Men and women had clearly defined and separate social roles in Viking age Scandinavia. Men ploughed, fished, hunted, traded and fought. Most women’s lives were more narrowly confined to the home: they milked the cows and churned butter, ground grain and baked bread, spun wool, wove cloth and looked after the children.” His argument for this is that grave goods mirror these roles “exactly.” He goes on to say that there is no reliable evidence that women ever fought as warriors alongside the men but rather that the women who came with the men on campaigns were their wives who took up the same roles in the camps as they had at home. Though this book is good in the sense that it provides an overview of the Viking age for those interested, the fact that only 2 pages are dedicated to the women makes it look like Viking age history was created solely by men.

Else Roesdahl published *The Vikings: Revised edition* in 1998 and this book has been used as course literature for at least some archaeological university programmes in Scandinavia. In this book we are also told that the women had household roles that were reflected in their grave goods. She mentions how contemporary sources tells us that the women accompanying the great heathen army of ca 890 had supporting roles for the men and were brought to safety

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44 Haywood 1995: 44.
45 Haywood 1995: 45.
46 For myself both in Sweden and Iceland.
along with the children before a battle.\textsuperscript{47} Then she writes that Medieval Irish historians writing about Viking exploits in Ireland included episodes on “wild female warriors” but she dismisses these stories as “probably dramatizations” and then ends with saying that “if any female warriors did exist, there cannot have been many”.\textsuperscript{48} The statement that we know women had supporting roles due to contemporary sources is of course valid but to disregard the sources on female warriors as dramatizations is highly dubious. Here, the idea of female warriors is not entirely dismissed but rather regarded as a very tiny possibility and of being very few in number. Of course I do not disagree that women had domestic roles as is evident of the grave goods accompanying most women, but she doesn't bring up the fact that many women were buried without household items and that some were buried with weapons. Grave goods are not heterogeneous as she seems to imply.

Judith Jesch is a historian who in 1991 published a book titled \textit{Women in the Viking age}, a book that, as implied by the title, focuses entirely on the women of the Viking age. This book will be used in this thesis due to it’s obvious relevance to my topic, however, her interpretations on female warriors are a bit different from my own, but I will get to that later.

Jesch goes through everything related to women, using archaeological and written sources to describe the everyday life of women and their out of the ordinary occurrences in other parts of the Viking world. She describes how women are represented in burial goods, runic inscriptions, pictorial and poetic descriptions. She gives a detailed analysis of the differences and similarities in male and female grave goods, information which I will cite in chapter 4. She also offers a good analysis of what clothing women wore by using multiple sources, pictorial depictions and grave remnants, but emphasizes that what often went into the grave were not everyday attire and that like modern people, they were often buried in their finest clothing and jewellery.\textsuperscript{49} When speaking of the religion of the Viking age she notes that crosses are more commonly found in the graves of women in Birka while men started wearing Thor’s hammers around their necks. She explains this not as an indicator that women were more susceptible to Christianity but that women were more likely to wear pendants.\textsuperscript{50}

When speaking of burial customs she lists several different areas with both male and female

\textsuperscript{47} Roesdahl 1998: 60.
\textsuperscript{48} Roesdahl 1995: 60.
\textsuperscript{49} Jesch 1991: 17f.
\textsuperscript{50} Jesch 1991: 22.
graves and finds that although there are differences on the local scale, in general men and women were buried the same way, some were cremated, some inhumed, some in flat graves, some in boat graves, some in small mounds and some in fantastic royal mounds, men and women alike.\footnote{Jesch 1991: 27-30.}

When speaking on the topic of female warriors she goes through written sources such as Saxo Grammaticus, English, Irish and Frankish annals and chronicles, and the Icelandic sagas. With Saxo, she notes a certain animosity towards the concept of female warriors in his writings since he was a Christian clergyman whose worldview did not fit with that of a woman taking part in a male activity such as war, in his worldview women were only sexual beings.\footnote{Jesch 1991: 178.} One thing she interprets in the story of Lagertha is something I have a hard time agreeing with, when Saxo wrote that “\textit{She (Lagertha) flew round the rear of the unprepared enemy in a circling manoeuvre...}” Jesch interprets this as Lagertha literally flying which she interprets as Saxo imposing Valkyrie powers on her.\footnote{Jesch 1991: 180.} I believe it is more plausible that his usage of the term “\textit{Flew}” was meant metaphorically rather than literally as Jesch believes, as in swiftly moving behind the enemy. A flanking maneuver to route the enemy from behind, such as this, is a common military tactic. As for the sagas, she describes their use as examples of high medieval literature, not as as historical accounts. Though mostly fiction, she recognizes that some of the sagas are based on historical people and events which, though somewhat fictionalized, provide a picture of life in Iceland during the Viking age and has influenced modern views on the era.\footnote{Jesch 1991: 182.} She goes over representations of women in the sagas, including one I will speak of in chapter 3, Freydis Eiriksdottir. She notes an interesting comparison between Freydis and another woman, Gudridr, the former never converting to Christianity as is common in the sagas and the latter spending the last part of her life as a nun and having several descendants who became bishops in Iceland. Freydis was crude and cruel and her brother Leifr, who converted to Christianity, remarked that none of her offspring would prosper. Jesch compares this to Saxo’s descriptions of the “\textit{bad old days}” before Christianity and Gudridrs reformed religious view as what was to be aspired.\footnote{Jesch 1991: 185.}
Jesch’s book gives a very detailed insight into the lives of women from all walks of life, from slaves to queens, in the Viking age using a wide range of credible archaeological sources and makes detailed descriptions of burial customs, dress and jewellery, as well as written mentions of women and their roles in society, making it a very well-rounded and informative source for women in the Viking age.

Megan McLaughlin is a historian with a focus on the central middle ages, social and religious history and the history of gender and women. In 1990 she published an essay titled *The woman warrior: Gender, warfare and society in medieval Europe*. Here she tries to define a warrior as someone who actively participated in battle while also recognizing that some who were considered generals or commanders could also be considered warriors due to their direct contribution to war regardless of how many blows were struck in person. She lists many instances of women participating in battle for many different reasons, some for control over territory, some for temporary necessity such as nuns defending their monastery from bandit attacks (after which they resumed their “feminine occupations”), some for or against their children and some for religious purposes - fighting against the enemies of the faith, for leaders of the church, and in the crusades in the middle east (sometimes disguised as men).

Though she finds the most references to female warriors from the central middle ages she recognizes the fact that earlier accounts may simply have been lost or gone unrecorded but due to the increased sources of the later middle ages it is safer to assume that the decline in recorded female warriors noted a trend of fewer and fewer women participating in battle to levels we are more familiar with today. She explains this decline with the further increased definitions of gender boundaries and their reactions to anomalies with suspicion and sometimes even hostility. Another explanation she offers to this is the decline of feudal society where the domestic sphere was heavily connected to the military, the fighters being personally connected to their lords and ladies in small social spheres. When the state became more centralized, the use of professional armies and mercenary forces increased and replaced the smaller bands of warriors which had sometimes included women. These new fighters received specialized training that excluded women.

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56 McLaughlin 1990: 196.
57 McLaughlin 1990: 199.
58 McLaughlin 1990: 200f.
59 McLaughlin 1990: 205.
The Viking world edited by Stefan Brink in collaboration with Neil Price is one of the most extensive works on the Viking age, including papers by many different authors on a wide range of topics. Chapter 4 of the book is dedicated to the roles of women in the Viking age with emphasis on women's roles in the political sphere. "Sexual politics" and marriage is explained as being the most important aspect of the women and the only way to get any saying in the political arena. The women of sagas and written sources are limited in their lives to that of their sexual power because they could only gain status and wealth through their relationships with men, either as wives or concubines. Married women had a significantly higher status than unmarried women but concubines sometimes had close to equal power as the wives. Women gained more power after their husbands deaths as the status and wealth of the men often transferred over to the widows.\(^60\)

In the same book, when speaking of the equipment of the Vikings we learn that swords, axes, spears and lances, and bows and arrows were all used by the Vikings and that swords were the most highly prized assets in their arsenal. Some swords were highly decorated with silver or copper inlays of geometric, religious or animal motifs in the pommels and guards. Some swords also had gold or silver wiring around the handles.\(^61\) The most common weapon found in the archaeological record are axes, these would have been the cheaper alternative to the sword for close quarter melee combat and most warrior graves ranging from the upper to the lowest social standings had axes in them. Axes were made from iron and were often very plain, although unusual sizes and shapes have turned up and even axe heads with copper, silver or even gold inlays have been found.\(^62\) Since axes were also used as tools for many purposes it is sometimes unknown if the axe-heads found in graves were used as weapons, tools, or both. When it comes to women buried with axes, the question is raised whether these would have been "true" weapons or merely part of an assemblage of tools or kitchen utensils used by "the mistress of the household".\(^63\) This is interesting to read because axes were very uncommon in the graves of women, so when they are found, many scholars follow this idea of axes being weapons in men's graves and household tools in women's graves, more on this later.

\(^{60}\) Magnusdottir 2008: 41.

\(^{61}\) Pedersen 2008: 204f.

\(^{62}\) Pedersen 2008: 205f.

\(^{63}\) Pedersen 2008: 206.
The most recent academic work I have found which exclusively focuses on female warriors in the Viking age was published by Polish archaeologist Leszek Gardela in 2013, titled Warrior women in Viking age Scandinavia: A preliminary archaeological study. His study was conducted in many ways similar to my own, exploring the concepts of gender and identity, including examples of female weapon graves as well as written sources that reference female warriors. He brings up some examples of females buried with weapons, one such is from Denmark where a woman was found with a 9th C. spearhead by her legs, spearheads are extremely rare in female graves and this being the only occurrence in Denmark. This he explains, could come from a magic staff and that the woman could have been involved in malevolent magic rituals evidenced by the fact that she had boulders placed on her chest and right leg. Another female burial contained what appeared to be either a spearhead or a large arrowhead made from bronze that also had bronze wiring which indicated that it probably had a wooden handle, he interprets this as also possibly being some sort of magic staff and that the woman could have been a Seidr, a Viking age sorceress or seer. These burials were at the liminal areas of the cemeteries possibly signifying that they were thought of extraordinary amongst their society. Axes are very uncommon in female graves in the Viking age and some of the graves Gardela lists include them, one in Denmark and several in Norway. As we have seen, axes in female graves are sometimes interpreted as household tools but if this was the case, why are they not more common in female graves that contain other household items? Gardela lists several interesting cases of females buried with axes, spears and even shield bosses, some of which I will speak of myself in chapter 4 and therefore need not be repeated here. He relates the interpretations of other archaeologists who still seem to relegate the presence of axes to household functions, and other war gear to a missing male in the grave e.g. that a man was buried with these items but was later removed from the grave leaving us with extraordinary looking graves with female skeletons and war gear.

He clarifies that the interpretation of the “missing male” is impossible to prove and that it could be possible that these items did indeed belong to the females found with them and that

64 In sagas it is described that sorceresses were buried with boulders over their bodies to prevent them from rising from the grave. Gardela 2013: 280ff.
65 Gardela 2013: 284.
66 Gardela 2013: 279, 287f.
67 Gardela 2013: 291.
they could therefore represent women who transgressed the typical divisions of gender roles. In his final discussion on the weapons found in female graves he once again contemplates the appearance of axes in female burials and interpretations of them as household items, claiming that perhaps they could have served as both tools and weapons but without proper metallographic studies that reveal traces of their use, it is impossible to tell. As I explained in my chapter on methods, studies such as these are almost never performed due to budgetary restrictions, but I do think that the best way to determine whether or not an axe was used as a weapon or as a tool is to do metallographic analyses which could identify traces of use, such as blood of animals or humans, traces of wood or other bio-organic traces. At the moment however, these types of analyses are unfortunately unlikely to take place. Gardela concludes that at the moment of his writing, there is too little evidence to accurately determine whether or not women participated in combat and that future research should include a broader spectrum of archaeological, textual and iconographic material to get a more definitive answer.

An interesting study I found on female warriors was written in 1983 titled *why there are so few women warriors* by David Adams, a behavioural psychology researcher. This study is a cross-cultural investigation into several different still existing aboriginal tribes and why some tribes included women in warfare and why some did not. Amongst the tribes, he found that those communities in which women were married into different tribes within the region that spoke the same language and shared cultural traits, the women would not be included in decisions of war or in the wars themselves. This, he explains, would be due to possible contradicting loyalties, as the women could come from a tribe that would later be attacked. Of the tribes that fought outside of the language and culture areas it would be more likely that women were allowed to participate. Of the tribes in which women actively participated as warriors, all of them were found to be of those that engaged in external warfare e.g. against tribes that did not share their language or culture.

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68 Gardela 2013: 292.
69 Gardela 2013: 298.
70 Gardela 2013: 306f.
Another interesting analysis he makes is that, when speaking of early primitive humans and their older ancestors and the biological factors that define which sex engaged in hunting and warfare, he goes against earlier explanations of the superiority of male strength and speed and instead emphasizes the biological strains of childbearing and nurturing that women had that made the men perform these tasks instead. In other primates, such as chimpanzees, the differences in strength and speed are far more notable between the sexes than amongst humans who are not too different in these factors. This can be applied to humans of all eras and explanations such as “men are stronger and faster than women” can no longer be used when explaining why men were the obvious choice to be warriors. His analysis of pre-state tribal societies provide a very interesting explanation which, if taken in a Viking age context, could explain differences in female warrior graves depending on location. Marriage in the Viking age was quite complicated, they would get married off by their families at a young age to strengthen alliances but could divorce at will and remarry but even then, if the marriage was between two classes such as high-born or low-born, the families could intervene to stop it. Because marriage was often a social contract between families, a decrease of female warriors in the core Norse areas should be reflected due to the possibility of conflicting loyalties which might have excluded women from internal warfare. Areas outside Scandinavia, where the Vikings fought in external warfare against different cultures with different languages and no conflicting loyalties would arise, an increase of female warriors should also be reflected. This theory can be tested in my own work and I will include it in my analysis.

What can be gathered from these examples is that women in the Viking age are thought to have been restricted to child care and household roles. When women are found with objects not conforming to this idea, other theories arise that would not happen with the men, a woman with an axe must have used it for household tasks while for a man it is ok to think of it as a weapon. If a woman is buried with multiple items that are commonly associated with males, an idea of a missing male comes up, which is at best impossible to prove and at worst an untenable ridiculous assertion. In graves containing people of both sexes, the material culture found are often delegated to each depending on their perceived gender relation even though the finds are either scattered inside or in close proximity to the “wrong” gender. However, the

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74 Jesch 1991: 54, 94
The fact that women often were confined to the household does not mean that the scholars were wrong to assume so, most archaeological finds point to this. Very few scholars accept the possibility of female warriors and the consensus seems to be that women never had roles in war other than to take care of the children and the household when the men were away fighting and that the evidence of female weapon graves and mentions in written sources are either disregarded completely or construed in a way that fits better with preconceived ideas of gender roles.
3. Textual sources

There are very few contemporary written sources on the Vikings and what we have from later writers describing their exploits are of uncertain accuracy due to the length of time between the writer and what they wrote about. The sources we have from the time of the Vikings in the west came mostly from clerical writings such as chronicles and annals which described, often briefly, the events that occurred certain years. Some of the later accounts are fictional, some have reality and fiction blended and some can with a greater degree be thought of as reliable. However, there is no such thing as an unbiased text, every writer of all ages had an agenda and a worldview that was reflected in their texts, therefore some of the descriptions we can find on the subject should be read with a grain of salt. Though some descriptions, such as the number of ships, combatants and their methods of fighting, could be exaggerated, other descriptions could be considered more accurate, for example the approximate time, location and outcome of a battle, names of some of those involved and important casualties. The most famous contemporary source on the Eastern Vikings came from Arab writer Ibn Fadlan but even though his descriptions are very interesting, he makes no mention of female Vikings and will therefore be excluded from this chapter. A reason for the absence of female Norse in the eastern area could be the Rus’ intention of settling and marrying local women. The most extensive ancient work on the Vikings came from Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus, the Gesta Danorum, which recounts the history of the Danes. This work was written in the late 12th C. - early 13th C. Though he wrote his work several decades and sometimes centuries after the events and descriptions he makes, it is thought that he often based some of his texts on earlier sources. Therefore the reliability of the text is subject to debate. While explaining the different instances of female Viking warriors being mentioned in western sources I will evaluate the credibility of the source and if it can be correlated to that of other sources. The first written source to be examined is that of Saxo Grammaticus.

3.1. Saxo Grammaticus

Saxo Grammaticus wrote The history of the Danes (Gesta Danorum) which consists of 16 books. Books 1-9 details the early mythology and history of the Danes up to the end of the

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75 Project Gutenberg: Gesta Danorum: introduction.
Viking age and book 10-16 deal with the middle ages. In his work he gives a description of some women who “dressed themselves as men and spent almost every minute cultivated soldiers skills... Loathing a dainty style of living, they would harden body and mind with toil and endurance, rejecting the fickle pliancy of girls and compelling the womanish spirits to act with a virile ruthlessness.” He was surprised by this behaviour and commented that they had somehow unsexed themselves and forgotten their true selves. He made a very interesting analogy that showed his surprise and how this way of life was so alien to the society in which he lived “… They put toughness before allure, aimed at conflicts instead of kisses, tasted blood, not lips, sought the clash of arms rather than the arms embrace, fitted to weapons hands which should have been weaving, desired not the couch but the kill, and those they could have appeased with looks they attacked with lances.”76

Saxo mentions in his histories several female Vikings by name, Lagertha, Alfhild, Sela, Rusila, Stikla, Wibjorg, Hetha and Wisna. He does not write particularly much about these women but just enough to give a window into what he knew of them.

Alfhild is described in book 7 and her story is sometimes called the story of Alf and Alfhild. Alfhild was the daughter of the King of Goths and was said to be born of such beauty that even as a baby in her cradle she would bury her face in her robe so as to not make others envious. The king kept her in close keeping, guarded by a “viper and a snake” so as to protect her chastity. A Danish suitor named Alf defeated the serpent guardians and gained the opportunity to vie for her hand. Through her mother’s encouragement however, Alfhild looked past his virtues and grew to despise him and thereafter exchanged womanly attire for that of a man’s and “began the life of a warlike rover.” She enrolled other like-minded women into her service and was put in charge of a band of rovers who had lost their previous captain in war and “did deeds beyond the valour of women.” Alf pursued Alfhild and unknowingly engaged his few ships with her many but as his companion Borgar struck off her helmet in battle, he realized who she was and then decided throw away the spear and instead embraced her and made her change her man’s attire again for that of a woman’s.77

This story is most likely entirely fiction, though it could have some basis in real people; the description of her beauty, being kept locked away and guarded by serpents awaiting a valiant

76 McLaughlin 1990: 194f.
hero to free her to gain her hand in marriage, are too similar to many other fairy tales with similar themes to be considered of any great validity. These characters are also only mentioned in the Gesta Danorum and could be a reiteration of earlier oral traditional storytelling which were never meant as factual but Saxo took it as such.

Lagertha, sometimes spelled Ladgerda or Lagerdha, has a story with legendary king Ragnar Lothbrok that is very similar to that of Alf and Alfhild with Ragnar winning Lagertha's hand by slaying a bear and dog she had had placed on her porch to guard against a suitor. Their history however started earlier than that and includes things not commonly found in fairy tales. Ragnar was the grandson of king Siward of Norway and came to Norway when Siward was killed by king Fro of Sweden. Fro had put the women of Siward and his kinsmen in a brothel to publicly humiliate them and Ragnar, seeking revenge, freed the women, amongst them Lagertha, and then took his fight to Fro with the women joining in on the fight. The women had previously suffered insult and feared their chastity in the camp of Ragnar so they changed their attire to that of men’s and asked to fight with the men. Ragnar who had come not only to avenge his grandfather but also the ill deeds committed against the honour of these women, saw no problem allowing the women to fight in his troop against their common foe. Lagertha was described by Saxo as “a skilled amazon, who, though a maiden, had the courage of a man, and fought in front among the bravest with her hair loose over her shoulders.” All marvelled at her matchless deeds and only the fact that her hair swung freely on her back betrayed the fact that she was a woman. After the battle, Ragnar, marvelled at the deeds of Lagertha wished to marry her and there we come back to the story of the beasts Lagertha had set to guard her. However, this story does not end in the way that the story of Alf and Alfhild did, Ragnar fell in love with another woman named Thora and divorced Lagertha citing her untrustworthiness, due to the aforementioned incident with the bear and dog, as the reason for the divorce. Despite this slight, Lagertha still had love for him and thus when Ragnar was deposed as king by the Jutes and Skanians he called to Norway for aid, and Lagertha hastily came with their son and her new husband as well as a hundred and twenty ships. Lagertha and her warriors went unseen behind enemy lines and routed them from behind turning the tide of the battle to Ragnar's advantage and they were successful with Ragnar reclaiming his throne. When Lagertha came home after the battle she proceeded to

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murder her new husband with a spear-head she hid in her gown in order to take his title and sovereignty as she thought it “pleasanter to rule without her husband than to share the throne with him.”

The story of Lagertha did contain some elements commonly found in fairy tales but also parts which are unique. Her prowess in battle was shown not just once but several times, first when she fought against Fro and then against the Jutes and Skanians and then when she killed her own husband for the throne. In both instances of war, Ragnar had attributed his victories to Lagertha's skill as a warrior and tactician. Attributing military victory to someone else, a woman especially, is not something we would expect to hear from a legendary warrior, such as Ragnar. Despite the fact that the story of Lagertha and Ragnar is incredibly interesting to read, both of them as well as king Seward, king Fro and other people from this story have no verifiable historical prevalence, they are all considered mythological or legendary and Ragnar is thought to be an amalgamation of several historical figures compiled into one character. Lagertha's story of having a bear and a dog guarding her porch is more believable than that of Ald's who had giant serpents guarding her dwelling but is still an element commonly used in fairy tales; a princess guarded by beasts waiting for the noble hero to come free her; however in this instance, Lagertha was never imprisoned but rather put these beasts in place herself to test any potential suitor, an act which shows what type of woman she was, only wanting a worthy warrior to claim her, an equally powerful warrior. The assumption that Ragnar was semi-historical and not entirely mythological can bring up an idea that Lagertha too was semi-historical or at the very least based on a real woman (or several, as with Ragnar), though with the Gesta being the only source of her existence, the idea that she was a historical figure is impossible to prove and she was most likely a fictional construction, possibly based on earlier myths or myths of Valkyries.

Sela is mentioned only briefly in the Gesta Danorum and is described as a skilled warrior and experienced rover. She was the sister of Koller, the King of Norway, and after his demise at the hands of Horwendil, a Danish Viking and governor of the Jutes, she too was hunted down and killed by Horwendil.

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The historicity of these people can be disputed as there is no other reference to anybody named Koller being the king of Norway outside of the *Gesta Danorum*, so if he was fictional then Sela probably was too and vice versa. Due to the fact that Kollers life is greatly described here while Sela is only briefly mentioned we can rationalise a lack of exaggeration and thus a lack of fictionalisation on her part of the story. However, the events described in this story would have been placed somewhere in the 7th C. making it unclear if Sela, Koller and Horwendil, should they have existed, should be considered Vikings or pre-Viking warriors.

Rusila and Stikla were mentioned very briefly by Saxo who described them as Amazons who “aspired with military ardour to prowess in battle”.

Rusila and Stikla had fought Olaf, king of the Throds for his kingdom and, angered by this, King Harald Finehair of Norway came disguised to the court of Olaf and overthrew them both. We don’t really learn very much about these two in Saxo’s account but Rusila has also been linked to Inghen Ruaidh (the Red Maid), a female Viking mentioned in Irish annals due to the similarities of the names. I will speak more on the red maid further down. However, the lack of information here makes it hard to reasonably defend the validity of the existence of Stikla and Rusila as Saxo describes them.

In book 8 Saxo describes the events of a Swedish-Danish war, the leaders of both sides are Harald Wartooth of Denmark and Sigurd Hring of Sweden (supposed father of Ragnar Lothbrok). Both of these are considered legendary and their historicity is uncertain but they would be placed in the 8th-9th C. Saxo names several commanders on both sides, amongst them the captains Hetha and Wisna, from the town of Sle, and another female warrior named Wieborg, who all fought for Harald. “On these captains, who had the bodies of women, nature bestowed the souls of men” Wisna was described as a skilled warrior filled with sternness and guarded by a band of *Slavs*. Hetha was guarded by a retinue of “very active men”. Hetha was put on the right flank of Haralds line and Wisna was made standard bearer. During the war, Wisna got her right hand cut off by Starkad, a warrior who wrote the original

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84 Inghen Ruaidh meaning red-haired maiden and Rusila virgo (in saxos original latin) meaning red maiden. Steenstrup 1876: 20.
86 Archaic form of Slavs.
source of this war that Saxo used for the *Gesta*, and then disappeared from the text. At the end of the war, Harald was slain and Sigurd put Denmark under Swedish rule, he appointed Hetha, former captain under Harald, as ruler of Zealand and the rest of Denmark besides Skane who was given to a man named Ole. The people of Zealand did not wish to be ruled over by a woman and so pleaded with Ole to take over her lands, he used threats to make her hand them over and so she did, only getting to keep Jutland as a tributary state.\(^{87}\) The *Chronicon Lethrense* makes the same statements about Hetha and Wisna, they fought for Harald and at the end of the war, Hetha was given command of Zealand.\(^{88}\) The maiden Wieborg\(^{89}\) was only mentioned briefly but was witnessed by Starkad to have felled a champion named Soth and threatened to fell more but was pierced by an arrow and thus was killed.\(^{90}\)

The historicity of these women could be argued to be fictional as there is great debate as to whether this war actually happened, though being referred to in several other sagas as well as the *Chronicon Lethrense*, with scholars going back and forth about whether or not it is fictional, historic or a blend of historical and fictional elements. If we assume that this war did indeed happen then there is no reason to believe that at least some if not all of these women existed. Since Wisna and Wieborg were both mentioned by Starkad, the original reiterator of the war, these are most likely to have been real or based on real women and Hetha, being mentioned by both Saxo and the *Chronicon*, could be as well.

All in all, Saxo Grammaticus *Gesta Danorum* should be read with a critical perspective and certainly a lot of what he wrote could be considered fictional or historical with fictional elements. He drew a lot from earlier written and oral sources which, though they might have been just stories, he saw as history. Certainly some facts are fictional or embellished but certain things, such as names, could be considered more reliable even though spelling may vary.


\(^{88}\) *Chronicon Lethrense*. IX.

\(^{89}\) Sometimes spelled Webiorg or Wegbiorg

Even if the stories of Alfhild, Lagertha and Sela could have been fairytales, reiterated by Saxo as history, it is possible they were seen as inspiration for real women to take part in battle, though this is entirely conjecture.

3.2. Icelandic sagas

Many sagas from Iceland contain extraordinary female characters such as in the Saga of the people of Laxardal where we meet Gudrun Osvifsdottir, Hrefna, Aud the Deep-minded and others. Gudrun has been called one of the greatest heroines in Icelandic sagas. However, these and other extraordinary women in other sagas that are known for their social, religious and political virtues and accomplishments and will be excluded in this thesis due to them not fitting the criteria as being warriors. In fact, the number of women in powerful positions are a great many, too many to bring up here and to individually discuss their qualities and how they are not in fact warriors but hold non-military powers. With these women out of the discussion there are a lot less women who would qualify as female warriors or women who sometimes engaged in battle.

The Sagas of the Greenlanders and Eirik the Red’s saga are the two sagas that make up The Vinland Sagas. These sagas were written down in the early 13th C. by different individuals in Iceland and depict Norse contact with Greenland and North America in the late 10th - early 11th C.

Eirik the Red's saga is the saga dedicated to the life of the farmer, explorer and warrior Eirik the Red but many other people and their individual deeds are also described in this saga, though most of them are in some way connected to Eirik. Eirik was the first one to discover and settle Greenland, naming several places there after himself (Eiriksfjord, Eiriksdalur, Eiriksey, Eiriksholmar etc.) as well as naming the area Greenland, in hopes of attracting more people. In this saga we are first introduced to Eirik's daughter Freydis who went on an expedition to Vinland together with her husband Thorvald, the leader of the expedition Karlsefni and a large and feared warrior named Thorhall as well as other men. One day they were attacked by natives of the land and a retreat was sounded by Karlsefni who wished to

91 Eirik the Red’s saga: Verse 2.
retreat to a more favourable area so they could fight better. Freydis who came out of the camp as the men were fleeing said: “why do you flee such miserable opponents, men like you who look to me to be capable of killing them off like sheep? Had I a weapon I’m sure I would fight better than any of you.” They kept up their flight but Freydis, who was pregnant at the time, lagged behind and the natives were catching up to her. She picked up a sword from a fallen Norseman on the ground and prepared to defend herself, she exposed a breast and smacked it with the sword which frightened the natives who turned and ran.92

In the Saga of the Greenlanders we hear more of the children of Eirik the Red, three sons named Leif, Thorvald and Thorstein and the daughter, Freydis.93 In this saga, Freydis is only described as Eirik's daughter but in Eirik the Red's saga it is mentioned that Freydis was an illegitimate daughter of Eirik.94 Freydis we learn was a domineering woman who married Thorvald, a man of little importance, mainly for his money.95 Leif Eiriksson and 35 compatriots went on an expedition beyond Greenland and were the first Europeans to discover North America, three areas especially in what is now northeastern Canada and they named them Helluland, Markland and Vinland.96 Vinland was named such after the fact that there were lots of grapes and grapevines, something that caused many trips there in order to bring grapevines, berries and skins back to Greenland.97 Eventually, two Icelandic brothers named Helgi and Finnbogi came over to Greenland with the hopes of going to Vinland themselves, and Freydis Eiriksdottir set out on a journey to meet them and propose they travel together for a half-share of any profits gained, the brothers agreed. They travelled in two ships and Freydis secretly brought more men than the brothers in disregard of their previous agreement. Tensions rose in their camp with Freydis being feared by the brothers and one night she spoke privately with Finnbogi and asked to switch ships as theirs was bigger and she wanted to leave Vinland, Finnbogi agreed. Though the meeting had gone as she wanted she told her husband that the brothers had attacked her and that he should avenge this ill-deed, if not she would divorce him. Her husband, Thorvald, rallied his men and captured the brothers and their people outside, Freydis had them kill all the men and when no

92 Eirik the Red's saga: verse 11.
93 Saga of the Greenlanders: verse 1.
94 Eirik the Red’s saga: verse 8.
95 Saga of the Greenlanders: verse 1.
96 Saga of the Greenlanders: verse 1.
one wanted to kill the five women, she took an axe and killed them herself. Then they returned to Greenland with all the products both she and the brothers had procured. Though she had threaten her men about telling the truth, eventually the story of her atrocious deed came out and from then on, no one expected anything but evil from Freydis and her kin.

The Vinland sagas are considered to be of good historical accuracy and though some discrepancies exist between the two, it is clear that Freydis was a scary woman who was domineering and fearless, much more so than her male compatriots of the time, Eirik the Red was himself a very ferocious Viking, no wonder his daughter was as well. Though I would not call her a shieldmaiden per se, a Viking she was, evidenced by her killing of the Icelandic brothers and taking their things and for her fearless display against the marauding natives in Vinland.

Brynhildur, sometimes spelled Brynhildr or Brynhild, was one of the main characters in the Volsunga saga and by what we learn from her, she appears to be more of a deity, a Valkyrie, than an actual human as she not only had prophetic powers, but also knew of many godly things. She got her name from the fact that she “fared with helm and byrny unto the wars.” And she is described often as carrying a sword, wearing a mail-coat and helmet. In a war between two kings, Agnar and Helm Gunnar, with Helm Gunnar being described as the greatest of warriors and was to be granted victory by Odin. Though Odin decreed Helm Gunnar should be the victor, Brynhildur “smote” him down. For this she was punished by Odin. In fact, her only will in life was to gain fame through warfare as her suitor, Sigurd, was told and when he proclaimed his desire for her, she replied that they are not fated to be, as she is a “Shield-may, and wear helm on head even as the kings of war.” Eventually she married a king named Gunnar but in reality loved Sigurd, whom had slayed the dragon Fafnir for her. In this saga we learn of how Brynhildur is perceived by those around her and that even her name comes from the fact that she is a warrior. She describes herself as a shield-may and was known to have had magical powers.

99 Archaic form of “brynja” - mail coat.
100 Volsunga saga: 93.
101 Volsunga saga: 84.
102 Volsunga saga: 95f.
103 Volsunga saga: 110.
This story of Brynhildur and Sigurd goes back to the older German epic poem *Nibelungenlied* where she is named Brünnhilde, a Valkyrie of Wotan.\textsuperscript{104} Volsunga saga, though it includes mentions of Odin and other Viking age deities, goes back far earlier than the Viking age and the Odin mentioned there is a reiteration of the germanic Wotan. Either way, the story of Brynhildur, as interesting it is to read, cannot be said to be historical although it is thought that she was based on a real woman, Princess Brunhilda of Austrasia, her story being quite different in reality. The story of Sigurd slaying a dragon for her, her having magical powers and the fact that she is seen as a Valkyrie of Odin all betray the fictionalisation of the story.

If we see the story of Brynhildur as a work of fiction coupled with the fact that it’s based on a much older story, it is possible to think that this story and the character Brynhildur was known in many parts of the Norse world and could have served as inspiration and validification for other women to become shieldmaidens themselves.

### 3.3. Non-scandinavian written sources

There are several distinct descriptions of a *land of Amazons*, located somewhere in an area to the west or southwest of ancient Prussia. These women would hold land and own slaves and any boy that was born of them would immediately be killed. They were described as horse ridden warriors full of bravery.\textsuperscript{105} Another description of these types of warrior women came from Christian chronicler Adam of Bremen who described Amazon's living northwest of the Baltic sea.\textsuperscript{106} The earlier accounts of the amazons in Prussia were never explicitly referred to as Amazons, only women, while Adam, familiar with the Amazon myth, described them as such.\textsuperscript{107} Adam of Bremen also mentions bearded women in the far north of Sweden and Norway where the men live in the forest and are not seen.\textsuperscript{108} These tales of bearded women and Amazonian warriors are fun to read but have little historicity to them as he also speaks of witches and sorcerers, cyclops, griffins and many other supernatural beings in this land which to him must have been as alien to him as Mars is to us.

Greek historian John Skylitzes, in his work on the history of the Byzantine empire, written in the 12th C. apparently mentioned women being part of Rus fighting forces. However, his text

\textsuperscript{104} Archaic German version of Odin.
\textsuperscript{105} Lönborg 1897: 131f.
\textsuperscript{106} Lönborg 1897: 134.
\textsuperscript{107} Lönborg 1897: 133.
\textsuperscript{108} Lönborg 1897: 134.
was written in ancient Greek and the only book from the modern era\textsuperscript{109} detailing his work, edited by Immanuel Bekker, was written in both ancient Greek and Latin.\textsuperscript{110} Since my Latin is very rusty and my ancient Greek is non-existent, I cannot delve into this source any further.

3.3.1. Annals

The Irish annals were contemporary sources written by monks and learned men, these texts were often quite short and made mention of important events of each year quite briefly. When an important person was born or killed, when wars broke out and when extraordinary events took place, these were written down by the clergy of Ireland.

The Irish annals of Ulster make mention of several Viking and Irish commanders during the war between the Irish and “foreigners” e.g. Norsemen. Inghen Ruaidh was one of these foreign commanders and the name translates to red maid or red-haired maiden/virgin, a woman, who had at least two sons, Eoin Barun\textsuperscript{111} and Ricard, who were slain in the battle of Clontarf near Dublin.\textsuperscript{112} According to the annals, Inghen Ruaidh and her son Eoin Barun each commanded a fleet that came over to Ireland, near Dublin, to wreak havoc.\textsuperscript{113} The war between the Irish and these foreigners were compiled in the 15th C. in the text “Cogad Gáedel re Gallaidh” and was based on earlier contemporary annals. The annals of Ulster make mention of The Maid who fought against the Irish. In a skirmish between the Conaille of Muirtheimne and the Maid, dated to 882 in the annal, several prominent Irish were slain but in the end the Conaille were victorious.\textsuperscript{114} ca 200 years later, in 1098, The Maid is again mentioned, this time though the ships of the foreigners were plundered by the Maid and their crews killed, approximated to 120 people.\textsuperscript{115} Obviously, with a time gap of 216 years, The Maid cannot refer to the same person but no names are given in these instances besides the title of The maid so it is unknown who they were but with a title such as that, it would be safe to assume they were both women, presumably one foreign (Norse) and one Irish.

\textsuperscript{109} Published 1838.
\textsuperscript{110} Compendium Historiarum: Cedrenus, Georgius Ioannis Scylitzae ope, vol. 2. 1838.
\textsuperscript{111} English: possible translation as John the Baron.
\textsuperscript{112} Todd 1867: introduction 191.
\textsuperscript{113} Todd 1867: 41.
\textsuperscript{114} CELT Ulster. year 882: p.337.
\textsuperscript{115} CELT Ulster. year 1098: p. 533.
In the Annals of Inisfallen it is mentioned in the year 905 that barbarians came across the Mediterranean and many other seas into Italy and Rome, they rode steeds, wore leather garments and were accompanied by “close-cropped women”\textsuperscript{116} e.g. women with very short hair. Though this description of short-cropped can be interpreted in different ways, the fact that they were given this adjective clearly indicates it as something that stood out and defied the norm of feminine appearance. Perhaps these short haired women were warriors that partook on an attack on Italy but without more information this is hard to verify.

There are quite a lot of annals and chronicles from Ireland and the rest of Britain but very few mention women in Viking contexts, the references of women in war are mostly as a storytelling point of narrative with the “evil of women” that sometimes caused war and conflict. When it comes to Vikings, descriptions of women are mostly about them being killed or taken away as captives by Vikings. Only the annals of Ulster specifically mentions female Viking warriors while the short haired women mentioned in the annals of Inisfallen are not explicitly described as warriors but it is definitely a possible interpretation.

I can find barely any mention of women in the royal Frankish annals on either side of the spectrum. Sometimes the daughter of a significant man is mentioned as being born or killed or a woman being married from one significant family to a significant man or a significant female religious official is mentioned as being martyred or dying of other reasons. With the Norsemen's arrival in England the Anglo-Saxon chronicle describes that they brought over their wives and regularly led them to safety in times of battle.

A point of notice however is that only the names of leaders or prominent figures are related in these stories while the warriors of both sides are mentioned only as warriors, soldiers, heathens, pirates etc. so only the identity of the their profession is identified, a gender identity is not, making it possible that warriors of both genders were involved but not explicitly identified.

Other, shorter annals, offer very brief iterations of events and when it comes to contacts with the Norse they are often just referred to as Danish pirates, raiders etc. and no accounts of names which we can use to distinguish men or women.

\textsuperscript{116} CELT Inisfallen. year 905.1: 139.
3.4. Pictorial sources

One of the most recognizable pictorial source depicting Viking age events is the Bayeux tapestry and even though some women are depicted there, none seem to have had warrior roles and will therefore not be included more in this thesis.

The Oseberg ship burial, being one of the most recognisable of archaeological discoveries relating to the Viking age, contained fragments of a tapestry depicting what looks like a procession of people, possibly depicting the funeral procession for the Oseberg queen. Looking at the reconstructed tapestry one can see figures in both dresses and trousers with 5 out of 13 figures holding what appears to be spears. Though Leszek Gardela mentions that some of the characters have swords, I cannot see any myself. Out of the 13 figures, 5 appear to be wearing dresses, and one of those is holding a spear. 3 figures are wearing trousers and the other 5 is hard to see exactly what they are wearing, 2 of those are sitting in a chariot making the features impossible to see. Interestingly enough, one of the figures wearing trousers and holding a spear is adorned with a massive beard, this could be a depiction of Odin. The one woman holding a spear could be a Valkyrie or a seidr woman, as we know from some archaeological sources, seidr women were buried with a spear or some sort of staff they used in rituals. Erik the Red’s saga also mentions a woman named Thorbjorg who was a seeress, one of ten sisters who all had the gift of prophecy but the only one still alive. She was invited by the leading farmer to give a prophecy on when the hard times experienced at the time would cease. A lengthy description is made of her and we learn that she carried a staff with knob on top that was adorned with brass and stones.

There are quite a lot of runestones in Scandinavia and a few outside but out of these, very few are dedicated to women but due to the fact that most were raised for men, many were raised by women in the memory of their husbands, fathers, brothers and sons. The runestones dedicated to women were those of very high social or political status. Since I cannot find any runestone mentioning women as warriors there is no need to write further on them.

117 Gardela 2013: 301.
118 Gardela 2013: 280ff.
119 Eirik the Red’s saga: Verse 4.
The picture stones of Gotland have a very long history, the earliest ones being erected in the later Roman Iron Age and the beginning of the Migration era and gradually evolving stylistically until the Viking age where they are very much alike the runestones of mainland Scandinavia with crosses and runes etched into them. The picture stones from the pagan era often contain images of the gods and one the most common motifs is that of a woman holding a drinking horn, she has been interpreted as a Valkyrie who greets warriors arriving at Valhall. However, interestingly enough, depictions of Valkyries outside of Gotland usually carry a sword while these do not begging the question of whether these women are indeed Valkyries, with a gotlandic twist, or not Valkyries at all. On these stones there are also anthropomorphic figures dressed as women, holding cups, but with long hair and beards. They have been interpreted as some sort of third gender or as priest figures.

Three different picture stones depict scenes of a woman in between either two bands of warriors or between an army and an approaching ship. Several researchers have argued that these stones depict the legend of Hildr Högnadottir who is best known from the Rágnarsdrápa but also from other sagas and eddas. In the story, Hildr is kidnapped by a king named Hédinn and her father pursues them and battles are fought for her return and after a certain battle recalled as Hjadningavíg, Hildr walks the battlefield and resurrects the fallen warriors so they can fight again the next day. As a cause and instigator for this war she is shown to also have Valkyrie-like powers.

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120 Herlin Karnell 2012, 7.
122 Helmbrecht 2012: 87.
123 Helmbrecht 2012: 88.
124 I could not find any english translation of this saga which is why it was excluded from chapter 3.2.
125 Gudmundsdottir 2012: 60.
126 Gudmundsdottir 2012: 60. This story has been compared to the Iliad and though some scholars argued for the Iliad being depicted on the three picture stones, the probability of the ancient norse being familiar with the Iliad is unlikely while their knowledge of the story of Hildr Högnadottir being certain. Gudmundsdottir 2012: 61, 63.
4. Archaeological sources

We have now discussed the written sources pertaining to female warriors and as few as they were, they were significant clues nonetheless. Now we need an in-depth look at cases of Viking age graves containing women and warrior equipment to see how the archaeological sources compare to the written. I will do this by searching for examples on the internet by going through online databases of museums and databases of archaeological field reports as well as searching for other literature about female warriors or other works (either professional or amateur) that mentions women buried with weapons and then pursuing leads into reliable and more extensive sources for their validity.

When looking for warrior graves I will look for several different pieces of equipment that could have been used by a Viking warrior such as the sword, the axe, the spear or lance and bows and arrows that were all used in battle. The sword being the more expensive and valued weapon and the axe being the most common. Axes were not only used as weapons but mostly as tools. Spears and lances, and bows and arrows were also used for hunting and spears were sometimes used as a magic staff for sorceresses.\textsuperscript{127} The sword is the only weapon that cannot be used for a purpose outside of combat with the exception of some being status symbols indicated by the quality of craftsmanship and decorations.\textsuperscript{128} Every warrior aboard a ship was by law required to carry a shield according to the older law texts of Gulathing and Frostathing and some sources indicate the use of mail shirts and metal helmets but very few of these defensive equipments have been found in the archaeological record.\textsuperscript{129}

Axe-heads, spear-heads, swords and arrowheads are all common finds in warrior graves from the Viking age, shields and bows are almost never found due to them being mostly made out

\textsuperscript{127} Gardela 2013: 284.
\textsuperscript{128} Pedersen 2008: 206, 208.
\textsuperscript{129} Pedersen 2008: 207.
of wood, only the metal parts are sometimes recovered. In my examination of the archaeological records, these are the items that I will look for in my search for female Viking warriors. However, a female skeleton found only with a spear-head could be interpreted as a Seidr sorceress instead of a warrior, therefore I will exclude any finds I encounter with a female buried with a spear unless it’s in conjunction with other weapons or defensive equipment as well. The same will be done with those found with arrowheads, unless found in conjunction with other weapons, arrowheads alone can be seen as mere hunting equipment, and though female hunters is an area of interest that lacks research and deserves recognition, this particular thesis is confined to warriors.

From all that we know of Viking age burial custom it is clear that there is no standard burial practice throughout all of the ancient Norse world. Some were cremated on pyres, some placed upon a ship and buried (ship and all), some within symbolic ships (stones arranged in the shape of ships), some in small or big mounds depending on social hierarchy and location. Local variation existed within individual communities, villages, farms and families; inhumation or cremation, the location of the body and grave goods all differ within these areas. Island communities such as Gotland, Öland and Åland as well as Iceland and Greenland had very varied customs and in Iceland, cremation burials are extremely rare and instead inhumations are the norm, where in other parts of Scandinavia inhumations are very rare. Therefore the intention with the upcoming chapter 4.1. is not to pretend that there was just one way for men and women to be buried and that those that did not conform were anomalous but rather that there are some attributes we can discern in the general sense of Viking burial custom between the sexes and then some differences we can discern within the sexes that are anomalous to the majority.

A problem with the examination of graves is that, as said, there were many different methods of burial in the Viking age with the most common being cremation in many parts of the Viking world. Though burial goods can be preserved in cremations to some degrees, skeletal remains are rarely well enough preserved to make sex identification possible, cremation destroys most evidence of the sex of the dead which severely limits the amount of graves that can be used in this thesis. Without a definitive identification of sex, the material goods are

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130 Pedersen 2008: 207.
131 Price 2008: 257.
132 Price 2008: 258.
irrelevant to this specific topic. The only time we can expect results with cremation graves where the bones are too destroyed for analysis is when the material goods clearly indicate a woman with an anomalous artefact, such as a weapon. This however is something to be careful with as we risk going back to making interpretations with insufficient data.

4.1. Typical male and female burials

As mentioned above, there is no clear cut way for Viking age men and women to be buried, local variations existed in all the areas of the Norse world. Men and women both could be either cremated or inhumed. They could be in small flat graves, large mounds, and everything in between.

The common people of the Viking age were often buried in simple wooden coffins or birch-bark shrouds.\footnote{Haywood 1995: 27.} Slaves are normally found in burials where they were either forced or volunteered to follow their master to the afterlife by being ritually killed as sacrifice and buried with their master.\footnote{Price 2008: 259.} This practice was observed with the Volga Rus by Arabian traveller Ibn Fadlan and there are some archaeological observances of ritually slaughtered people in high status graves.\footnote{Price 2008: 266.}

What really separated the sexes in death was the objects they were buried with. Both men and women were buried with different tools representing either their profession or status in life. There are some standards we can generally make out:

- Oval brooches were worn only by Norse women, finding these in graves does not only distinguish the gender but also her cultural affiliation as Norse.\footnote{Jesch 1991: 9.} The only time men are found with oval brooches are when they have been ritually deposited post-burial or ritually offered peri-burial. It is however worth noting that oval brooches were not worn by all women in the Viking age as in some locations and sometimes certain eras, the women did not have a tradition of wearing oval brooches, the areas that do however, shows that they were worn exclusively by women.
- Swords, shields and other weapons are mostly connected with men. Although women are sometimes found with weapons, they are not as common. Throughout

\footnotetext{133}{Haywood 1995: 27.}
\footnotetext{134}{Price 2008: 259.}
\footnotetext{135}{Price 2008: 266.}
\footnotetext{136}{Jesch 1991: 9.}
archaeological history, weapons have been seen as male attributes and used when gendering graves in the same extent as oval brooches are used for women. The women found with weapons are however the main focus for the upcoming case studies.

- Jewellery of different kinds are found in female graves. Armbands, necklaces, pendants and refashioned metal objects were all worn by women and especially necklaces with glass-beads are typical finds in female graves.

- Spears and iron rods are very special objects. Spears are found in both male and female graves, more often in male graves where they are attributed as either weapons of war or hunting tools. When found in female graves they are seen as signs of sorceresses. Written sources do mention völvas or seidrs as carrying iron rods or spears for use as magical staves. If a woman is found with an iron rod she was most probably a sorceress and if she is found with a spear-head then we can interpret it as a substitute for an iron rod for use in magic rituals. If the spear is found in conjunction with other weapons we can assume that it was not used for magic but for combat.

- Keys are almost exclusively found in female graves as women have been seen as the head of the households, especially when the men were out of the country for trading or raiding. Keys were part of the female dress during the Viking age, they would be worn on a chain on the outside of their dress to show their power over the resources of the farm.

- Items connected to the domestic sphere are mostly found in female graves, objects used in the production of textile such as spindle whorls, needles, loom weights and other weaving equipment are found almost exclusively in female graves. Cooking equipment however, though found mostly in female graves, are also prevalent in male graves.

- Things associated with hunting such as bows and arrows, pelts and furs are all things that can be found with men. Furs and pelts however were trade commodities and are

139 Gardela 2013: 299.
140 Gräslund 2001: 93
therefore found with both sexes but when found in conjunction with hunting tools it is safer to assume that the person was a hunter. In some areas rich in hunting resources such as Aurland in Norway, arrowheads have also been found in a number of women's graves indicating they also participated in hunting.\textsuperscript{142}

- Other indications of professions include farming tools, weights and scales, metals and stones, blacksmithing tools etc. In the Viking age, professions such as these are mostly carried out by men. Blacksmithing tools having been found only in male graves. And in 19\% of the instances of weights and scales being found in graves in Scandinavia, it was in graves of women. In Birka, much more women have been found with these things, not surprising considering Birka was one of main trading towns in the Viking age.\textsuperscript{143} Farming, though not really a profession in itself, was mostly carried out by the men of the family but there have been finds of sickles in female graves indicating that they were also sometimes involved in harvesting.\textsuperscript{144}

The last major difference was the dress worn by either sex. Both men and women were dressed in a specific manner and carried with them different things that we can find in their graves. However, organic materials such as textile and leather are rarely found in the archaeological record as they rot away while in the ground of an inhumation grave or burned to ashes in cremation graves. These things are very rarely recovered but there are examples of textile and leather surviving, such as in the Oseberg ship burial and certain areas with a low amount of oxygen in the ground such as in mires and swamps. Using the few instances of Viking age textile preserved in the ground with references and descriptions in written sources and picture stones, the typical female attire has been reconstructed with a great degree of probability.\textsuperscript{145} However, the male dress is somewhat more difficult to distinguish as it could have more variation and not as many finds have been recovered.\textsuperscript{146}

\textbf{4.2. Case studies}

The best way I feel to get a broad picture over what archaeological sources we have for female warriors is by presenting a set of different cases where a female has been buried

\textsuperscript{142} Domnasnes 1982: 77.
\textsuperscript{143} Jesch 1991: 21, 37.
\textsuperscript{145} For an in-depth description of Viking age dress, see Jesch 1991: 14-18.
\textsuperscript{146} Dommasnes 1982: 73.
together with aforementioned warrior equipment. The cases range between different areas such as the core Scandinavian countries of Sweden, Norway and Denmark, as well as the expanded areas of the Britain. Leszek Gardela included examples that will not be brought up here due to them already being interpreted as seidr (which I do not contest) as well as examples I will include here. He mentioned in his study that there were no examples of female weapon graves in Frankia, Iceland, Germany, and Poland. In my research I came to the same conclusion, looking especially into the case of Iceland but found no evidence of any female weapon graves. As explained earlier, the eastern expanse will not be brought up in this thesis.

4.2.1. England

**Santon Downham**

The first case study I will bring up is that of a pair of oval brooches found at Santon Downham in Norfolk, England. The interesting thing about this is that these brooches were found in the vicinity of a sword.

The circumstances of these finds are however unclear as they were discovered by a private person in the 1860’s who later donated the items to the British museum; the sword and one of the brooches in 1883 and the other brooch in 1888. Since these were found by a private person, no proper archaeological excavation was conducted and thus no archaeological report exists but it is said that a skeleton was found in the vicinity and interpretations have been made that it was a double burial of a man and woman of Norse origin occupying the Danelaw in the late 9th C. Since one skeleton was found, not two, this interpretation cannot be confirmed. Another interpretation has been offered that the brooches were a ritual offering to one person buried with the sword in which case it would make sense that only one skeleton was found. An excavation in Claufton hall in Lancashire of a burial mound contained a sword, an axe, a spear and a hammer as well as a pair of gilded bronze oval brooches. These brooches were wrapped in cloth, back to back, and encased a molar tooth and two beads, this has also been interpreted as a male grave where the brooches were ritually offered to the

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147 Gardela 2013: 276.
148 British museum collection: nr. 1883,0727.1 and 1888,0103.1
150 It was not specified in the report if the tooth was human or animal.
Due to the exact position of the brooches in Santon Downham being unknown, we cannot tell for sure if they too were in a position which implied ritual deposition like that in Claughton hall or if they were in a way that would indicate the person wore them as part of their dress.

These oval brooches of the most common type of oval brooches from Scandinavia and are made from a gilded copper alloy with silver wire inlays and decorated with zoomorphic ornamentation. Oval brooches are one of the essentially Scandinavian cultural items that were brought over by the Norse to the areas they settled, they were part of the female dress and often came in pairs, one worn on each shoulder. The fact that the two brooches found in Santon Down are identical in appearance indicate that they were a set used by one person. The Sword has been identified as type L of the Petersen typology, dating it to the late 9th C. - early 10th C. Making it contemporary to the brooches.

I cannot find any report on the state of the skeleton that was found at the site; the grade of degradation, fragmentation etc. or any osteological analysis of any sort, including gendering. Therefore it is impossible to conclude whether or not it was a female buried with brooches and a sword or a male buried with a sword and ritually offered the brooches.

This case is quite hard to make any definitive interpretation due to the findings being very poorly recorded, only the brooches, a sword and a skeleton are documented, and though the artefacts are quite well-preserved the state of the skeleton is unknown. Of the two interpretations presented, the first being that the brooches and the sword came from a double grave of a man and a woman and the second being that of it being a single grave of one person buried with the sword and then being ritually offered the brooches, implying a male burial. I can offer a third interpretation, one person buried with a sword as well as two brooches, possibly a female with the typically female oval brooches and a typically masculine item, a sword. This interpretation has also been made by Shane McLeod. Unfortunately, due to the uncertain circumstances of this find, a definitive interpretation cannot be made at this time.

151 Richards 2004: 205.
152 British museum collection: nr. 1888,0103.1
Heath wood

On the western part of Ingleby parish in England, a small block named Heath wood, has what has been described as a war cemetery of Norse migrants to the Danelaw. It has been excavated for many years and at the moment about one third of the area has been excavated. The cemetery comprises of 59 burial mounds in 4 different clusters.\(^{156}\) The clusters of burials have been interpreted as possibly representing different warbands of kinsmen who were to join each other in Valhalla.\(^{157}\) Besides a small number of single cremation burials found scattered about, this is the only Norse cremation cemetery found in the British Isles.\(^{158}\) The suffix -by in Ingleby is Norse in origin and means farm or village and the entire name, Ingleby, translates as Farm of Anglians, meaning that the cemetery itself was not considered part of Ingleby as it is distinctly Norse and therefore the name of the specific area of the cemetery, Heath wood, is more appropriate.\(^{159}\)

Heath wood lies 4km from a town named Repton which is believed to have been the place where the great heathen army, described in the Anglo-Saxon chronicle, wintered when they came to England. The idea of a pagan burial ground being established at Heath wood only for an over-winter camp is unlikely and the presence and use of Heath wood suggests that the cemetery was used either for several over-winter camps or during and after the Norsemen established a permanent or at least long term colony at Repton.\(^{160}\)

The area was first excavated in 1855 then in 1941-1949 and then in 1955. Thomas Bateman was the one who first excavated the site in 1855 and who first described the mounds as remnants of cremations on the ground level which were then covered in stones that were thrown over the still glowing embers (due to visible fire damage) and then lastly by dirt to form the mounds. The nature of the mounds made him determine that they were of probable Norse origin and from the war between the Danes and the Anglo-Saxons during the war between them.\(^{161}\) During the excavations, several fragmented remains of swords have been found\(^{162}\) as well as nails and clamps interpreted as coming from at least two shields.\(^{163}\)

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\(^{156}\) Richards et al. 2004: 23.
\(^{158}\) Richards et al. 2004: 97.
\(^{159}\) Richards et al. 2004: 25.
\(^{160}\) Richards et al. 2004: 100f.
\(^{162}\) Mounds 50, 1 and 7.
Unfortunately, of the three mounds that contained these items, the skeletal remains could not be sexed in two of them.

The area was opened for excavation again in 1998-2000 in which several more mounds were excavated. Mound 50 revealed a small knife, the remains of a sword-hilt with silver inlays as and what appeared to be a Maltese cross decoration on the pommel, as well as several iron nails and clamps which are thought to have come from a shield. The swords blade and the shield boss were absent which may have meant that they had been removed after the cremation.\textsuperscript{164} The cremated skeletal remains found here were osteologically analyzed and found to contain two individuals, one with a probable identification of a female aged 25-45 and an infant/juvenile of unknown sex.\textsuperscript{165} It has been suggested that the sword and shield belonged to the unsexed child\textsuperscript{166} but since this is the only infant/juvenile found in Heath wood, assuming that these items belonged to him/her is very unlikely. The mound also contained a lot of animal remains from a dog, a horse, a pig, a sheep or goat and possibly an ox. Osteological analyses on their cremated remains found no signs of butchering, meaning they were possibly whole when laid in the pyre.\textsuperscript{167} An interesting point is that the size of the cemetery and the moderate amount of mounds could indicate that the burials could have been those of a warrior elite killed over a 5 year period during the invasion and either transported from the battlefield as ashes or to be cremated in situ for burial in the mounds.\textsuperscript{168} Shane McLeod also posits that because of the three cremations in Heath wood where sexing was possible - all three were found to be female, and the infant/juvenile possibly also being female - there is a possibility that all the graves in Heath wood were those of women.\textsuperscript{169} Though this is an intriguing proposal, an all-female, pagan, warrior cemetery, it is not possible to prove due to the other graves being unidentified.

In the case of mound 50, the high quality of the sword hilt and the animals cremated along with the woman and child within would indicate a high status burial, and if we assume that the artefacts indeed did belong to the woman and not the child then we are most likely

\textsuperscript{163} Richards et al. 2004: 90. Mounds 7 and 50.
\textsuperscript{164} Richards et al. 2004: 57f, 68.
\textsuperscript{165} Richards et al. 2004: 77. Table 1.
\textsuperscript{166} McLeod 2011: 348.
\textsuperscript{167} Richards et al. 2004: 79.
\textsuperscript{168} Richards et al. 2004: 107.
\textsuperscript{169} McLeod 2011: 348.
looking at an actual burial of a female Viking warrior that was either part of the great heathen army or part of the settlement established in the immediate aftermath of the conquest of Mercia.

**Repton wood**

Repton, close to the aforementioned Heath wood, was the site of the great heathen army’s winter encampment in 873-874. The site was originally a monastery that the Vikings took over and used not only for camping but for burying their dead, amongst them several dramatic warrior graves where battle wounds can be found on the skeletons. This is one of the few Viking mass graves from England and it has been interpreted as possibly being that of battle casualties or deaths otherwise incurred on campaign. The mass grave was centered in a Christian mausoleum that the Vikings had levelled and reused for a central grave of an important warrior, four possible sacrifices of men directly adjacent to him and a total of at least 250 other individuals surrounding them. These 250 individuals consisted of 80% males which have been interpreted as either dead warriors or the remains of monks that were killed when the Vikings took over, or disturbed from already existing graves when the fortification was built. The mass grave contained weapons such as swords, axes and seaxes which would indicate that those buried here were linked to a warrior identity. The remaining 20% of the skeletal remains were of women and are thought to have either been native followers of the camp, nuns from the nunnery or Norse women. An examination of these bones concluded that their physiology was more in line with Anglo-Saxon women than Norse which indicates that most if not all of the women were not of Norse origin. Isotope analysis was conducted on seven of the individuals in the mass grave and the men were all found to be of Scandinavian origin (one from Sweden and the rest from Denmark) one of the two females examined could be of Norse origin, the analysis indicating her childhood was spent on the mid-continental or Baltic Europe which includes parts of Scandinavia and it was found that

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171 Price 2008: 262f.
172 Richards 2008: 69.
173 McLeod 2011: 345: Table 2.
the strontium isotopes examined from her were similar to the man from Sweden, indicating that they grew up in the same area.\textsuperscript{175}

Though an interpretation of monks and nuns being buried to the central warrior, the sheer amount of individuals as well as the weapons that were included in the mass grave, would indicate that at least some were, as the other interpretation suggests, warriors felled in combat. The isotope analysis that was conducted was quite small-scale and only five men and two women were analysed, of these, all the men and one woman were Norse. Could she have been a camp follower, the wife of a Viking, or a Viking herself? Conducting a larger scale isotope analysis would reveal the origin of more of the individuals, and if most if not all men were of Norse origin then the monk hypothesis would crumble. If more of the women are found to be Norse, then the nun hypothesis would also crumble.

For now this is only speculation, but if most individuals in the mass grave were of Norse origin, then the men would certainly be interpreted as warriors and I see no different interpretation for the women if they too are found to be Norse. Hopefully more of the skeletons in the mass graves will be examined more closely in the near future but for now, the one Norse woman cannot be said for certain to have been a warrior, but we cannot dismiss it either.

\textbf{4.2.2. Sweden}

\textbf{Birka}

Birka was a Viking age town located on the island of Björkö in lake Mälaren in Sweden, close to present-day Stockholm. Being one of the earliest and biggest towns in Scandinavia it has been extensively excavated by archaeologists. Birka was the site where Ansgars Christian mission to convert Sweden took place and contains about 2300 cremation and inhumation graves from the Viking age and about 1100 of them has so far been excavated.\textsuperscript{176}

Hjalmar Stolpe excavated the site in the 1870’s and among the hundreds of graves he examined, one is of particular interest. A chamber grave in the Hemlanden area of Birka, with the inventory number of BJ581, with a partially preserved skeleton, including a complete

\textsuperscript{175} McLeod 2011: 346.
\textsuperscript{176} Gräslund 1980: 4.
spine as well as remains of two horses. The grave goods found here included a full setup of weapons such as an iron sword, two shields, two spears, a fighting knife and an axe.\footnote{Kjellström 2012: 76.} Besides the weapons, other finds include iron fittings, two iron bridles for horses (one in the chamber and one on one of the horses) and other horse equipment, game pieces and game board fittings, a dice, an Arabic silver dirham coin dated to the reign of Caliph Al-Muqtadir (895-932 AD.), a silver pendant, an iron ring brooch, a bronze bowl, an iron ring, an iron buckle, a bone comb with bronze fittings, a slate whetstone and some miscellaneous iron objects.\footnote{Arbman 1940: 188f.} The two horses were found towards the lower end of the human skeleton on a ledge.\footnote{Kjellström 2012: 76.}

The knife was described as having perforated bronze fittings covered by white metal. One of the spearheads was badly damaged but at the time of excavation measured 42.6 cm in length and had nine bronze fittings but was without any traces of ornamentation. The second spearhead was 34 cm long but the tip was broken off making the total length when deposited unknown. It had 8 bronze rivets but could possibly have had more before. This spearhead was ornamented with silver and bronze wire twisted left and right to create a pattern. The iron axe was 20 cm long with a blade length of 17 cm. Arrowheads were also mentioned in the original source but no exact count of how many, only that they were all of the same type, 13-15 cm in length and had silver wiring on the shaft ends. The shield bosses had 4 nails each and their positions in the grave indicate that they were placed in the chamber standing up against the walls.\footnote{Arbman 1940: 188.}

This grave was previously estimated to that of a man even though no osteological examination was made at that time “The skeletons of a man who was probably seated in a sitting position, and that of the two horses, were fairly well preserved.”\footnote{Arbman 1940: 189f.} The grave goods alone were used in the gendering of the grave as that of a man.

New osteological analysis was recently made of the skeleton and through an examination of the lower jawbone and hipbone as well as approximate height estimation of the individual concluded distinct feminine features. This was confirmed to be a woman’s grave by a total of

\footnote{Arbman 1940: 188.}
three different osteologists, Anna Kjellström (leading osteologist), Petra Molnar and Elin Ahlin Sundman. ¹⁸²

Through this new analysis by osteologists we have an example of a previously grave-goods-only gendered grave being found to break the stereotype of what a female grave looks like. All the items found in the grave, including the weapons, the game pieces, the horses and the horse equipment, all point to a typical male warrior burial. Now we can see that it is a non-typical female burial, one of a female warrior.

The investigations into Birka are continuous to this day and osteological analyses of previously excavated graves are still being conducted, perhaps in the not too far away future, more female warriors could be rediscovered.

4.2.3. Norway

Kaupang

Kaupang is a town in Norway with a large grave area in the vicinity which consists of several cemeteries and grave clusters which have been dated as being in use from ca. 800 AD until 950 AD when it’s use seems to have been discontinued.

The cemeteries at Kaupang have been excavated by different archaeologists from the 19th C. until present times and Frans-Arne Stylegar published an article in 2007 which compiled the information gathered on the cemeteries at Kaupang by the other scholars as well as some of his own interpretations and contributions. Instead of going back to the works of the earlier scholars, this case study will mostly rely on the work of Stylegar where I will reference the parts that are important for this particular thesis. For a more in-depth look at which sources he uses, I suggest reading his full article.

The cemeteries of Kaupang are located both on the mainland (Nordre Kaupang, Sondre Kaupang, Hagejordet, Bijkholberget and Bjonnes) and on a set of islets (Lamoya and Vikingholmen). ¹⁸³ It has been estimated that around 1000 graves were located here but only around 700 monuments remains today; these are divided into two barrow cemeteries, one flat

¹⁸² Kjellström 2012: 76.
¹⁸³ For full map of the area see page 67 in Stylegar 2007.
grave cemetery and at least 5 lesser burial clusters.\textsuperscript{184} Unfortunately, during the 19th C. a lot of graves and barrows were destroyed due to the inhabitants of Kaupang starting cultivation on their newly acquired land and though we have some information on what had been found in the barrows by the farmers - swords, glass beads and boat remains - the circumstances of the finds are lost forever. \textsuperscript{185}

Of the graves which have been excavated and that could be gendered by grave goods, 58\% of the 9th C. graves and 24\% of the 10th C. graves are female. The drop in female gendered graves could be explained by a change in female dress. The 10th C. also saw an increase in weapons in gendered male graves and an increase in insular and eastern imports in contrast to 9th C. imports of mostly continental origin.\textsuperscript{186}

Of the graves excavated at Kaupang, 79 contained weapons, and of these 17 could be dated to the 9th C. and 38 to the 10th C. while the other 24 could not be accurately dated. Of the 9th C. weapon graves, four contained a sword/axe/spear combination, three contained a sword/spear combination, two contained a sword/axe combination, one contained a spear/axe combination and the remaining four contained spears only. Of the 10th C. weapon graves, a total of 13 contained full weapon assemblages while the other combinations range from three to six instances.\textsuperscript{187} Another interesting note is that of the long barrows of both Nordre and Sondre Kaupang that have been gendered, all were found to be female.\textsuperscript{188}

In the Nordre Kaupang cemetery there are four instances of female gendered graves containing oval brooches together with an axe head and the same combination is found in five graves in Bijkholberget cemetery. The ones in Nordre Kaupang could possibly be double cremations while the ones at Bikjholberget are certainly female graves. Additionally, two female graves contained single spear-heads and two contained shield-bosses. These have been interpreted as being connected to Valkyrie symbolism.\textsuperscript{189}

One of the most impressive graves at Kaupang is that of a triple boat grave, a boat 9m long containing two women and one man. The first woman was found with silver armbands, a pair

\textsuperscript{184} Stylegar 2007: 65.
\textsuperscript{185} Stylegar 2007: 77.
\textsuperscript{186} Stylegar 2007: 65.
\textsuperscript{187} Stylegar 2007: 83.
\textsuperscript{188} Stylegar 2007: 87.
\textsuperscript{189} Stylegar 2007: 84.
of gilded oval brooches, a silver ring that was possibly attached to a bead necklace. The other woman who was found by the stern of the boat was associated with an iron staff found underneath a stone under the boat suggesting that she was a seidr. She also had some other special objects next to her that indicates the same thing - a bronze cauldron with a runic inscription “i muntlauku”\(^{190}\) and several bronze items inside the cauldron as well as an egg-shaped stone next to it. This same woman is one of those who was found with a shield boss and an axe-head.\(^{191}\) If we connect the Seidr to the other women with shields and axes we can conclude that at least some of the females of Kaupang were thought of as having magical powers. However, if the graves without a sorceress staff are not symbolic of Valkyries, but rather practical, these women could be interpreted as female warriors.

Åsnes

In the municipality of Åsnes in Hedmark county we find a grave containing weapons and a female skeleton.\(^{192}\) The grave was first explored in 1900 when the son of the owner of the farm where it was located started digging into the “large grave mound”, at first they find bones from a horse and then as they dig deeper, they find more bones, this time from a human, as well as iron objects.\(^{193}\) This mound is found to contain a full assemblage of weapons, including a complete, albeit somewhat damaged, sword, a spearhead and an axe-head.\(^{194}\) According to the online database of the museum of cultural history in Oslo, the sword\(^{195}\) is double-edged and approximately 87 cm long in total with the handle being 12.5 cm, it has been classified as type M of the Petersen typology, the most common of the sword types and the most commonly found type in this part of Norway.\(^{196}\)

The spearhead\(^{197}\) is described as very thin and flat with the widest part being only 2.9 cm, however, it is heavily damaged by both rust and fire making it probable that it was originally bigger, the fire-damage came not from the original burial but from when the farmhouse it was located in burned down to the ground in 1912.\(^{198}\) The axe-head\(^{199}\) is 17.8 cm from edge to

\(^{190}\) Translation: “in (or into) the hand basin.” Stylegar 2007: 97.

\(^{191}\) Stylegar 2007: 66, 96.

\(^{192}\) Site id: C22541.


\(^{194}\) Stylegar 2007: 84.

\(^{195}\) Artefact id: C22541a.

\(^{196}\) Hernæs & Holck 1984: 34.

\(^{197}\) Artefact id: C22541b.

\(^{198}\) Hernæs & Holck 1984: 34.
back and is described as not being very curved, the largest width of the blade is 8.2 cm. Besides these weapons, five iron arrowheads, one possible iron file, fragments of a slate whetstone and several small pieces of unknown iron scraps, have all been recovered. A shield boss was also found in the initial excavation but was lost in the aforementioned fire.

Initially this grave was thought to belong to a man but after further inspection, the skeleton was found to be that of a woman. The woman was laid on her back oriented east to west with the sword on her left side, the grip by the hip and the edge by the head and the aforementioned horse was laid in the foot end of the grave. Osteological analysis of the skeletal remains gave an age estimation of 18-19 years at the time of her death, a height of 158 cm and a weight of about 40kg. Hernæs reiterates an earlier interpretation of the Ånes grave being that of a shieldmaiden as of the ancient sagas, but he himself regards the size of the sword compared to the small size of the woman as well as her young age as an indication that it was not her sword, that she only carried it, countering the shieldmaiden theory.

Though Hernæs gives compelling arguments against the shieldmaiden theory, he bases it solely on the relationship between the skeleton and the sword. The fact that she was buried not only with the sword but also with an axe, a spear and a shield is imperative to consider. Even if the sword might not have been an ideal weapon for her, the axe and spear coupled with a shield would have given her a formidable chance in battle, even if the sword was just for show. Considering her age it is also likely that the axe would have been the first weapon she carried into battle until she could afford a sword, which she may never had had a chance to use as she died so young. Considering also the horse, it is possible that she was mounted in combat, utilising the spear as well as a bow and arrows, though this specific interpretation of a horse-mounted shieldmaiden is far-fetched and not possible to prove at this time, the other interpretation of her wielding the axe instead of the sword is more likely in my opinion.

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199 Artefact id: C22541c.
200 Artefact id: C22541d-g.
201 Hernæs & Holck 1984: 34.
203 Hernæs & Holck 1984: 32.
204 Hernæs & Holck 1984: 37f.
205 Hernæs & Holck 1984: 34.
206 Hernæs & Holck 1984: 36.
4.2.4. Denmark

Bogøvej

In Bogøvej on the island of Langeland in Denmark lay a small cemetery on a hill during the Viking age. The site was excavated 1987-1989 and all 49 graves were excavated completely, three of these were double graves and in all the graves where skeletons were found, the preservation was excellent and either age at death, sex, or both could be determined on most of the skeletons. Amongst these graves one is of particular interest, the chamber grave of a young woman aged 16-18. The grave was rectangular in shape and surrounded by lightly seared planks, creating the chamber. This grave is also the only weapon grave in this cemetery, containing an axe. Though the original authors as well as Leszek Gardela indicate that the presence of iron nails in the grave showed that she was buried in a coffin only 2 nails were found and described in the report and these were found in the two western corners of the grave. This seems a bit low to qualify as nails of a coffin, for example grave BA, a burial of an older woman ca 55-65, was found with 24 nails and 4 rivets. But I digress, I’m not here to discuss whether or not she was buried in a coffin, the interesting part about grave BB is the axe found beside her. The axe was made of iron and was 17.1 cm long with the edge of the blade being 7.9 cm long, slightly concave with the bottom of the edge being drawn back. The head of the axe slims up towards the back and then 4 cm from the back it curves down again. Remnants of textile was found attached to the back of the axe. As with many wooden items, the handle of the axe is not preserved. The axe is described as a “bearded axe”, found commonly in the eastern Baltic and eastern Prussia and was part of an eastern tradition of blacksmithing. Of the axes of this type found in Scandinavia, they are all considered battle-axes.

Besides the axe and nails, other items were also found in the grave - an iron knife on her chest, some burnt pieces of flint, fragments of pottery, a firesteel (firesteels are almost

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207 Gardela 2013: 277.
209 Grøn, Krag & Bennike 1994: 120.
211 Grøn, Krag & Bennike 1994: 34.
213 Grøn, Krag & Bennike 1994: 34.
exclusively found in graves of men\textsuperscript{215}) and a silver Arabic dirham coin (dated to 945 AD.\textsuperscript{216}), these last two items were found on her pelvis.\textsuperscript{217}

Leszek Gardela posits the question as to whether or not the axe was a weapon or a tool used in the kitchen, perhaps to cut meat.\textsuperscript{218} He also mentions that axes are very rare finds in female graves and appear more often in male graves.\textsuperscript{219}

This grave was not on the hill of the cemetery but on its slopes and was one of the most secluded and southerly located graves in the cemetery. This position on the liminal fringe of the cemetery could indicate some sort of special position for the woman.\textsuperscript{220}

If we look at the position of the dirham and firesteel it’s possible that they were in a pouch on her belt, made from organic materials not preserved. The position of the axe in the grave indicates that the shaft ran up towards her hip, making it plausible that it too hung from her belt.

The fact that axes of this type is commonly labeled as battle-axes (when found in male graves) and that axes in general are so rare in female graves and coupled with the fact that no other household utensils were found in grave BB would indicate that it was not a mere tool used for cutting meat but that it was indeed a weapon. However, to label the woman in this grave as a warrior would be a bit of a long stretch as no other weapons, shield bosses or armour were found and the fact that she was quite young. Though a weapon, it could possibly have been worn by her for self-defence, not as an offensive weapon. The axe and the coin point to an eastern connection but I doubt, these things aside, that she was a far travelling Viking, perhaps she aspired to be but died too young to fulfill her dream.

4.3. Case studies - Endnote

Though I had hoped to find more examples of female weapon graves, the ones I found will hopefully be enough to work with. There are however some more references to women buried with weapons but I cannot find any official source to these, only certain websites or

\textsuperscript{215} Grøn, Krag & Bennike 1994: 120. Out of 200 firesteels found in Norway, all were in graves of men: 121.
\textsuperscript{216} Grøn, Krag & Bennike 1994: 134.
\textsuperscript{217} Grøn, Krag & Bennike 1994: 34.
\textsuperscript{218} Gardela 2013: 279.
\textsuperscript{219} Gardela 2013: 298.
\textsuperscript{220} Gardela 2013: 279.
blogs of Viking enthusiasts, so therefore there is no use in mentioning them. However, there are some cases which can be more reliably said to be legitimate but that I can find no official academic literature on, either due to language barriers or lack of digitization of older archaeological reports, and therefore cannot include in my case studies.\textsuperscript{221}

I looked into all areas of Norse expansion to the West but besides the core Scandinavian countries of Sweden, Denmark and Norway, only England had cases of female weapon graves. I looked into Iceland, France and other parts of the British isles such as Ireland, Scotland and the northern Islands (Shetland, Orkney, Man) but could find no examples of a female weapon grave in these areas.

There has also been several occurrences of women being buried with shield-shaped pendants, possibly Valkyrie related,\textsuperscript{222} but were not found in any of the case studies that I brought up. Though they could be related to Valkyrie symbolism, the fact that they are not recorded in any of the weapon graves I described would indicate a religious or symbolic reference to female warriors rather than actual warriors.

\textbf{4.4. Valkyrie artefacts}

Besides female weapon graves, there are certain other archaeological artefacts that are of interest to understanding and interpreting the concept of female warriors. We have already discussed the occurrences of jewellery and oval brooches in the female dress, but there is a certain other type of jewellery that, though not directly linked with female dress, can show us another side of gender and identity in the Viking age; brooches, pendants and mounts that depict Valkyries.

These are brooches, pendants or mounts that seem to depict mythological Valkyries, Odin’s choosers of the slain, the semi-deity women who chose which warriors would go to Valhalla.

\textsuperscript{221} One of these is the so called Suontaka sword which was supposedly found in Suontaka, Hämä county, Finland. The references I can find online are not reliable enough to use but apparently a sword was found in 1968 in the grave of a woman and is of type Æ dating to the end of the Viking age, ca 1050 AD. The sword appears to be quite famous, most of the results from online searching show several websites with replicas for sale and images of the original in blogs. Due to language barriers I could not pursue this lead further.

Another reference occurred with a woman's grave in a site near Roskilde, Denmark, that contained a sword. The national museum of Denmark lists a woman found near Roskilde with a ritually killed male slave and a spear, but no sword. Unable to find any more references to this grave or if the one listed by the museum is the same as the other, I am unable to pursue this lead.

\textsuperscript{222} Graham-Campbell 2013: 163.
by taking the bravest of fallen warriors from the battlefield.\textsuperscript{223} “The first element of “Valkyrie” is Valr, meaning “the slain” - Hence the word means “Chooser of the slain””\textsuperscript{224}

There are examples of these brooches throughout the Scandinavian world as well as the areas of Norse expansion.

In England, eight, possibly nine, of these have been discovered by metal detectorists; a mount where only the head and torso remain resembles a Valkyrie brooch, but is unable to be properly identified, was found in Colkirk in Norfolk.\textsuperscript{225} The others that are identified as such have been found in Donington in south Lincolnshire, in Exton in Rutland, in Wickham market in Suffolk, in Bylaugh in Norfolk, in Winterton Lincolnshire and from the area of Peterborough, exact location unknown. What identifies these figures as Valkyries are the trailing skirts and the weapons they bear, a shield coupled with either a spear or a sword, spears being the most common. The last three mounts shows a figure facing a horse-mounted warrior woman which is interpreted as a Valkyrie greeting a warrior to Valhalla, as paralleled in Gotlandic picture stones.\textsuperscript{226}

These types of brooches have also been found in Scandinavia, here they are most often found in graves and hoards and are made from either silver or a copper alloy.\textsuperscript{227} One example was found in the treasure hoard in Klinta on the island of Öland, Sweden. This was a Valkyrie pendant amongst other pendants attached to a silver amulet ring.\textsuperscript{228} In Denmark they have been found in Tissø and Ribe. The ones from Tissø are described as pendants but has the same characteristics of the brooches and mounts found in England. Tissø itself is a lake close to a Viking age settlement that was founded around the middle of the 6th C. and lasted until the middle of the 11th C. The name Tissø translates as Týr’s lake, Týr being one of the war gods in old Norse religion - and judging from the multitude of weapons, tools and brooches which were found in the lakebed - the lake was the site of ritual offerings to Týr.\textsuperscript{229} The settlement was also the seasonal site of powerful chieftains\textsuperscript{230}, two manors has been located

\textsuperscript{223} Pestell 2013: 243.
\textsuperscript{224} Graham-Campbell 2013: 161.
\textsuperscript{225} Pestell 2013: 244.
\textsuperscript{226} Pestell 2013: 243. See chapter 3.4. In this thesis.
\textsuperscript{227} Eniosova 2007: 141.
\textsuperscript{228} Graham-Campbell 2013: 170.
\textsuperscript{229} Jørgensen 2008: 77.
\textsuperscript{230} Evidence suggests the site was not in use continuously throughout a long period but rather on seasonal periods of time.
with a high number of weapons and items made from gold, silver and bronze. South and north of the manor site there were markets and construction places.\textsuperscript{231} Within the area of the second manor a smaller house was built during the first phase of construction around 700 AD and then rebuilt larger in the second phase around the 8th-9th C. The small building is shown to have been maintained alongside the manor for about 250 years. It is thought that the manor had cultic significance due to the high number of weapons and “heathen amulets” found within the manor and in the lake and it’s possible that the small building was a Hörgr, an altar or religious sanctuary building where rituals would’ve taken place.\textsuperscript{232} The heathen amulets that Jørgensen speak of contain imagery of Norse mythology, including some gilded silver pendants depicting Valkyries.\textsuperscript{233} Excavations showed that the entire market area was not used continuously but rather that parts were used in short and intense intervals.\textsuperscript{234} Due to the presence of a marketplace and construction site next to the Manor and lake, it’s likely that the Valkyrie pendants were made here and then used in the manor area and offered to the lake. It is also worth knowing that it is thought that it was the god Týr who chose which warriors should be taken to Valhalla and commanded the Valkyries to gather them.\textsuperscript{235}

Valkyrie imagery is also found on small gold foil figurines of women holding beakers found in Uppåkra in Sweden. It has generally been determined that figures of women holding beakers are representations of Valkyries as seen on for example the gotlandic picture stones.\textsuperscript{236} The Uppåkra examples do not have weapons, only beakers for drinking which has been interpreted as a symbol of the important social function of feasting and hospitality.\textsuperscript{237}

Though I was not intentionally researching the eastern expanse, I accidentally happened upon information about two Valkyrie brooches in this area and so I might as well include them here, seeing as these artefacts are quite rare.

In Russia, one brooch made out of silver was found in Rjurikovo Gorodišče near Novgorod and one out of gold in the archaeological site known as Gnězdovo in the village of Gnyozdovo, ca 400km south of Novgorod. Gnězdovo is a site where a lot of Scandinavian

\textsuperscript{231} Jørgensen 2008: 81.
\textsuperscript{232} Jørgensen 2008: 79.
\textsuperscript{233} Jørgensen 2008: 81. Figure 7.1.3.
\textsuperscript{234} Jørgensen 2008: 81.
\textsuperscript{235} Guerber 1909: 96.
\textsuperscript{236} Graham-Campbell 2013: 39.
\textsuperscript{237} Larsson 2002: 28.
objects with magical connotations have been found. These were made locally out of iron, copper alloy and silver, only the Valkyrie and one other object was made from gold. The golden Valkyrie was not actually a brooch but most likely a pendant, carved out of a thin gold sheet, and had a suspension loop which indicated that it was hung, possibly as a set of several pieces of jewellery. This specific Valkyrie bears more similarities to those shown on gotlandic picture stones than the brooches found elsewhere in Europe.  

The last artefact I will speak of is a relatively recent find, a Valkyrie figurine made from silver, found in Hårby, Denmark. It was discovered by a metal detectorist and amateur archaeologist named Morten Skovsby in 2013. Due to it being such a recent find, there aren’t any scholarly articles out yet, though I know some are working on it at the moment. From the Odense museum website’s description of it we can see that it is 3.4 cm tall and about 1 cm wide, it’s a figure showing a woman with long braided hair holding a sword in her right hand and a shield in her left. This figurine is unique since it’s the first three-dimensional representation of a Valkyrie, the pendants and brooches as well as the gotlandic picture stones are all flat two-dimensional images. The site itself, Hårby, has had some archaeological excavations done which showed that it contained several small houses used in the manufacturing of different things, like at Tisso, and several pits were found with charcoal, burned stones and metal fragments, which indicates that items were regularly melted down here in order to create new things. It is believed that this figurine was to meet the same fate but luckily for us it ended up preserved in a midden.

Though one can argue with the interpretation that all these figures represent Valkyries and not female warriors most signs do point to Valkyries. The connection between them and places of magical or religious purposes as in Tisso, Uppåkra and Gnězdovo, makes it likely that they had a religious function, perhaps as talismans or as objects created specifically for rituals such as offerings. However, the fact that they are not all represented equally in imagery could indicate that not all of them were Valkyries. However, as with all things, local variations could be in place. The knowledge we have of Valkyries should not be taken as singular representations and it’s likely that the imagery of these brooches, pendants and figurine, represent another source for how the mythological Valkyries were perceived. In the

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238 Eniosova 2007: 141.
Icelandic sources, Valkyries are represented as young and beautiful women, with dazzling white arms and flowing golden hair. They rode steeds not only on land but also over the sea to gather warriors from battlefields and sinking ships alike.\textsuperscript{240} The goddess Freyja, though a goddess of love and magic, also had her own hall, Folkvangr, where half of the fallen warriors would go. She would herself dress in a manner similar to the Valkyries and went down with them, she not only took the men but also women who were enticed by the concept of Folkvangr that they rushed into battle hoping to die with their husbands so they may be brought there together.\textsuperscript{241} If we see the figures not as Valkyries of Odin but as Valkyries of Freyja or Freyja herself, then we can get a very much different interpretation.

The pendants were likely to be worn but it is not possible to assume if it was gender exclusive or gender inclusive. The brooch type were likely to be worn on clothing and since jewellery was more likely to be worn by women, it is likely that these were as well. The ones that were made without the previous two functions, those that seem entirely decorative, may have been made solely for ritual purposes, such as offering them to the gods. The last Valkyrie, the three-dimensional representative figurine, is especially interesting. Since there was no pin for fastening nor a loop for suspension, neither brooch nor pendant is probable. This leaves decorative as the sole interpretation for its use, the intricate work that went into it as well as the fact that it was a figurine would indicate that it was not intended to be offered but rather that it intended to be stood somewhere, maybe an altar, and offerings was made to it instead of the other way around. Adam of Bremen's account of the temple in Uppsala had a description of large wooden idols of the primary gods Odin, Thor and Freyr,\textsuperscript{242} and perhaps this was a miniature idol of either Freyja or a Valkyrie. From Adams account as well as other archaeological finds we learn that idols were used in worship and thus I believe it possible that this silver figurine was one such idol and since it was made out of silver, it was preserved, unlike those made out of wood.

The fact that the terms Valkyrie and shieldmaiden have been used interchangeably for the deities as well as in descriptions of human women in the sagas, it is quite an astonishing part of old Norse cult we can see here. The idea of Valkyries and their attributes as choosers of the slain can be connected to the larger idea of women participating in war if we examine it

\textsuperscript{240} Guerber 1909: 182f.
\textsuperscript{241} Guerber 1909: 138f.
\textsuperscript{242} Alkarp 1997: 155.
from a gender theoretical perspective, something I will bring up in more detail in the upcoming final chapter.
5. Discussion & conclusion

In my research I hoped to find a more extensive amount of female warrior graves that I could then pick and choose from and then discuss and further examine the most likely ones, however, the case studies I described were the only ones I did find, excluding some who I intentionally chose not to include such as spear-only or arrow-only graves. I found seven cases in total which included women buried with offensive weaponry. Three in England, two in Norway, one in Sweden and one in Denmark. Out of these, some are more or less likely to represent female warriors and therefore I will divide them up into cases of low, medium and high probability.

The criteria I used for determining which case studies to do I believe was accurately estimated; whole female skeletons or fragmented skeletal remains which could still be identified as female, with weapons such as axes, swords, knives, arrows and spears as well as other equipment such as shields. Deliberately excluding graves containing only spears, or only arrows as these are often relegated as either magic or hunting equipment, a Seidr or hunter identity. Knives are usually worn by both sexes and are believed to be everyday items used for a variety of purposes, only the Birka grave contained a knife which was big enough to be considered a battle-knife and in this case it was but one of several weapons in the arsenal. Armour is very rare to find across the board regardless of gender and so it was no surprise that none of the case studies included pieces of armour in the grave. Even though it can be said that warriors usually had more than one weapon, my decision to include graves containing only an axe as the sole weapon comes from the fact that they are very rare in female graves to begin with and so the interpretation that they were only used as household tools when it comes to women but used as weapons when it comes to men is logically invalid. The case studies I brought up where the axe was the sole weapon found we could see that they included no other household items making it more reasonable to argue that they were not tools but rather weapons.

The first case study I brought up - Santon Downham in England - is one I find to be on the lower scale of probability; one sword, a pair of oval brooches and one skeleton. First of all, the skeleton is unidentified in terms of sex as well as in connection to the other artefacts, this is due to the poorly recorded circumstances in which they were all found, it is said that they
were found together but without proper records it is impossible to know exactly how they are connected. The oval brooches are distinctly female and the sword is typically male and so without identification of the skeleton we cannot tell which of these were anomalous, a woman buried with a sword or a man buried with oval brooches.

The Repton mass burial contained at least 250 individuals, out of which most have been analysed. 80% of these were discovered to be men of Norse origin while the women, 20% of the burials, mostly show Anglo-Saxon skeletal morphology. One out of two women who were examined with strontium isotope analysis was shown to be of probable Norse origin. The amount of weapons in this grave coupled with visible battle wounds on many skeletons indicate that many if not most of the men were warriors in which case it is possible to assume that at least some of the women were too. Due to the sheer amount of individuals and weapons the interpretation of this being a grave of war casualties is highly likely but due to the low amount of strontium isotope analysis made, it is hard to know if the women were part of the Norse warrior band or something else. If we could connect the one woman of Norse origin to any weapon then the probability would be higher but since it was all mixed in as a mass grave it is not possible to say for certain, therefore I deem this case as of medium probability of containing one or more female warriors.

The case of the woman found in Åsnes in Norway is also of medium to high probability. She was found in a large burial mound and the fact that she was buried with a full assemblage of warrior gear such as a sword, an axe, a spear, a shield and arrowheads indicate a warrior grave, however, the age and the size of the woman would counter it. She was very young, 16-18 years of age at death, 158 cm tall and about 40 kg. The size of the sword would indicate that she would not have been able to wield it effectively but as I stated earlier, the axe, spear and arrows would have been fine to use, especially on horseback and since a horse was found in the mound it is not an impossible interpretation.

In the case of Kaupang in Norway there were 79 weapon graves out of the ones that have been examined. Most belonged to men but there were several cases of females buried with weapons, nine had oval brooches coupled with an axes and two graves with a spear and shield. There was also the massive boat grave containing three individuals, a man and woman as well as a third woman who is connected to Valkyrie symbolism, she had an iron rod, a
shield and an axe. The fact that she had an iron rod would connect her to the Seidr hypothesis but together with the axe and shield I would argue for another identity as a symbol of Valkyries. The amount of female graves in this area which did not contain weapons would indicate that the ones with weapons are special in some way. The other female weapon graves show no connection to magic of any sorts, just women buried with axes and oval brooches and in one case (besides the Valkyrie/seidr) a shield. Although axes are generally uncommon in female graves, the high amount of them found in female graves here could indicate that they were used as tools as some interpretations go, however, the male graves which contained weapons usually had a higher amount in each with full assemblages of different combinations of weapons, therefore we cannot rule out the possibility that some of the axes found in female graves were also used as weapons, not only as tools. Since we cannot for certain make this assumption but neither disregard it fully, Kaupang would be of medium to high probability.

Bogøvej in Denmark is very interesting and the case of grave BB especially so. This cemetery was quite small with only 49 graves but has been fully excavated, grave BB which contained a woman with, among some other things, an axe and a firesteel, two typically male artefacts. This is the only female grave in Denmark that contained an axe and this particular axe is of a type that is commonly referred to as a bearded battleaxe. The type is fairly common in itself throughout Scandinavia but since this is the first time it’s been found with a woman, interpretations in the way of “household tool” category just does not fit. If we interpret the axe just as we would if it was found with a man, as a battleaxe, then it is certainly not a mere household tool. As mentioned earlier, the woman in Bogøvej was quite young and thus it is less likely that she would have been a far travelling Viking, but due to the type of axe it is and the fact that it is the only time a Viking age burial of a woman has been found with any type of axe in Denmark, I would say that the probability of this being a warrior grave is very high. As I mentioned earlier, the axe could have been carried by the woman for self defence and not for direct offensive actions but it is also possible that she was not a native Dane but that she only died there, perhaps she was from Norway where more women have been found with axes, strontium analysis could help determine where she was from but at the moment we only know where she was buried, Denmark. The liminal position of the grave in the cemetery would also indicate the special status of the woman in life and since no high status objects nor magical items were found we could deduce that she was not a
noblewoman or a sorceress but still important enough to warrant a special status, perhaps as a warrior.

In Heath wood in England we find the only Viking age cremation cemetery outside of Scandinavia. Many weapons have been found here and out of the three burials that could be sexed, all were of women. One particular burial, mound 50, was found to contain a woman and an infant/juvenile as well as several animals and the hilt of a sword which was decorated with a maltese cross and silver inlays. It has been theorized that the sword belonged to the child but seeing as this was the only child found in the cemetery and that there were more weapons found in other mounds (though the human remains connected to these could not be sexed) I would disagree with this assumption. If the sword and animal sacrifices were not connected directly to the child but rather to the woman, who could’ve been the mother of the child, then it is very likely that she was a warrior. Heath wood was very close to the Repton woods mass burial but is different in the fact that it is entirely pagan in nature. If we see the Heath wood and Repton wood cemeteries as belonging to the same people we could argue that this smaller one was of special importance and that those buried here, like in Bogovej in Denmark, had special status. Others have theorized that it was a cemetery for warriors of the great heathen army in which case the child is more of an anomaly than a woman buried with a sword. I deem the case of Heath wood to be of high probability to hold at least one female warrior, the woman in mound 50, and possibly more seeing as the only burials that could be sexed were all found to be female, perhaps the other weapons also belonged to women who just could not be identified, though this is impossible to prove at this time.

The most probable case of a female warrior I found is that of the Birka grave Bj581 which at its initial discovery was hailed as the grave of a man who embodied the typical Viking warrior ideal. It included a full assemblage of weapons including a sword, two shields, two spears, one seax, one axe and a number of arrowheads as well as two horses and a plethora of other miscellaneous items. The site of Birka itself as a crossroad for trade and travel to the east and the rest of Scandinavia would have been an ideal place for the Vikings to inhabit, either for trading or raiding purposes. Recently, in 2013, the skeleton in the grave was re-examined by a team of osteologists and it was discovered that the grave in fact held a woman, not a man. This particular case is of special importance as it proves that there has been, in the past, cases of misgendering graves by looking solely on the grave goods. When it
was thought to belong to a man the grave was labeled as a warrior grave and now that it is
known that it is in fact a woman, the warrior identity should remain, seeing as the assemblage
of weapons and other artefacts did not change, only the sex of the person buried with them.

I expected to find more examples across more countries and it was surprising not to find any
examples in the rest of Britain, so few in Scandinavia and none in Iceland, Ireland and
France. It is possible that they have simply not been found yet or that, like the Birka grave,
they have been misgendered. As of now however, these areas should be considered as empty
of female warriors. In total there are 15 graves with probable female warriors and 3 other
possible ones. Eleven, possibly twelve in Kaupang, one in Birka, Heath wood, Åsnes and
Bogøvej respectively, Santon Downham possibly has one and the Repton mass burial may
have one or more but since it is a mass grave it’s hard to know. As with male warrior graves,
axes were the most common weapon found with only one battle knife, a few swords,
arrowheads and spears found.

Based on the rarity of female warrior graves as well as the fact that most of the graves I
discussed were in some way either buried in the margins or periphery of the cemeteries or in
a different, special way from the rest of the graves, I would like to argue for the concept of
female warriors to have been perceived as something extraordinary even during the Viking
age and possibly seen as a different gender, not men or women but rather something
different, in between, a Valkyrie.

By what we know from gender theory and feminist thought, what makes women women
changes constantly and is dependent on the social, temporal, cultural and geographic context
in which gender exists. If we look at the written sources it is interesting to note that most of
them use words such as Amazon, Valkyrie or Shieldmaiden (Shieldmaiden being another
word for Valkyrie) to describe women who fought in wars. Saxo Grammaticus argued that
women who fought like men had somehow “unsexed themselves” and often referred to them
as amazons and I believe this could have been a concept he did not think of himself but
rather, like with most of his sources, it was based on earlier sources and their mentality.

Many of Saxo’s reiterations of stories had elements commonly found in fairytales which
furthers the idea that these types of women were something completely alien to him and
supernatural and extraordinary to the original authors. Since Saxo often based his history on
earlier oral sources it shows that this sentiment of female warriors being so special was not uncommon even during the Viking age. The most references to female warriors we have comes from Saxo’s account and Lagertha, one of the more recognizable characters, showed incredible skill in battle and is often compared to a Valkyrie. Her skills in combat as a warrior and tactician, as a maiden not in need of rescuing, and as a powerful force that turned the tide of battle in favour of her one-time-husband and forever-ally, Ragnar Lothbrok who attributed his victories to her, shows how extraordinary she was and even though this war between Denmark and Sweden has never been proven to have actually occurred, if it was fictional, would certainly have been known in some version and reiterated during the Viking age.

In the Sagas we only hear about two warrior women, one of which is Freydis Eiriksdottir which could be argued to be more of a relentlessly ambitious (and deadly) woman than a warrior, she plotted to have men killed, killed women herself, and stopped marauding natives from continuing their attack on her camp by slapping a sword on her exposed breast. The story of Freydis is more realistic in nature as she and her family are well attested historical figures and with her father Eirik the Red having a history of violent behaviour, it is no wonder that his daughter would be the way she was as well.

The second woman in the sagas to be a warrior is Brynhildur from the Volsunga saga. As mentioned earlier, this saga is a reiteration of an older German story and tells the tale of Brynhildur who is a Valkyrie of Odin and a self-proclaimed shield-may (Shieldmaiden). Her very name comes from the fact that she wore a byrny which is a mail-coat, a helmet, and wielded a sword. In the story she is shown to have many supernatural powers such as foreseeing events and smiting people down at will. Her story is much more fictionalized compared to Freydis and though she is also thought to have been based on a real woman, her story contain far too many fairytale elements to be of historical value. But as the original German story predates the Viking age and then transforms into a Norse version as a saga, it would be possible that this story was known throughout parts of the Norse world during the Viking age and served to inspire young women who aspired to be shieldmaidens.

Besides the sagas and Saxo Grammaticus we also saw that the Valkyrie symbolism extends to other objects. The Oseberg tapestry from the Oseberg ship burial of a mighty queen has Valkyries and a possible Odin figure and Gotlandic picture stones have many representations
of Valkyries holding beakers and greeting warriors to Valhalla next to Odin and several of these picture stones from Gotland have depictions of Hildr Högnadottir which appears in the saga Ragnarsdrápa which shows her as having Valkyrie-like powers as she instigates a war and resurrects fallen warriors to continue the war every day. And lastly, the Valkyrie jewellery I spoke about at the end of chapter 4. The iconography of Valkyries are here seen extensively on jewellery in Scandinavia as well as England and Russia. The one three-dimensional representation we have is of a silver figurine of great craftsmanship from Hårby, Denmark. It is believed that this figure was created only to be sacrificed but luckily somehow ended up in a midden and preserved. It is impossible to say exactly what its purpose was but if we assume that, like most of the other Valkyrie artefacts, it was created only to sacrifice, then we see a very special part of old Norse cult we don’t fully understand yet. These representations on jewellery shows that the Valkyrie was an important figure in old Norse cult and if we see female warriors as earthly representations of these deities then it’s possible to look beyond the face value of these figures and see them not only as Valkyries but as women as well.

If women who participated in battle or who behaved like men in terms of violence it is possible that these were likened to Valkyries. Since gender is fluid and based on context it is possible that their identity changed when going to war and they were no longer just women but seen as something else, possibly manifestations of Valkyries, and then afterwards most would resume their identities as wives, mothers, daughters etc. If that is the case then it would make sense that they were treated in a special way such as getting buried in the periphery of cemeteries or having animals sacrificed with them. In the case of Heath wood especially we can see that the women buried here must have been seen as different from those found in the nearby Repton mass grave, 4 km away, cremated in a pagan custom way with several animals laid in the pyres and away from the reused Christian cemetery of Repton. These sites could also point to an ideological difference between those buried in Heath wood and Repton respectively.

One of the most important case studies was grave Bj 581 in Birka because it showed that it is not always viable to gender a grave by the grave goods alone. Of course, most of the time archaeologists work with a deadline and financial limit that simply does not allow for large scale examination of every single individual find, especially in large areas such as Birka, and
then gendering with grave goods is quicker and often times correct, it is only the anomalies we miss. However, with this recent re-examination of BJ 581 I believe it is imperative not to jump to conclusions about the sex of the person based on the grave goods or other contextual finds. A grave with warrior equipment should be labeled as a warrior grave instead of a male or female warrior grave until it is more reliably determined which it really is. This should go with all types of discoveries because, contextually speaking, meaning and use changes depending on several different criteria such as time and culture. A counter-argument for this would be the cases where a typically female object, such as oval brooches, are found together with a typically male object, such as a weapon, and thus determined to be an atypical female grave rather than an atypical male grave. However it is possible to conclude that in the Viking age men and women did have distinct social spheres and that crossing into other gender identities was abnormal but that it was more accepted for women to cross over to the “wrong” sphere compared to men doing the same. Though it was more accepted, it seems that it was a very special and extraordinary occurrence that warranted special treatment.

In chapter 2 I spoke about a theory regarding female warriors being allowed to fight in cultures which engaged mainly in external wars i.e. against peoples of different cultures and languages, while being excluded from internal warfare i.e. against people belonging to the same culture and language as the main culture. This was because women were married in from other tribes and families and thus in internal warfare the wife’s tribe could be attacked and a conflict of interests would arise. The study showed that only cultures which fought outside their language and culture groups would allow women to fight in their wars. This theory could also partly be used in a Viking age context as in Scandinavia women would also be married within their culture, however men would sometimes take wives from areas they expanded into such as in the case of Russia. Looking through the case studies however we can see that there were more possible female warriors in mainland Scandinavia than elsewhere and therefore the theory of internal warfare containing less or no female warriors does not fit here. This can be explained by the size, complexity and expansiveness of Viking age culture and land. The shieldmaids in Saxo’s stories were part of wars between two or more Kings and their people, not small tribes or families. Brynhildur was outside any specific society, having favourites in wars but no connection to anyone except her immediate family.
Freydis was Greenlandic and engaged in violence with first Icelanders and then Native Americans.

The armed women found in Kaupang could be explained to have had a function similar to the female samurai, Onna Bugeisha, who defended the home while the men were away while the women in Birka, Bogovej and Åsnes being more likely to have travelled for war, especially the Birka woman due to the centrality of Birka as a crossroad to the rest of the Norse world. The Åsnes woman I argued earlier would probably not have been a far-travelling Viking but the composition of her grave goods would suggest she was no mere defender of the home but that she was involved in some, possibly regional, fighting. The warriors found in England could possibly all come from the great heathen army or smaller warbands attacking coastal settlements or clerical buildings and it would then make more sense that they included women since no contradicting loyalties could possibly arise.

Finally, can we close the argument once and for all, did female warriors exist during the Viking age? If we use the word female as a determination of biological sex then I would argue that female warriors did indeed exist as evidenced by the case studies as well as the Irish annals and other written sources. Obviously it’s not certain that all of the cases I listed contained seasoned warriors but, as I explained with the probability scale, there are some who should be considered more likely to have actually been warriors. If we use the word female as a term for gender identity then I would argue that these women had a different gender identity when it came to combat, Valkyries, and thus it is also possible that more women engaged in combat than what we can see but that they resumed their regular identities outside of war. As we can see with the written sources, they often refer to fighting women as either Valkyries or shieldmaidens and many of the case studies showed they were buried in liminal or peripheral spaces owing to special treatment applicable to people who did not belong to the two main social spheres of gender identities. If the concept of fluid gender identity applies in this case then “female warrior” could be interchangeable with “Valkyrie” but since Valkyries mostly refer to the mythological deities it would be best to keep using the term “female warrior”.

There is no such thing as 100% fact in archaeology as more evidence constantly appears to either confirm or deny our theories but for the facts I have discussed I believe it is possible to say that, at this moment, the evidence points to their existence. However few cases we have
at this moment it is highly probable that more are yet to be discovered or, as with the Birka woman, rediscovered. Archaeological work continues at Birka and other large sites and hopefully newer osteological analyses will reveal more of these female warriors both in Scandinavia and the Norse areas of expansion.

When it comes to what more can be done in future research I have stated a few times before that osteological analyses should always be made when possible if we are to expand the list of female warriors as well as other types of identities of both men and women. Metallographic analyses on weapons should preferably also be made in order to discover their use but with the nature of professional archaeology as being constrained by time and budget it is an unrealistic expectation to have on all archaeological excavations. Strontium isotope analysis could help reveal if more women in the Repton wood mass burial were Norse or Anglo-Saxon in origin as well as help determine where the other women, especially the Bogovej woman was from, was she Danish or did she come to Denmark from somewhere else? Where did the warriors of the great heathen army come from exactly? Hopefully strontium isotope analysis will become more commonplace in archaeology in the future to help us better understand the migration of people in the Viking age and beyond.

The archaeology of gender is an ever-growing theoretical approach within archaeology that should be continued to be studied by future students of archaeology as a way to understand the importance of context when making interpretations, not only in regards to gender but other identities as well. There are instances of men buried with household items, children buried with weapons as well as the aforementioned women found with magical or hunting equipment, these, and others, are identities that will also need attention in future research.

I believe it is not a matter of If but rather When we find more female warrior graves and when more cases are discovered, new research can be done about these and an updated work including them should be made.
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