



MA thesis
in Medieval Icelandic Studies

Scandinavian Women in Viking Age Society

Samantha Claire Dickson

October 2021



UNIVERSITY OF ICELAND
SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES

FACULTY OF ICELANDIC AND COMPARATIVE CULTURAL STUDIES

University of Iceland
School of Humanities
| Medieval Icelandic Studies

**Scandinavian Women in Viking Age
Society**

Thesis for M.A. -degree
30 ECTS

Samantha Claire Dickson
Ssn.: 0211954139

Supervisor: Anita Sauckel
September 2021

Ágrip

Þessi ritgerð rannsakar þau hlutverk sem voru í boði fyrir skandinavískar konur á víkingaöld. Skandinavískar konur voru lengi jaðarsettar í fræðiritum um víkingaöldina þar til tiltölulega nýlega. Vinsæla myndin sem oft er dregin fram af víkingaöldinni einkennist af stríðsmönnum, karlaveldi í ofbeldisfullum heimi sem samanstendur af árásum, eyðileggingu og þrækkun kristinnar Evrópu. Hins vegar, með nútíma fornleifauppgötvunum og áherslu á kynbundna rannsókn hafa flóknari og fjölbreyttari frásagnir komið fram. Víkingaöldin stækkaði norræna heiminn yfir ný landsvæði, árásir víkinga breyttust í langtímabyggðir og blómlegar þéttbýlisborgir urðu til sem urðu miðstöðvar fyrir viðskipti. Þessi stækkun náði til kvenna næstum strax og þessi ritgerð rannsakar kvenhlutverk brautryðjanda, ferðalanga og, í sumum viðskiptamiðstöðvum, viðskiptakonu. Þessi ritgerð mun einnig fjalla um hið umdeilda hlutverk stríðskvenna og vinsælu nútíma framsetningu kvenna á víkingaöld með því að greina fornleifafræðilegar heimildir og norrænar fornþókmenntir. Að auki mun þessi ritgerð skoða þá hugmynd að skandinavísku konur hafi haft meiri réttindi og frelsi en flestir, sérstaklega á þeim tíma, og til þess mun ég nota engilsaxneskar konur til samanburðar. Með notkun þessara aðferða er niðurstaða ritgerðinnar sú að þrátt fyrir að skandinavískar konur sinntu víðtækari og fjölbreyttari hlutverkum samanborið við samanburðarhópinn, þegar um er að ræða lagaleg mál og stöðu þeirra í samfélaginu voru þær ekki svo ólíkar og aðstæður þeirra svipaðar, þrátt fyrir mismunandi trúarskoðanir.

Abstract

This thesis investigates the roles that were available for Scandinavian women during the Viking age. Scandinavian women have long been marginalised in Viking age scholarship until relatively recently. The popular picture so often conjured of the Viking age is one of male warriors in a violent world consisting of raids, destruction, and enslaving a Christian Europe. However, with modern archaeological discoveries and an emphasis on gender orientated studies, a more complex and diverse narrative has emerged. The Viking age saw the expansion of the Norse world into new territories, Viking raids turned into long term settlements and thriving urban cities emerged that became centres for trade and commerce. This expansion included women almost immediately and this thesis explores the female role of pioneer, traveller, and, in certain trading hubs, businesswoman. This thesis will also address the controversial role of the female warrior and popular modern representation of Viking age women by analysing archaeological sources and Old Norse literature. In addition, the idea that these Scandinavian women had more rights and liberties than most, especially for the era, is something this thesis will be examining, and I will be using Anglo-Saxon women as a means of comparison. Through these methods, this thesis has concluded that while Scandinavian women were able to have more wide reaching and varied roles than their counterparts, when it came to legal matters and their standing in society, they were not so different and there are many similarities in their circumstances, despite the differing religious beliefs.

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisor, Anita Sauckel, for her wisdom, discussions, and generous insight throughout the writing process. I am grateful for your helpful advice and support with this topic, it has been wonderful to work with you.

I would also like to thank Haraldur Bernharðsson for his initial support and advice, especially when at first it seemed I might be writing the entire thesis from England with limited access to sources due to Covid-19 circumstances. And I would like to thank both Anita and Haraldur for consistently and thoroughly preparing me throughout my studies to write this thesis.

Thirdly, I want to acknowledge the support and encouragement I received from my family and friends. Thanks for always checking in on me, reading drafts, and motivating me with your kind words. I especially want to thank my mother, Wendy Dickson, for fully supporting me and my decision to move to Iceland and study this degree, my life here in Reykjavik was made possible because of you. I would also like to thank my fellow classmate and thesis writer, Sophie Kass, for all your help, you have always come through for me when I needed you! I also wish to thank Guðrún Fríða Snorradóttir for her assistance translating the abstract into Icelandic, your time and efforts are greatly appreciated.

Finally, thank you to all the friends I have made in Iceland who have made my life here truly enjoyable, and I am grateful for the support and motivation you gave me during this difficult time!

Table of contents

Ágrip.....	1
Abstract.....	2
Acknowledgements.....	3
Table of Contents.....	4
1 Introduction.....	5
1.1 Viking Age women in Scholarship.....	5
1.2 Purpose and Research Questions.....	7
1.3 Theory.....	8
1.4 Geographical and temporal limitations.....	10
1.4.1 Comparison to Anglo- Saxon Women.....	11
1.4.2 Terminology.....	12
1.5 Structure of thesis.....	12
2 Scandinavian women’s roles in society according to archaeology.....	13
2.1 Problems with using grave goods as evidence.....	17
2.2 Archaeology on urban settlements.....	19
3 Perceptions of Scandinavian women in Old Norse Literature.....	20
3.1 The Sagas of Icelanders and the Settlement of Iceland.....	20
3.2 Heroic.....	28
3.3 Mythological.....	31
4 Comparisons with Anglo-Saxon women’s society.....	36
4.1 Marriage.....	37
4.2 Burial practices.....	39
4.3 Final comparisons.....	42
5 Conclusion.....	43
Bibliography.....	45

1 Introduction

In my thesis I am going to discuss the roles Scandinavian women played within Viking Age society. I will be looking at how they are represented in literature and supplementing this with archaeological sources to demonstrate the wide and varied roles these women had. This will include the Scandinavian women that travelled and settled abroad as women contributed greatly to the expeditions aimed at colonial settlement. Thus, I will also be looking at female travellers playing the role of pioneer when assessing Scandinavian women in Viking age society. With such a wide geographical area to cover it is difficult to generalise about Scandinavian women's lives and experiences within society as each place would vary but as highlighted by my research, good assumptions can be made, and I will contribute to this area of Viking Age studies and shed some light on the women who are often marginalised or confined to household roles.

1.1 Viking Age women in Scholarship

The historical narrative of the Viking age has generally consisted of 'bloodthirsty Vikings', male warriors raiding, destroying, and enslaving Christian Europe, which has shaped our modern perception of the term "Vikings" (Jesch, 1991, p. 1). By focusing on this, traditional historiography and archaeology created a Viking world dominated by men with most of the studies concentrating on exploring the lives and material culture of the male half of society (Gardela, 2013, p. 273). This created the popular image of the bearded axe wielding male Viking warrior who became a 'hallmark of the Late Iron Age Scandinavian societies' (Gardela, 2013, p. 273). This emphasis on Vikings as warriors by scholars 'made invisible the women in the background' and despite all the works on the Viking age, 'there is little mention of these females who undoubtedly existed' despite the large role they played in society (Jesch, 1991, pp. 2- 3).

In general, over the many years of Viking Age scholarship, a great deal less attention has been devoted to the roles of women and children (Gardela, 2013, pp. 273- 274). However, Modern twentieth century archaeological discoveries, like in the 1970s and the 1980s, and especially gender orientated theoretical studies in the fields of history and

cultural anthropology have helped change the historical narrative, presenting images of women as well as men, showing peaceful urban Viking settlements (Jesch, 1991, p. 2). Thus, the historical narrative is changing, and the term Vikings has developed to mean not just male warriors but people from Scandinavia during the Viking age, meaning it can now include women whereas before there was little room (Jesch, 1991, p. 1). These recent discoveries have led to Viking gender roles being more carefully studied and more diverse roles for women being considered, like their involvement with trade (Mierswa, 2017, p. 5). Despite this, Mierswa highlights how within the field of gender archaeology in the Viking Age there is much that ‘remains to be explored concerning women’s status and roles in Viking settlements and trade’ which is what I hope to build on in my thesis (Mierswa, 2017, p. 5).

Women’s roles in the Viking age can be identified by examining how they are represented in written sources and through archaeological evidence like the grave goods they are buried with. Thus, my work will mostly include literature from the Icelandic Sagas, the Poetic Edda, and *Landnámabók* as I believe these sources highlight the diverse and far-reaching roles women played, as well as examining burials and grave goods. The issues with these types of sources include the literature relating to the Viking age being compiled a few centuries after events took place as information and stories in the Viking age were transmitted orally through the centuries before being written down (Friðriksdóttir, 2013 p. 2). Thus, the Icelandic Sagas for instance tend to reflect the medieval Christian attitude towards women rather than their Viking age forebearers which makes it difficult to know how truthful they are about the pagan past (Jesch, 1991, pp. 201- 206). Also, determining the sex of the dead purely by the grave goods present requires the use of preconceived notions of gender roles by the archaeologists themselves, influencing their decision, and this can be seen in the grave at Birka, Sweden, where a skeleton was found in the 19th century honorably buried with weapons and thus was long assumed to be male until recently. Through DNA testing it was revealed that the skeleton buried with weapons and high-status objects was in fact female. Most grave goods can also be found in the graves of both sexes, with blacksmith tools being the only objects found exclusively in the graves of one sex, men (Jesch, 1991, p. 21). The gender confirmation at Birka in the form of an online publication in 2017 led to international fame with the article being covered by more than 130 international news agencies and

featured by around 2200 individual online accounts, accessed by millions of followers (Price et al, 2019, p. 182). The article was ranked the forty-third most frequently accessed scientific paper of some 2.2 million published globally during 2017 by Altmetric which, as the original team who conducted the study point out, leads us to ask, ‘why did this one single grave generate such global attention?’ (Price et al, 2019, p. 182). The modern shift for research on the women in history and the desire to see female Vikings in more roles like that of a warrior could in part be due to television dramas like History’s ‘Vikings’ that depicts shieldmaiden’s like Lagertha and a ‘strong belief in Viking women warriors is now rife in many quarters of cyberspace’ (Jesch, 2019). This desire to see women in the role of warriors in the Viking age contributed to the viral reception of the paper ‘A female Viking warrior confirmed by genomics’ in 2017 which received a tremendous amount of attention in the media when it reevaluated the burial at Birka (Jesch, 2019).

1.2 Purpose and Research Questions

This popular modern perception of Viking women, that of an independent woman who enjoys more freedom than her counterparts, even participating in warfare as shieldmaidens, was around long before the show Vikings emerged. These views also originate from the written sources about the Viking age. For example, the Sagas of Icelanders often portray women as headstrong, outspoken, and even forceful when pursuing their goals and in Eddic poetry there are examples of shieldmaidens and numerous portrayals of the supernatural Valkyrie can be found in old Norse literature. The main purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate, however, that while it may be tempting to view Viking age women this way, the reality of their position in society was not as glorious. I seek to examine the realities of their situation and to do this I will also be drawing on Anglo- Saxon women’s experiences in a Christian society as a comparison. When evaluating these comparisons, one is tempted to ‘asses them as advantages or liabilities to the quality of feminine life’ however, such evaluations can be dangerous as no one can ever be sure how medieval Scandinavian women themselves evaluated those factors, and ‘one is prone to be influenced by personal evaluations’ which is something I will keep in mind (Jochens, 2013, p. 162).

My main research questions are:

1. What were Scandinavian women's roles within Viking age society?
2. Were pagan women in the Viking age as 'free' as modern perceptions imply?
3. How are Scandinavian women represented in the Literary sources and what can these representations tell us about their roles in society?
4. What does the archaeological evidence tell us about Scandinavian women?
5. How do Scandinavian women compare to Anglo-Saxon women with regards to their standing in society?

1.3 Theory

Since this thesis discusses the roles of women in the Viking age, I will be discussing aspects of gender identity so it is therefore important to include gender studies in my research. But while my approach is not based entirely on works of cultural theory there are definitely aspects I will employ.

For example, aspects of feminist theory will be applied when interpreting the archaeological and written material. Feminist theory has undergone various stages since its original conception in the late 18th century as a social movement to achieve political equality for women (Hekman, 2013, p. 96). The approach I am most interested in and will primarily utilise is the 'radical, psychoanalytic and postmodern feminism which seeks to understand how women become 'women' in our society' (Hekman, 2013, p. 97). Feminism today focuses on offering a 'comprehensive analysis of the social meaning of gender' which applies to my research as while examining the evidence we must ask what roles were socially acceptable for each gender which may differ from today's views as, as feminist theory demonstrates, gender is a social construct (Hekman, 2013, p. 96). While gender is usually assigned on a biological basis, the roles each gender are expected to perform are socially constructed and thus can vary from culture to culture (Johnson, 2010, p. 160). Therefore, when analysing the past, we should be aware of this and avoid assumptions based on our own time, such as distinguishing roles based on 'common-sense', like modern views on domestic and public, hunting and gathering, the household and the wider world as well as assuming that women and men behaved the same in all societies and time periods which has often been done and I will demonstrate this in my chapter on archaeological evidence and grave goods (Johnson, 2010, p. 160). It is even

worth considering that perhaps the assumption that ‘a rigid binary division of labour’, with regards to gender, is false (Johnson, 2010, p. 160).

The third wave of feminism in the late 1990s addressed the issues of masculinity, femininity, strict gender binaries and Western stereotypes and when more information became available, such as social classes, religion, and age, archaeologists made extensive use of gender theories that were laid out as a part of this feminist movement and began to bring complexity to their inferences about how past societies functioned (Mierswa, 2017, p. 2). Women were not considered to be influential nor important members of society in the Viking age until significant gender archaeological theorizing was done in the 1990s (Mierswa, 2017, p. 2). Thus, today gender archaeologists can view women’s roles in far more complex terms that consider factors like male roles, status, and age (Mierswa, 2017, p. 5).

Therefore, gender theory will be applied to my archaeological findings as gender in archaeology has made a huge impact as of late and this affects how archaeological findings like burials have been interpreted and subsequently challenged which is something I will uncover in my thesis. In more recent years feminist theory combined with gender theory to combat male bias in archaeology and examine gender in the ‘archaeological record’ which is what I will be looking at especially with regards to re-evaluating burial sites like the one previously mentioned at Birka, Bj 581 (Johnson, 2010, p. 155). This relates to the androcentric assumptions which sparked initial interest in the archaeology of gender as ‘androcentrism is the belief that men are at the centre of things, either making up society exclusively or with women on the margins’, an example of this is the use of language like “Man” for human, or “he” when “she or he” is meant (Johnson, 2010, p. 155). Therefore, attempting to put women back into the discourse in archaeology involves ‘a lot of work: a complete rewriting of established common-sense terms and turns of phrase’ such as ‘public display’, ‘power’, and ‘authority’ (Mierswa, 2017, p. 2). Thus, with the heightened awareness of female underrepresentation in the archaeological record that came with feminism, ‘a general “add-women-and-stir” trend emerged in excavations’ (Mierswa, 2017, p. 2). Thus, as Johnson points out, it ‘becomes very difficult to place women back into the picture’ and thus we are ‘disinclined to make the effort, particularly as the passage is written so apparently lucidly and smoothly’ but as the evidence has shown this can lead to problems as these types of assumptions led to errors

like when determining the sex of the grave Bj 581, thought to be a male warrior and then later, using DNA testing, revealed to be female (Johnson, 2010, p. 157). This discovery not only challenged our perceptions on past societies but also puts into perspective how we cannot assume how past societies viewed gender roles and that there is a possibility of there being more misinterpreted graves like this, but the work involved to uncover them all would be too difficult. As Johnson points out, 'all archaeology makes assumptions about gender', and there is no rule that implies a feminist perspective needs to be applied when looking at gender in the past (Johnson, 2010, p. 165).

1.4 Geographical and Temporal limitations

My thesis will cover the era known as the Viking age which is typically characterised as between the late 8th century and early 11th century, when Christianity started to become the dominant religion in Scandinavia. My focus is on women from Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Iceland, a region uninhabited before settlers arrived from Norway, while also including areas of western Europe subject to Norse expansion as women contributed greatly to the expeditions aimed at colonial settlement. They left Scandinavia with fathers, brothers, and husbands to settle in England, Ireland, the Orkneys, Iceland, Greenland, and even North America and expeditions to such uninhabited areas like Iceland and Greenland included women almost immediately (Jochens, 1996, p. 103).

Due to the vast geographical area of Scandinavia itself paired with areas heavily influenced by the Vikings, it would be too large of an undertaking to examine in this thesis so, despite the wealth of information eastern Europe has to offer on the Viking age, I have chosen to focus on western Europe. Within western Europe I have also limited myself to areas of greater importance due to their Scandinavian presence, such as Britain which had a high Scandinavian presence in places like York. Archaeological discoveries in York present thriving urban populations and through the Coppergate dig we see a popular trading city undergoing an economic boom with a high population number that increased with Viking involvement. The archaeology demonstrates York's trading links with Scandinavia and a high Scandinavian presence represented by new styles of objects becoming fashionable, such as shoes in a Scandinavian style being manufactured in York in the 10th century (Williams, 2017, p. 296). Later documents from the 12th and 13th

century show a range of Scandinavian names, both male and female, still in use in Yorkshire and Lincolnshire. Thus, the persistence of Scandinavian names shows how deep Scandinavian influence went (Jesch, 1991, p. 77). While it is possible some male Viking settlers married Anglo-Saxon women and gave their daughters Scandinavian names, the preponderance of Scandinavian women's names suggests a reasonably high number of women emigrating with their families and the Anglo-Saxon chronicle confirms this by detailing how when early Danish raiders moved around southern England they were accompanied by their families (Fell, 1984, p. 134). However, populations of towns like York 'could never have been entirely Scandinavian' and it is 'impossible to determine to what extent that urbanity included Scandinavian women' but York was in an area of England with a significant Scandinavian presence (Jesch, 1991, p. 39). With regards to the archaeological evidence, I have chosen specific cases that I feel offer a varied and valuable insight into women's roles from various regions and times to make more accurate assumptions about the lives of Scandinavian women.

1.4.1 Comparison to Anglo-Saxon women

As previously stated, part of the purpose for this thesis is to address the popular modern perceptions of Viking age women and determine the truth about them. By doing so, this thesis will unearth the differences and similarities concerning these women's lives within their respective societies. To do this, my work will focus on certain aspects of Anglo-Saxon women's lives that I feel offers the best comparisons. These will include marriage laws and customs, burial practices, and the influence religion had on their roles and gender constructions within society. I will be utilising archaeological evidence, law codes, and other Christian texts. By offering a comparison with their counterparts, this thesis aims to address the research questions: "How do Scandinavian women compare to Anglo-Saxon women with regards to their standing in society?" And "Were pagan women in the Viking age as 'free' as modern perceptions imply?"

1.4.2 Terminology

In this thesis I will refer to place names, people, and gods in their English versions. I have chosen to do this to maintain consistency and simplicity as the original Old Norse language has changed and evolved over time which means there are different versions of the same names.

There is much debate surrounding the usage of the terms Viking and Viking age. The term “Viking” has come to mean an entire society of people during the period, with raiding and warfare the primary activity to define them (Williams, 2008, p. 193). So, this term is not wholly accurate for the general population of Scandinavia which is why some scholars find it misleading. Therefore, I am utilising the term Scandinavian when referring to the general population and the women known as Vikings, but I will use the term “Viking age” when referring to the period as it is the most commonly used term and therefore the most recognisable and understandable.

The terms “Shieldmaiden” and “Valkyrie” are often used to mean the same thing in the written sources, with Valkyrie referring mostly to the female deities that, at Odin’s behest, selected the men destined to fall in battle and brought them to Odin’s Hall, Valhalla, where they served drink (Jochens, 1996 pp. 38- 39). Because of this, I will only be using these terms when referencing the written sources otherwise I will be using the term “female warrior” when discussing women in these types of roles.

1.5 Structure of Thesis

My thesis will be divided into 5 chapters. The upcoming chapter will discuss the roles available to Scandinavian women in the Viking age using the archaeological evidence available while Chapter 3 will focus on the textual evidence. Chapter 4 will offer a comparison with Anglo- Saxon women and address the concept of religion and how far this affected women’s lives and if this limited or changed the roles they could play within society. Chapter 5 will seek to conclude this thesis, summarising my findings and answering my main research questions.

2 Scandinavian women's roles in society according to archaeology

In this chapter I will be examining what the archaeological evidence can tell us about Scandinavian women's roles within society. To fully understand the role of women in Viking age society, women first needed to be recognised as a part of the archaeological past (Mierswa, 2017, p. 2). As previously highlighted in my introduction, most work up until quite recently has focused on the male members of society, so the new archaeological approach of "finding women" and putting them back into the picture involves 'identifying the traces left by women within material culture' (Mierswa, 2017, p. 2). This emerged from gender archaeology, along with the first wave of anthropological feminist literature in the 1970s and early parts of the second wave of feminism (Mierswa, 2017, p. 2). Despite regional differences between the areas of Scandinavia, Viking colonies, and rural and urban areas, there is enough in common to identify many Scandinavian graves in places as far apart as Greenland and Russia (Jesch, 1991, p. 12) and there are female Scandinavian burials in 'almost all areas of the world in which we know that the Scandinavians were active' (Jesch, 1991, p. 35). Thus, evidently Scandinavian women travelled widely and played a large role in Viking expansion, indicating they could also play the role of pioneer (Jesch, 1991, p. 35). Studies focusing on burial sites in Scandinavia, Russia, Ireland, and Northern Europe thus uncover significant evidence of women's roles at Viking age trading hubs (Mierswa, 2017, p. 3). Scandinavians applied the same customs to the areas they settled thus it is possible to identify these Viking women as 'sharing a common culture' and therefore Scandinavian (Mierswa, 2017, p. 3). In particular, the Viking age Scandinavian traditions of ornamentation makes their goods easily recognizable and making them gender specific aids in identifying evidence of female burials. These gendered goods include oval brooches, disc brooches, trefoil buckles, arm rings, necklaces, caskets, and spindle whorls (Jesch, 1991, 14).

Scandinavians bury their dead fully dressed, with jewellery and personal belongings that represent the implements of daily life and sometimes the dead were also accompanied by their horses or dogs and there is some evidence that slaves were also sacrificed to attend their masters or mistresses in the next life (Jesch, 1991, p. 12). The most common

objects found in most female graves are oval brooches. They were developed and in use between 800 and 1000 AD (Mierswa, 2017, pp. 3- 4) and are also detailed in contemporary poetry as a normal wear for a free born woman (Jesch, 1991, p. 9). They were not only for decoration but held a function in her dress as one brooch was placed on each shoulder to hold together the straps of her dress and they were then attached to each other with metal-linked chains or ornate sets of beads strung together. Box brooches were also used in a similar fashion, attached at the centre of a woman's dress, possibly to attach outwear, therefore it is unsurprising that they are found in most female graves (Mierswa, 2017, p. 4). Thus, they are therefore a distinctive factor in identifying female graves.

Where the dead were more commonly buried with objects of everyday use, it is possible to detect a distinction between the sexes and make assumptions on their roles in daily life. The implements most characteristic of women's graves are those used in the production of textiles, such as spindle whorls, wool combs, and weaving battens (Jesch, 1991, p. 14). Thus, it is possible to determine through the objects buried with women not only her rank and status but also the tasks she had undertaken in life and thus was expected to perform in the afterlife (Jesch, 1991, p. 19). So, through grave goods we can get some idea of the roles women performed within society. The Westness burial, for example, on the island of Rousay in Orkney contained a skeleton of a young woman and child with wool combs, weaving batten, bronze basin, knife, pair of shears, and outdoor work was represented by a sickle. She was also adorned with fashionable jewellery like a pair of bronze oval brooches, a string of about 40 beads, mostly glass, and a silver ringed pin inset with gold panels of wire, filigree patterns, amber studs, and red glass (Jesch, 1991, p. 9). The extensive grave goods are characteristic of a heathen burial, and the oval brooches mark her as a Norse woman (Jesch, 1991, p. 9). A typical female grave in 9th century Bjørke also contained a mix of jewellery and practical items such as: bronze brooches, glass beads and an iron weaving batten (Jesch, 1991, p. 10). Thus, the Westness burial not only demonstrates some of the roles women appear to have been expected to perform but also that they travelled far to make new homes for themselves and their families (Jesch, 1991, p. 10).

As stated above, the implements most characteristic of women's graves are those used in the production of textiles but also work tools like knives, cooking equipment, agricultural tools, and even weapons can be found. The only objects found exclusively in

the graves of one sex are blacksmith tools in male graves. Even weapons, hunting equipment, and carpentry tools can be found in odd female graves and in Birka weights and balances found suggest women could engage in trade (Jesch, 1991, p. 21). Interestingly, despite narratives about female Viking age warriors fighting alongside men appearing in the early Middle Ages and ‘continuously reoccurring in art as well as in poetry’, this role for women has generally been dismissed as ‘mythological phenomena’ (Hedenstierna-Jonson et al, 2017, p. 853). But the reevaluated grave at Birka, Bj 581, may show there is some truth to the narrative and reveal this role as a genuine possibility for women. Birka, Sweden, was a prominent centre for trade from the 8th to late 10th century and linked to a ‘social, cultural and economic network that reached beyond the Ural Mountains’ and into the east and south to the Byzantine Empire (Hedenstierna-Jonson et al, 2017, p. 853). With over 3,000 graves identified and approximately 1,100 excavated, Birka holds one of the largest known congregations of burials in the Viking world (Hedenstierna-Jonson et al, 2017, pp. 853- 854). The grave Bj 581 is especially distinctive as it was a richly furnished and complete warriors’ burial, located in a place of importance on an elevated terrace between the town and a hillfort, in direct contact with Birka’s garrison (Hedenstierna-Jonson et al, 2017, p. 854). The grave goods: a sword, axe, spear, armour piercing arrows, two shields, and two horses, demonstrate that whoever was buried there was a ‘professional warrior’ and a highly respected one at that (Hedenstierna-Jonson et al, 2017, p. 854). A full set of gaming pieces was also found which Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson and her team believe indicates knowledge of tactics and strategy (Hedenstierna-Jonson et al, 2017, p. 854) as a full set with iron-bound boards is rare and are commonly found with military leaders, such as in the large ship burials where they are employed ‘symbolically’, with the boards laid out with pieces in play, and they believe that the placement, being in direct proximity to the body, suggests she held a command role in addition to the high status she is honoured with the quality of the military equipment she is buried with (Price et al, 2019, p. 184). As previously mentioned, grave goods have been used to determine the sex of the dead and the male sex has been associated with that of the warrior identity (Hedenstierna-Jonson et al, 2017, p. 855). Thus, the individual in Bj 581 was considered to be male with the sex only questioned after a full osteological and contextual analysis was undergone that revealed the individual was a woman and then genomic confirmation of the biological sex was

carried out by Hedenstierna-Jonson and her team to confirm this undeniably since ‘a female warrior of this importance has never been determined and Viking scholars have been reluctant to acknowledge the agency of women with weapons’ (Hedenstierna-Jonson et al., 2017, p. 855). The osteological analysis raised important questions concerning ‘sex, gender and identity among Viking warriors’ which is why further investigating into the biological sex was required (Hedenstierna-Jonson et al., 2017, p. 855). Two samples were taken from the left canine and the left humerus and used for DNA analyses and to confirm the biological sex and support skeletal integrity and to investigate the ‘genetic relationship of the individual to ancient individuals and modern day groups’, genome wide sequence data was generated (Hedenstierna-Jonson et al., 2017, pp. 855- 857). According to results made by Hedenstierna-Jonson and her team, the DNA sequences demonstrated all the characteristics of authentic and ancient DNA and when corrected for clonality, the number of reads mapping to X and Y chromosomes proved that Bj 581 was a female (Hedenstierna-Jonson et al., 2017, p. 857). Therefore, Bj 581 can be considered the first confirmed female high-ranking Viking warrior and proof of this role women could play and thus revealing a new ‘understanding of the Viking society, the social constructions and also norms in the Viking Age’ (Hedenstierna-Jonson et al., 2017, pp. 857).

Grave goods not only tell us about the roles women could play but also their rank within society. Viking age societies had three distinct social groups: the upper class, middle, and lower class (Mierswa, 2017, p. 3). The royal mound of Oseberg, Norway, contained an entire ship and wagon buried with two women, a suspected queen and her servant, and its extensive grave goods is evidence of the high status some woman could achieve (Jesch, 1991, pp. 30-32) Inhumation was the most common form of burial but cremation was also practiced in the Viking age (Jesch, 1991, p. 12) and the practice of burials with grave goods generally declined in the latter part of the 10th century with the growing influence of Christianity (Jesch, 1991, p. 19). Therefore, it is hard to deduce religious practices from the variations in burial practices during this period, but the sacrifice of animals like horses and dogs is common, and particularly popular in Iceland (Jesch, 1991, pp. 22- 24). Memorial stones also give an indication into women’s status within society. In Denmark, the stones were generally erected by rich and powerful families and in such families, women could play a prominent role and some women even

commissioned them, like the monument Ragnhild commissioned for her husband (Jesch, 1991, pp. 49- 50). Ingas stones in Sweden tell the story of how two women become wealthy property owners through marriage and death (Jesch, 1991, pp. 54- 55). Overall, the stones mostly refer to men travelling, fighting, and dying abroad and we cannot tell whether women ever went on such expeditions from this (Jesch, 1991, p. 59).

2.1 Problems with using grave goods as evidence

In order to discuss the construction of gender within a society we must be able to discuss which activities were performed by which gender, or even which activities were not 'gendered' (Johnson, 2010, p. 166). A common way to do this is to look at which type of artefacts are buried with which gender in burials 'and then extend this argument outwards, to look at the same classes of artefacts in domestic contexts' (Johnson, 2010, p. 166). Another way is to 'rely on a limited essentialism' with the obvious example being that the 'necessities of childrearing do involve an association of women with domestic and household contexts' (Johnson, 2010, p. 166). Focusing on grave goods means that there is a stress on 'the importance of material culture' and the focus is on 'material settings' like, for example, the inside of houses, and ideas about gender frequently occur in relation to material objects, such as dress and jewellery which may be misleading or unable to show the whole picture (Johnson, 2010, p. 172).

For example, grave goods may also have been symbolic rather than representing the literal roles women were performing in life. This can be seen with burials that include ships, wagons or horses as they represent the journey to the next life (Jesch, 1991, p. 12). At Scar on Orkney a woman in her seventies was found buried in a boat twenty-five feet long with a man in his mid-thirties and a child. A whalebone plaque object was set at the woman's feet. While it is unclear what these objects were used for, they were not possessions every woman in society was buried with, so it is possible they were emblems of status and symbols of a magical and religious nature (Williams, 2017, pp. 261- 262). Other objects that were found in the grave were weaving spindle whorls and a weaving sword, a needle-case and some shears, which are typical of women's graves, but paired with the whalebone plaque these items could also be symbolic as these tools provide the imagery for 'hidden and terrible powers', like the loom used by the Valkyries in

Darraðarljóð in *Njals saga* to determine the fate of the battle (Williams, 2017, p. 262). While none of the names of the Valkyries indicate weaving, they are presented to do just that in *Darraðarljóð*: ‘vindum, vindum vef Darraðar’ (weaving, weaving, cloth of battle) is repeated throughout the poem, as they decide the fate of the battle, thus the loom is closely associated with fate and magical properties (Finnur, 1967, pp. 419- 421).

Thus, identifying the sex of graves and determining their roles based on grave goods is problematic and has led to some confusion, especially since female graves have been found with weapons. There are two approaches to determining the sex of a body in a grave, either by analysing the human remains or the grave goods themselves. While there are ‘strong indications’ of the sex when examining a set of bones, like men being larger or more robust and the scale of the pelvis, even with a complete set of bones there are no definitive traits that ‘unequivocally determine its sex’ (Jesch, 1991, p. 13). Osteological analysis is also used to indicate roughly the age at time of death and demonstrate the presence of certain diseases and injuries (Jesch, 1991, p. 13). Thus, in the absence of adequate skeletal remains it is common to determine the sex of the dead based of their grave goods so, skeletons buried with weapons and certain tools are assumed to be male and those with jewellery and domestic implements, female, but, as we have seen, this is not always the case (Jesch, 1991, p. 13). The jewellery worn by women is thus an important diagnostic feature in identifying their graves (Jesch, 1991, p. 14). The presence of jewellery in the female graves of the Viking age can be explained by the fact that women were normally buried fully dressed with a complete set of accessories and that the jewellery had a function in their costume, holding the material together (Jesch, 1991, pp. 18- 19). Archaeological finds like the one in Santon Downham, England, in 1867 of a female skeleton buried with an iron sword and two oval brooches originally led archaeologist to believe there could have been a double burial of a man and a woman with the second body not being noticed in 1867 (Jesch, 1991, p. 21). But more recent finds, such as in Gerdrup, Denmark, of a female skeleton buried with a needle case and a spear (Jesch, 1991, p. 21) and Bj 581 suggests that the possibility of a woman being buried with weapons should not be ruled out. However, just because these women are buried with weapons does not necessarily mean they used them in real life, as previously mentioned some grave goods could hold a more symbolic function (Jesch, 1991, p. 22). Despite this, the Gerdrup grave is ‘immensely important in changing the pattern of assumptions that

can be made from archaeological evidence about the status of women' (Fell, 1984, p. 131). Though there are many ways to interpret this find, Gerdrup, along with Bj 581, is at least good reason to take the many accounts that survive in old Norse literature detailing female warriors more seriously (Fell, 1984, p. 131).

2.2 Archaeology on Urban Settlements

Archaeological discoveries in York, England, present thriving urban populations. Through the Coppergate dig we see a city undergoing an economic boom, a popular trading city with a high population number that increased with Viking involvement. Archaeology demonstrates York's trading links with Scandinavia and new styles of objects becoming fashionable, like shoes in a Scandinavian style, started to be manufactured in York in the 10th century (Williams, 2017, p. 296). Thus, through archaeology we can see the importance of towns like York, as manufacturing centres and trading links, attracting specialist craftspeople 'mass-producing a variety of items on a scale and intensity not seen since the Roman era' (Hall, 2008, p. 382). The finds reveal there were skilled industries including the working of iron, copper-alloys, lead, silver, gold, and the making of glass and jewellery like the making of amber and jet jewellery as well as bone and antler working, particularly the production of combs, with most textile work being carried out in a domestic environment, so at people's homes, which brings women into the place of business (Hall, 2008, p. 382). Thus, the nature of the type of work in such trading and manufacturing towns like York meant that dwelling houses also doubled as businesses which meant that it is highly likely that 'most merchants and craftsmen ran small family businesses in which their wives played an active part' (Jesch, 1991, p. 39). Women are well represented in archaeology in settlements like Birka, Kaupang, and Hedeby which were prosperous centres for trade and manufacture (Jesch, 1991, p. 205). This demonstrates the economic roles women were performing in society as traders and manufactures during the Viking age. However, populations of towns like York were not entirely Scandinavian and it is 'impossible to determine to what extent that urbanity included Scandinavian women' but York was in an area of England with a significant Scandinavian presence (Jesch, 1991, p. 39).

3 Perceptions of Scandinavian women in Old Norse Literature

The role of women in Norse literature of various genres is significant. Female characters are often explicitly valued for wisdom, sound council, and support, in both private and public matters, and this is further accentuated through *Havamal*'s praise for female confidants (Clark and Friðriksdóttir, 2016, p. 336). Ultimately, the text itself creates a community that excludes women, determining them to be both dangerous and desirable, fickle and unreliable, deceitful and capable of altering and distorting 'men's perception of reality' (Swenson, 2002, p. 276). Throughout the text in *Havamal* they are either the desired object or the means to gain one and that is the extent of their role (Swenson, 2002, p. 276). In addition, in the Sagas of Icelanders we see that many of the female characters are 'thoroughly unpleasant' (Jesch, 1991, p. 182). For example, Hallgerðr and Bergþóra are the cause of constant feud in *Njáls saga* where they goad men into violence (Jesch, 1991, pp. 185- 190). Men are seen consistently blaming women for the violence and disruption to the peace with the phrase "eru kǫld kvenna ráð" (cold are the counsels of women) (Finnur, 1908, p. 265) being used, most notably in *Njáls saga* but the proverb resurfaces elsewhere like in *Gísla saga Súrssonar* when Bork questions the truth of Thordis' words and is suspicious of her (Anderson, 2002, pp. xi- xiii). The sagas of Icelanders also demonstrate how women have restricted opportunities to participate in the socio-political and legal structures that affect their lives and 'they occasionally express dissatisfaction and frustration with their lot, or subversively circumvent these structures in order to take control of events' and in this context the primary tool available to women is words and their other resource is magic (Friðriksdóttir, 2013, p. 10). In this chapter I will be looking at these contrasting perceptions of women and what this might tell us about their place in society.

3.1 The Sagas of Icelanders and the Settlement of Iceland

The Sagas of Icelanders resonate with its audience more than the 'dry bones of archaeology or the terse statements on runestones' (Jesch, 1991, p. 5). This is in part due

to their detail and focus on everyday occurrences making them believable, personal, and therefore more interesting accounts of the past. The sagas are credited for portraying a realistic vision of society and a 'remarkably consistent picture of real historical events and topography', depicting 'disputes in scarcely populated, agrarian communities', however it is important to remember that it is still an 'imagined space', a literary creation of a pagan society written from a Christian perspective (Friðriksdóttir, 2013, p. 3). This significantly impacts their views on past events and characters in the stories, including women (Friðriksdóttir, 2013, p. 3). The Icelandic sagas are also largely responsible for the widespread view that women in the Viking age were 'forceful, independent and powerful, and for the efforts of modern scholars to demonstrate this in the other sources' (Jesch, 1991, p. 5). Thus, the Sagas of Icelanders are significant sources as they have influenced modern views on the Viking age, especially regarding women's roles (Jesch, 1991, p. 182). For example, the development of Icelandic womanhood in the Viking age is one of the themes addressed in *Laxdaela* saga (Jesch, 1991, p. 193). There are various types of roles women perform in this saga including the pioneer settler, wife, and object of desire as well as the story of Melkorka, a slave revealed to be a princess and overall the women in the saga are perceived as 'strong and dominant' (Jesch, 1991, pp. 193- 199).

In Norse literature, especially in the Sagas of Icelanders, Scandinavian women are often portrayed as the inciter to violence. The whetting and inciting woman is removed from physical violence and relies on her words to obtain her goal of revenge (Jochens, 1996, p. 133). The whetting woman is the most striking female activity in the sagas that describe Norwegian and Icelandic society during paganism and the early Christian period and to goad men became the leading female role in the sagas (Jochens, 1996, p. 114). Jochens believes that men understood the devastation that their feuds produced, but, unable to control these and prone to further violent solutions, male storytellers and authors revived, amplified, and multiplied the ancient figure of the inciting woman to deflect the blame for men's unreasoning behaviour (1996, pp. 174-175). She was vilified and turned into a scapegoat for men's failures in establishing a peaceful society (Jochens, 1996, p. 175). Tactics employed by the whetter included physical tokens to incite revenge, like bloody clothing in *Njals saga* (Jochens, 1996, p. 184). It is interesting to note, however, that considering the amount of times this happens in the sagas there are little cases of it recorded in legal texts, even though they do highlight the effect of harmful language and

its consequences, suggesting the bloody token did not carry as much legal weight and was perhaps not as common as made out to be (Jochens, 1996, p. 187). Absence of the whetting woman in law codes even though lawmakers in Iceland and Norway were aware of the ‘deadly force of language’ and had rules against dangerous words and verbal accusations that excited people to violence (Jochens, 1996, pp. 197- 198). However, the inciting female was nevertheless clearly meaningful to the 13th century saga audience (Jochens, 1996, p. 187) and was overall ‘strikingly successful’ in goading men into action (Jochens, 1996, p.195). Friðriksdottir believes power is something achieved not just in women’s active involvement in disputes, but in every case where a woman is portrayed as influencing a situation to her own will (2013, p. 9). In this regard, goading others into violence and revenge is a way women can participate in the male sphere and play an active role in their feuding. The incitement speech can therefore be seen as woman’s primary device of involving themselves in men’s affairs (Friðriksdottir, 2013, p. 15). By using incitement speeches, a woman can use her words to compel action, a double-edged sword as it usually led to the loss of the inciters own kinsmen and the woman often used as a scapegoat for their death (Friðriksdottir, 2013, p. 19). The most elaborate and famous goading scene is in *Njals saga* between Hildigunnr and Flosi, who she successfully urges to avenge her husband, Hoskuldr Njalsson (Friðriksdottir, 2013, p. 17). The scene begins with Hildigunnr mocking Flosi’s chosen method of dealing with the situation and goads him:

“Hvert eptirmæli ska lek af þér hafa,” segir hon, “eða liðveizlu?”

(“what vengeance shall I have from you,” she said, “or assistance?”)

(Finnur, 1908, p. 264).

When Flosi replied that he would persecute her husband’s killer to the full extent of the law she is displeased and replies with:

“Hefna myndi Höskuldr þín, ef hann ætti eptir þik at mæla.”

(“Hoskuld would avenge you, if he had the blood-feud after you.”)

(Finnur, 1908, p. 264).

Expressing her desire for a more violent outcome. The scene continues when she then unlocks a chest containing the bloody cloak that her husband was slain in and that Flosi gave to him as a gift, ‘hafði hon þar varðveitt í blóðit allt’ (where she had kept it blood and all) (Finnur, 1908, p. 265). This symbolic item she presents to Flosi is accompanied

by a speech to incite him into action. Flosi is not happy about this and says ‘eru köld kvenna ráð’ (cold are the counsels of women) but is ultimately convinced (Finnur, 1908, p. 265). This is a typical example of the female whetter in Old Norse literature using a symbolic token and speech to incite her male kin to violent action. Friðriksdottir tells us that at least fifty-one women have been identified as whetters in the Sagas of Icelanders, indicating they are a frequent occurrence (Friðriksdottir, 2013, p. 17).

There are two opposite schools of thought as to how much the female inciter is a reflection of medieval reality. On one side, scholars consider the female inciter purely a literary construct with no historical basis, imaginative creations by misogynous medieval authors who made her a scapegoat of men’s violence, while on the other, scholars believe a real, historical role for women, approved by the hegemonic social order (Friðriksdottir, 2013, p. 20). Those who believe her to be an imagined creation argue that the authors created her in an effort to understand the past failings when attempting to create a new society when settling Iceland (Jochens, 1996, p. 201). It is also possible that some of the authors and audiences of the sagas of Icelanders considered whetting an appropriate female role, which is in stark contrast to the legendary sagas, or *fornaldarsögur*, where women are mainly depicted as wise, trustful, and advocating for peace (Friðriksdottir, 2013, p. 7). Ultimately, the image of the whetting woman is a powerful one. She acts as a catalyst in the story and plays an active role in society and her speech functions as ‘an event’ demanding a response if the recipient ‘intends to keep his honour intact’ (Friðriksdottir, 2013, p. 21). Thus, when performing the role of the whetter women are not ‘passive victims of fate’ and, urging their husbands or male kin to perform actions they are not physically able to in the confines of their society, allows them to insert themselves within men’s feuding and power struggles in a socially appropriate way (Friðriksdottir, 2013, pp. 21- 25). Thus, the female whetter employs words that function as speech acts to empower herself to participate in the male sphere (Friðriksdottir, 2013, pp. 24- 25).

The Sagas of Icelanders also depict the everyday aspects of women’s lives like marriage, childbirth, and work (Jochens, 2013, p. 3). In the sagas when men had leisure time they were ‘bored or lazy’ and are seen sleeping while others work or playing sports and games, telling stories, relaxing, or drinking and having fun and they also had the opportunity to participate in politics (Jochens, 1996, p. 100). Women on the other hand

did not seem to have as many ways to spend their leisure time or in fact have much time for it to begin with. Women in the sagas are much more often seen working and are rarely depicted as socialising amongst themselves ‘without working at the same time’ and numerous examples throughout the text show that women regularly went to bed later than men and arose earlier and these differences illuminate the gender distribution of work (Jochens, 1996, pp. 100- 101). In some roles women are made invisible in the sagas, for example with the preparation and serving of food and drink (Jochens, 1996, p. 126) and the sagas often note ‘that a man was married and had a son or daughter’ and then fail to provide further information, not even their names, just ‘her husband’s reproductive use of her’ (Jochens, 2013, p. 30). As the Sagas of Icelanders suggest, ‘most marriages of Icelandic women were arranged by fathers’ and his place was only set back if the women had a son or a son in law (Jochens, 2013, p. 26). As Jochens highlights, the male in-laws involvement is surprising as they ‘shared responsibility for her marital and sexual fate’ and, along with her husband, ‘this group was also charged with prosecuting sexual crimes committed against her’ (Jochens, 2013, p. 26). The sagas also demonstrate how marriages were arranged with political and economic issues in society in mind as men used marriage to create alliances, using the women like pawns (Jochens, 2013, pp. 27- 28). Women were not asked for their approval in the arrangement and were often told of their engagement after it had happened, not meeting their husbands again until the wedding which, according to the sagas, usually occurred at the brides house (Jochens, 2013, pp. 29- 30). If the bride was not delivered on the appointed day the groom had the right to appear and demand admittance to the house sheltering her, able to demand access to her and her dowery and her guardian and anyone else who sheltered her would be outlawed (Jochens, 2013, p. 29). The sagas of Icelanders also contain few examples of concubinage and extramarital intercourse which may demonstrate Christian authors adjusting past stories to Christian program (Jochens, 2013, p. 33- 36). The men of the sagas of Icelanders appear mostly faithful and occasional mentioning of mistresses and illegitimate children is unusual considering the impression gathered from past laws and contemporary sagas, but ‘a more careful reading of the sagas of Icelanders will reveal, however, that the impression of marital bliss is deceptive’ (Jochens, 2013, p. 33).

Marriage during pagan times was first and foremost about safeguarding inheritance and acquiring status and wealth and this can be seen in the laws as well as the Icelandic

sagas (Jochens, 1996, p. 24). Pagan marriage was thus arranged to ensure the ‘orderly passing of property from one generation to the next’ (Jochens, 1996, p. 21). In Iceland a child born to a free woman and an unfree man could not inherit even if the woman had freed the man to marry him and the same was true in reverse but a man could free a slave woman for the purpose of marriage (Jochens, 2013, p. 21). Furthermore, a man could bequeath his wife, as part of his property, to another man before his death (Jochens, 2013, p. 30). So, rules restricting marriage and sexual activity were prompted more by a practical concern to safeguarding property from reproductive despoliation than by social considerations (Jochens, 2013, p. 22). Viking age marriage contracts required certain steps, firstly the engagement which was when the father or other relative of the man, often the suiter himself, visited the father or male guardian of the woman he intended to marry in the company of kinsmen and friends. Time was then taken for the father to decide if the suitor was acceptable and this was usually based on wealth and social class, then negotiations took place between spokesmen for the groom and the person who had the right to arrange the girls marriage, a male relative, and only if none was available could the mother do it and this was the only condition in the law that allowed a woman to ‘take charge’ of another woman’s marital affairs (Jochens, 2013, p. 25). The connection between marriage and property is further accentuated during the negotiations between groom and guardian, for example with the bride price, girls dowry, and when an agreement is reached the two men repeat the conditions with witnesses’ present (Jochens, 2013, p. 26). Although the woman had the greatest interest in the arrangement, she was totally absent from the negotiations and the law does not imply that a woman in pagan times was asked for her approval, a few cases in the Sagas of Icelanders do appear that suggest a pagan notion of consent but the majority of marriages in the sagas were arranged without the woman’s knowledge (Jochens, 2013, p. 27). Children were also considered to belong to the male parent, which is revealed by *nomenclature* (Jochens, 2013, p. 30). Women did however retain their economic independence both in marriage and after. She also received portions in an eventual divorce if the husband was at fault and if she was the cause she received her dowry (Jochens, 2013, pp. 59- 60). Viking age marriage contracts did allow for divorce, and this continued even after Christian influence (Jochens, 2013, p. 31). In fact, divorce was easy to obtain and common in the Viking age society described in the Sagas of Icelanders, ecclesiastical leaders therefore compromised

with native tradition by allowing exceptions (Jochens, 2013, p. 55). The laws enumerated four conditions that granted divorce automatically, two of which concerned property. For example, if a husband wanted to take his wife's property out of the country against her will, she could call in witnesses and declare herself divorced (Jochens, 2013, p. 56). Another would be if violence was committed by one spouse against the other, where one partner had to inflict on the other injuries of great value (Jochens, 2013, p. 56). Marriages within the prohibited degrees of kinship was also grounds for a divorce (Jochens, 2013, p. 56). These laws suggest a society in which divorce was easily obtained and a long-standing tradition and this is reiterated in the sagas (Jochens, 2013, p. 57).

So, despite women's apparent lack of choice in the matter when it comes to choosing a husband, the legal freedom women had to leave an unsatisfactory marriage is well noted in the sources (Jesch, 1991, p. 95). Consent is also occasionally found in the sagas of Icelanders 'which has persuaded some scholars that pagan women also had the right to accept or refuse a suitor' (Jochens, 2013, pp. 47-48). However, most marriages in the sagas are without female consent, as allowed by secular law, and the few cases of female consent were a result of ecclesiastical propaganda (Jochens, 2013, pp. 48- 49). Marriages involving consent appear in the late 10th century when Christianity first became known in the Nordic world but the idea is used anachronistically by saga authors, they introduce consent into the north at a time when it had not yet been incorporated into Christian laws elsewhere (Jochens, 2013, pp. 48- 49). Ultimately, the narratives agree that acquiring a divorce in ancient Iceland was a relatively easy thing to do and in the sagas of Icelanders divorce is frequent (Jochens, 2013, pp. 54- 55). Male violence is the most frequent reason for divorce in the sagas and women also used the threat of divorce to incite men into action. Women can also be seen taking the initiative of divorce twice as often as men (Jochens, 2013, pp. 58- 59). Interestingly, the validity of the divorce only required witnesses at the initial declaration, not the spouse (Jochens, 2013, pp. 58- 59).

Aside from the Sagas of Icelanders, there are two extremely important texts, *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók*. Both are incredibly influential works written in medieval Iceland that describe the settlement of Iceland and reveal some of the important roles women could play, such as pioneer and traveller (Jesch, 1991, p. 79). *Landnámabók* is essentially a catalogue of all the first settlers, and while hugely detailed and believable, 'the complicated textual history... makes it very difficult to use as a historical source'

(Jesch, 1991 p. 80- 81). Ari Thorgilsson, the author of *Íslendingabók*, appears to have also written *Landnámabók*, or at least part of the original version, which is now lost, as only five extant versions exist now, but references to the version by Hawk Erlendsson confirm its existence (Edwards and Hermann Pálsson, 1972, p. 3). *Landnámabók* tells us that many women were among the first settlers, demonstrating how they could be ‘primary settlers and not just a part of a man’s bag and baggage, along with the children, slaves and cattle’ (Jesch, 1991, p. 81). *Landnámabók* also records husband and wife ‘emigrating to Iceland in partnership’ (Jesch, 1991, p. 81). There are thirteen recorded instances where the first settler was a woman, some emigrating with their male kin like their brothers, but unlike other examples of sibling settlers, they are listed separately as the first settlers in a particular place, which often bears their name (Jesch, 1991, pp. 81-82). The detailed description of Unnr’s settlement in Iceland ‘elaborates its picture of her as an important and powerful woman’ (Jesch, 1991, p. 195). Other women became settlers by default, such as Þorgerðr, whose husband died at sea. She arrived in Iceland with her sons and claimed land in southern Iceland (Jesch, 1991, p. 82). Women could also take the initiative in emigrating to Iceland as Ásgerðr Asksdóttir seems to have done (Jesch, 1991, p. 82) and Aud whose story is detailed in *Landnámabók* as well as being mentioned in multiple texts and ‘shows the maximum a woman could achieve in the socially turbulent times of the Viking age’ (Jesch, 1991, pp. 82- 83). *Landnámabók* details how Aud travelled first to the Faroes then the Orkneys and then Iceland, where her brothers were, accompanied by many free men (Edwards and Hermann Pálsson, 1972, pp. 51-52).

‘Eptir það fór Auðr at leita Íslands; hon hafði á skipi með sér tuttugu karla frjálsa’

(After that Aud went to Iceland; she had on a ship with her 20 free men)

(Benediktsson, 1986, p. 138).

Landnámabók also details how she looked for land in Breidafjord in the spring with her companions, eventually taking possession of the entire Dales district at the head of the Fjord (Edwards and Hermann Pálsson, 1972, p. 52).

‘Eptir um várit fór Auðr í landaleit inn í Breiðafjörð ok lagsmenn hennar... Auðr nam öll Dalalönd í innanverðum firðinum frá Dögurðará til Skraumuhlaupsár.’

(After that Aud went in search of land in *Breiðafjörð* with her companions... Aud claimed all the land in the Dales in the inner fjord from *Dögurðará* to *Skraumuhlaupsár*.

(Benediktsson, 1986, p. 139).

Thus, her story shows a ‘true picture of the possibilities opened for women in the upheaval of the Viking movements’ (Jesch, 1991, p. 83).

3.2 Heroic

Interestingly, one could argue that the heroic women portrayed in poetry are far grander and more impressive than their male counterparts. This can be seen by the fact that images of these women from heroic poetry continue for centuries and are recalled in modern popular interpretations of Viking women, exerting an ‘extraordinary fascination’ on writers and their audiences (Jochens, 1996, p. 8). One such example of this is in the Helgi and Sigrun poems which include Valkyrie and shield maiden representation, a good example of women with weapons in Old Norse literature, a role we have seen made possible through archaeology (Jesch, 1991, pp. 169- 174). In *Helgaviða Hundingsbana I*, the first lay of Helgi Hundingsbane, the Valkyries are presented as ‘hóvar und hjólum á himinvanga, brynjur vǫru þeira blóði stoknar, en af geirum geislar stóðu’ (high under helms on heavens field, their byrnies all with blood were red and from their spears, the sparks flew forth) (Finnur, 1932, p. 185). Later in the poem, during another battle the following scene is described:

Kómu ór himni hjalmvitr ofan,	From heaven there came,
óx geira gnýr,	the maidens helmed,
þærs grami hlífðu;	the weapon-clang grew; who watched o'er the
þá kvað þat Sigrún,	king, Sagun fair,
sárvitr fluga,	the wound-givers flew,
át hǫlu skær af hugins barri:	and the horse of the giantess raven's food had:

(*Helgaviða Hundingsbana I*, Finnur Jonsson, 1932, p. 194).

and Sigrun, a Valkyrie, is presented as protecting Helgi during the battle and thereby granting him victory. Valkyries are the youngest group of supernatural female beings, probably because of their close association with the chief god Odin, who arrived late (Jochens, 2013, p. 38). Names of the Valkyries are synonyms or implements for battle, demonstrating their close association with war and they, at Odin’s bidding, select the men

destined to fall in battle and reward victory to the survivors, forming an important link between the divine and the human world, they continue to look after them in death, serving drink in Valhalla (Jochens, 1996 pp. 38- 39). The Helgi Lays do however feature shield maidens more prominently who are involved in battle like the Valkyries, but more actively participate in the actual fighting. Often traveling in groups of nine, these shield maidens are portrayed as wearing armour, carrying weapons, and hovering on horseback over the warriors during the battle, thus these women were supernatural beings closely associated with warfare, an activity in which men were most vulnerable (Jochens, 1996, pp. 95- 96). They were even described as having ‘manlike strength’, as when Helgi was disguised as a female slave and almost broke a mill while working he used the excuse of being a former shield maiden to explain his strength and this was accepted (Jochens, 1996, p. 96). Shield maidens also provided men with powerful weapons, helped them in storms, inspired them to action, and encouraged them to greater efforts. Like Sigdrifa, they were endowed with knowledge about future events, a subject inaccessible to all males, including gods, and recognised heroes before meeting them (Jochens, 1996, p. 96). Despite their close similarities, shield maidens, unlike the mythological Valkyries, could and did have relationships with mortal men. For example, they had fathers, who also arranged marriages for them just as they did for ordinary women, suitors, husbands, and lovers (Jochens, 1996, p. 96). This association with women, weapons and war might lend some creditability to the archaeological findings of women buried with weapons suggesting that women could indeed participate in warfare. However, to enforce the gender norms of the time of composing these heroic poems, these shield maidens gave up their warrior like ways after marriage in favour of children, as seen when Sigrun married Helgi and has children she is then not present when he is killed in battle (Jochens, 1996, p. 96). As with the Sagas of Icelanders, the heroic sagas suggest how consent was perceived in Scandinavia’s distant past. Almost 100 marriage arrangements can be identified in the approximately two dozen heroic sagas, two thirds of which being negotiated by male relatives who ‘paid no attention to the woman’s wishes’ and in the remaining cases, some familiarity with consent emerges (Jochens, 2013, p. 50). Overall, while it appears that Scandinavian pagan fathers in the distant past were mostly unwilling to allow their daughters to have a say in the matter, clearly Icelandic authors writing

between the 12th and 15th century certainly believed they did not (Jochens, 1991, 2013, p. 51).

As discussed earlier when analysing the Sagas of Icelanders, the avenger and the whetter are two popular ways in which women are represented in Old Norse literature and the Heroic sagas are no exception. In the minds of ancient writers, single acts of physical aggression and continuous verbal egging became the two most female characteristics as they required less brute endurance than extended warfare but ‘more cerebral and emotional stamina’ thus, such acts ‘admirably suited female performers’ and in eddic poetry these features became hallmarks of the avenging woman who used her bodily energy in single acts of aggression for personal revenge but obtained better results when she verbally urged male family members to pursue her quest (Jochens, 1996, p. 133). These roles can be personified into two heroines: Guðrun and Brynhildr. Their actions are not aimed at the greater good for society but their own personal objectives: revenge (Jochens, 2013, p. 132). The character of Guðrun Gjukadottir reveals that many of the attributes we today might associate with, or exclude from, ideas of femininity and womanhood are not essential. Guðrun is not traditionally maternal nor is she passive or soft. In fact, she is a successful warrior and avenger in *Atlakviða* and can be seen subverting gender stereotypes by adopting masculine attributes such as martial prowess and ruthlessness. Eddic poetry presents a varied view of mothers. There are those who conform to traditional ideas about maternity, such as Figg and even Guðrun in her affection for her daughter but she also slits the throats of her own sons in her pursuit for revenge. The image of motherhood therefore becomes multi- dimensional, bouncing between a protecting, nurturing, and loving figure, to an ambitious, self- centred, and ruthless person. Beyond these transgressive mothers, femininity is strongly associated with wisdom, foresight, sound advice and consequently protection (Friðriksdóttir 2013, p. 344). Consequently, if whetting also functions as a type of advice, then women do have an important part to play in this aspect of heroic life. In the heroic sagas the incitement speech has tended to be foregrounded by scholars in preference to women’s peaceful advice, and women’s advocacy for caution is both common and vital and men who do not pay heed to their advice generally fare badly (Friðriksdóttir, 2013, p. 344). Overall, eddic poets often explicitly describe women as wise and depict them as giving sound advice, attributes that contribute to a positive image of femininity. In these poets’ minds, there

are roles for women that are supportive, helpful, and highly valued by the men who depend on them (Friðriksdóttir, 2013, p. 344).

3.3 Mythological

Unlike Christianity, the old Norse religion had female deities and allowed for women to play an active role in the ritual spaces as priestesses or magic users (Jochens, 1996, p. 8). Goddesses are, however, portrayed as less powerful than their male counterparts and ‘in many respects the divine cosmos mirrors the patriarchal society that produced it’ (Jochens, 1996, p. 8). Therefore, it is likely that gender divisions ascribed to gods and goddesses in a constructed cosmos and expressed in myth are in some way a reflection of societal perceptions (Jochens, 1996, p. 33). The Goddesses of Norse mythology, with the exception of Freyja, were limited in their activities, they neither travelled nor participated regularly in divine creative and recreative endeavours (Jochens, 1991, p. 68). Goddesses share domestic chores with Valkyries, as they serve drinks to the gods (Jochens, 1996, p. 71). Most of the information available on the hierarchy of the gods comes from roughly one dozen poems dealing with cosmology and divinities found in the first half of the poetic Edda in codex regius and from Snorri Sturluson’s use of these and other poems now lost in his rendition on the prose Edda and in *Ynglinga saga* (Jochens, 1996, p. 49). The older deities, overwhelmingly female, are found primarily in skaldic poetry whereas the poetic Edda preserves the memory of goddesses from the classical pantheon. If one moves from skaldic to eddic poetry, a decline can be found in the representation of female deities, and where women are concerned, there is a clear neglect in Snorri’s work (Jochens, 1996, pp. 81- 82). Also, the ‘association between evil and femaleness’ is not only present in Christianity but can be seen in the Old Norse religion as well, for example women starting the first war and the underworld being governed by a queen named Hel (Jochens, 1996, pp. 75- 76).

Some of the different roles of Scandinavian women can be seen in portrayals of Freyja (Jesch, pp. 135- 136). Freyja is associated with love and sexuality, death and magic (Snorri, 1987, p. 24). Her husband is always gone, she is beautiful, rich, and free to travel (Snorri, 1987, p. 30). She excited the fantasy of male giants, was greatly desired by all, but what she meant to women is less evident, and in her hall she shares the warriors fallen

in battle with Odin (Jochens, 1996, p. 67). The gods use Freyja and her eligibility for marriage freely in the myths as well as Frigg (Jochens, 1996, p. 69). In the mythological poems, women are mostly seen as beautiful and objects of desire (Jesch, pp. 136- 137). Some exceptions do exist, like with the shield maidens and the Valkyries, the goddess Skaði is also depicted in full armour and takes matters into her own hands when avenging her father (Jesch, pp. 138- 139). The match between Skaði and Njorðr is interesting and is well documented by Snorri and several Eddic poems, as well as by Saxo Grammaticus, and is also one of few cases in the entire old Norse literary corpus where a woman takes initiative not only regarding revenge but her own marital affairs as well (Jochens, 1996, p. 62). As stated in Snorri's Edda: 'En Skafi, dottir Þiassa iotvns, toc hialm ok bryniv ok a hervapn ok ferr til Asgarpz, at hefna fæpvr s(ins)' (Finnur. 1898, *Edda: Snorra Sturlusonar*, pp. 80- 81) (But Skaði, daughter of giant Thiassi, took helmet and mail-coat and all weapons of war and went to Asgard to avenge her father) (Snorri, 1987, p. 61) and 'en esir bvpv henni sætt ok yfirbætr, ok hit fyrsta, at hon skal kiosa ser man af asvm ok kiosa at fotvm1 ok sia ecki fleira af' (Finnur. 1898, *Edda: Snorra Sturlusonar*, p. 81). (but the Æsir offered her atonement and compensation, the first item of which was that she was to choose herself a husband out of the Æsir and choose by the feet and see nothing else of them) (Snorri, 1987, p. 61).

Norns also share dísir role as goddesses of fate but are considered to be far more powerful and Snorri associates them with the Valkyries by placing the youngest, Skuld, among them (Snorri, 1987, p. 18, 31). In the Nordic poem *Volupsa* they are said to have made laws, allotted life for mankind and decide fate (Jochens, 1996, p. 39). In her work, Davidson also links the Valkyries to the spirit wives of the shamans in northern Eurasia and to the Norns (Davidson, 2000, p. 96). This is also mentioned in *Volupsa*, 'Sá hon valkyrjur vítt of komnar... Skuld helt skildi', indicating Skuld is also a Valkyrie name (Finnur, 1932, 10). While none of the names of the Valkyrie indicate weaving, they are presented to do just that in *Darraðarljóð* and 'Vindum, vindum vef Darraðar' is repeated throughout the poem, as they decide the fate of the battle, thus the loom is closely associated with fate (Finnur, 1967, pp. 389- 391), which is something strongly associated with the Norns. The Norns are thought of as agents of fate and they are depicted as the weavers of destiny and fortune, the image of the Norns weaving symbolises how individual destinies are invariably entwined (Raudvere, 2008, p. 238). As Raudvere

observes in *Volupsa*, the Norns who appear in the text are given individual symbolic names, *Urðr*, *Verðandi* and *Skuld*, popularly understood as ‘Past’, ‘Present’ and ‘Future’, and they appear to control the destiny of the whole universe, which is doomed to inevitable destruction (Raudvere, 2008, p. 238). Thus, they have a strong connection to fate, usually pictured in the form of weaving, as in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana* the Norns are represented as setting up a huge loom whose threads stretch across the sky, during the birth of a prince and hero (Davidson, 2001, pp. 119- 120). Thus, clearly these Norns, like the Valkyrie in *Darraðarljóð*, are setting up their loom, this time across the heavens, stretching over the lands which Helgi is to rule, to decide his fate (Davidson, 2001, pp. 119- 120). Davidson believes that it is possible that the references to fate in *Darraðarljóð* as something woven might be due to Christian influence, and she highlights that similar expressions in Anglo-Saxon Christian poetry exist (Davidson, 2001, pp. 119- 120). Ultimately, there is not much known about the Norns, but in the literature they are mainly referenced by their actions concerning the fates of kingdoms and individuals (Davidson, 2001, pp. 119- 120), much like the *dísir* and the Valkyrie. Thus, it would appear the roles of female deities overlap considerably. Despite these seemingly important roles as deciding the fates of men, however, the rather passive and decorative goddess in Norse mythology suggest that females did not count for very much in the Viking age. They could only exercise power if they had wisdom or strength of character and there was admiration for women who could behave like men, like *Skaði* and *Guðrun* (Jesch, 1991, p. 148).

Similar to the Heroic, in the mythological poems women are also expected to impart some of their wisdom to male recipients. *Hávamál* refers to a woman as a man’s ‘*eyrarúna*’, a confidant of sorts, suggesting that they perform the role of giving counsel, and we consistently find female characters performing the role of advisor (Friðriksdóttir, 2013, p. 344). *Sigrdrífumál* is a prime example of this figure, she gives advice to *Sigurðr* that ‘encompasses many aspects of ordinary and military life’ and she teaches *Sigurðr* important runes, like those used in battle, ‘ale-runes’ to use against being drugged through drink, and runes to help with childbirth, sea journeys, and healing (Friðriksdóttir, 2013, p. 344). Overall, eddic poets often explicitly describe women as wise and depict them as giving sound advice, attributes that contribute to a positive image of femininity. In these

poets' minds, there are roles for women that are supportive, helpful, and highly valued by the men who depend on them (Friðriksdóttir, 2013, p. 344).

Arguably, the inclusion of gender perspectives when examining Old Norse literature has been undervalued until recently. I believe that the way a society views gender constructions is fundamental in shaping any written source and influencing the authors' perspectives on past events. As Clark and Friðriksdóttir point out, it limits the 'scope of available and forbidden roles, both for male and female figures' and thus gender constructions are fundamental to understanding eddic texts and the society from which they emerge (Clark and Friðriksdóttir, 2016, p. 332). This leads me to my next point regarding how far the literature available actually reflects Viking age society. As we have established, the authors were writing long after events took place and from a Christian perspective and in Eddic poetry, the image created is very much a man's world in which male power is judged by outstanding physical ability and military prowess, extensive knowledge, and/or sexual conquest. This is exemplified with Odin's boasting in *Harborðsljóð* about the women he has bedded as well as in *Havamal*, which is notably the longest eddic text, not a single poem, and featuring Odin as the narrator (McKinnell, 2014, p. 59). Or the Helgi poems where men fight to win treasure and the woman's love or approval, thus it is a world in which it is shameful to be feminine or effeminate (Clark and Friðriksdóttir, 2016, p. 334). These poems raise the question of how far normative gender roles are straight forwardly accepted, and how far poets and audiences were actively exploring their fragility and the immense efforts required to construct and maintain normative masculinity in heroic society (Clark and Friðriksdóttir, 2016, pp. 334-335). In such a world, femaleness could be considered a negative attribute and in *Havamal's* largely misogynistic attitude towards women, they are depicted as untrustworthy and it is easy to build up a picture of misogyny and contempt for women, but other comments in *Havamal* indicate that men are also fickle towards women and ultimately require the love of a woman (Clark and Friðriksdóttir, 2016, p. 335). These, as well as other comments, can be used to create a more balanced, if equally jaundiced, picture of all people as fallible, manipulative, and deceitful (Clark and Friðriksdóttir, 2016, pp. 335-336). Eddic poetry thus often represents characters, whether male or female, as motivated by their personal goal, using whatever tactics necessary to achieve them (Clark & Friðriksdóttir, 2016, p. 337). Eddic poets clearly had no qualms about

showing women to be ‘scheming and calculating just like men’ so focusing only on ‘perceived instances of male misogynistic attitudes towards women oversimplifies a much broader spectrum of gender relations’ (Clark and Friðriksdóttir, 2016, p. 337). Clark and Friðriksdóttir also point out that *Lokasenna* and *Þrymskviða* demonstrate more the fear of public accusations of deviance and consequent loss of social status rather than reprehending actual behaviour (Clark & Friðriksdóttir, 2016, p. 335). Overall, eddic poetry often describes women as wise and depicts them giving sound advice, attributes that contribute to a positive image of femininity. Thus, there are roles for women that are supportive, helpful, and highly valued by the men who depend on them (Clark and Friðriksdóttir, 2016, p. 344) highlighting the diverse depictions of women in eddic poetry (Clark and Friðriksdóttir, 2016, p. 347). As this chapter has shown, eddic poetry depicts both male and female characters in various ways, highlighting the complexity of human nature and relationships (Clark and Friðriksdóttir, 2016, p. 347). Women take on a variety of roles in the heroic poems, like the whetter or avenger, magic wielder, adviser, wife, widow, lover, and mother (Clark and Friðriksdóttir, 2016, p. 347). They can be both deceitful and sabotaging, wise and helpful and are often seen operating ‘outside human society’, such as with the Valkyries or the flying swan maidens, or the giantesses living in the wilderness (Clark and Friðriksdóttir, 2016, p. 347). While these women may not have much say in the matter, they are ‘central to men’s dealings with each other’ especially with regards to marriage, often used as alliances thus holding important roles (Clark and Friðriksdóttir, 2016, p. 347).

Typically, the women of the mythological genre are often defined in terms of their relation to a man, whether that’s as a lover, wife, or mother and most of these women are not developed beyond that (Clark and Friðriksdóttir, 2016, p. 334). This can also be said for mortal women of the various genres of Old Norse literature, but in their domain the line between public and private spheres are considerably more blurred and the ‘dynamics of complex inter- and intra-familial relationships open up possibilities for women to inhabit highly complex roles’ (Clark and Friðriksdóttir, 2016, p. 334). However, as we have seen, many qualities that may appear to belong to one gender may not have actually been the case, such as women and warfare. As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, the idea that gender is socially constructed has impacted how we analyse Old Norse literature as well.

Additionally, the literary sources available for this period are problematic. Linguistic difficulties, the diverse experiences of women in various countries, and the fact that these sources usually reflect the medieval Christian attitude towards women rather than the Viking age reality, all make it difficult to know how truthful they are about the pagan past (Jesch, 1991, pp. 6- 7, & pp. 201- 206). Women in literature are not a reliable representation of reality as they are created by ‘male fantasy’ (Jesch, 1991, p. 206). Also, eddic poems, believed to be passed down through the generations orally, are irrecoverable in their original pre- Christian form. When transcribed by scribes in manuscripts, each generation that retold them evolved and adapted the story, consequently they cannot be regarded as affording unproblematic access to pre- Christian attitudes (Clark and Friðriksdóttir, 2016, p. 340).

4 Comparisons with Anglo-Saxon Women’s society

To discuss the lives of Anglo-Saxon women in great detail would be a thesis itself so, due to the scope of this topic, this chapter will focus on certain aspects of Anglo-Saxon women’s lives. Those being, marriage laws and customs, burial practices, and the effect of religion, all of which have previously been discussed in this theses when examining Scandinavian women, and by doing so, this chapter will also highlight the effects religion had on women’s roles within society. Christianity affected women’s lives in various ways, including the roles available to them within society and this shaped the construction of gender norms within said society. While the conversion of Iceland is documented, it fails to reveal how this change impacted the female half of society. The impact of Christianity on women in general is a somewhat controversial issue. Some argue that the patriarchal system Christianity is based on only grew stronger with the introduction of an all-male clergy resulting in misogyny being Christianity’s legacy for women, while others claim that Christianity was first and foremost a ‘liberating force’, meant to include women, and thus the new religion benefited women (Jochens, 2013, p. 2). Ultimately, the close association between misogyny and Christianity is hard to deny but as we have seen from the sources detailing the pagan past, like with marriage laws, pagan Scandinavia was not so different (Jochens, 2013, p. 2). Thus, this chapter seeks to

answer the research question: “Were pagan women in the Viking age as ‘free’ as modern perceptions imply?”, especially when compared to their counterparts.

4.1 Marriage

One way to assess the effects Christianity had on women’s lives is by looking at Anglo-Saxon laws and customs concerning marriage. Christianity introduced a doctrine of consent, a general concept originating from Roman law that involved a verbal ‘yes’ by the woman in way of consenting, thus a woman’s consent became a trademark for Christian marriage (Jochens, 2013, pp. 17- 45). Christian marriage was formulated not as a contract, like in pagan Scandinavia where the emphasis was on economic benefits and forming alliances, but as a sacrament, promising fidelity for life, so Christian marriage was essentially a voluntary monogamous union (Jochens, 2013, p. 37). Like pagan marriages in Scandinavia, there was also an engagement and marriage ritual, but Christianity applied concepts of monogamy, fidelity, consent, and indissolubility, and instilled harsher incest laws (Jochens, 2013, p. 37). Christianity also added ‘ceremonial instructions for weddings’ which restricted sexual interaction and made it clear that the marriage was expected to last a lifetime as churchmen condemned divorce and concubinage (Jochens, 2013, p. 37). However, it is worth noting that consent in marriage was not fully formulated as a Christian doctrine until the middle of the 12th century (Jochens, 2013, p. 44).

As with pagan marriages, the prospective husband was required to pay a bride price, or ‘marriage gift’, and this could be a substantial amount in money and land, but with Christian marriages this was paid not to father or kin but to the woman herself (Fell, 1984, pp. 56- 57). The sum paid to the prospective wife was not considered a form of purchasing the woman but rather a way of providing for her financially, as the marriage gift also gave her security in the event of her husband's death (Leyser, 1995, p. 42). She had full control over this sum which meant that Anglo- Saxon women could own property and they could do with it whatever they pleased (Fell, 1984, p. 57). Anglo-Saxon laws made it clear that within a marriage the finances were to be the property of both husband and wife, not the husband alone, and according to the laws of Æthelberht a woman had the right to walk out of an unsatisfactory marriage. The laws of Æthelbert of Kent, the

first Anglo- Saxon king to be converted to Christianity and who ruled from 560 to 616, primarily focus on financial issues, such as penalties for offenses and marriage (McCarthy, 2004, p. 97). Many marriages of Anglo-Saxon women, particularly those of a higher class, were undoubtedly political arrangements. Despite this, according to Æthelberht's code, if a woman wished to end her marriage, she was legally free to do so and with the example of Queen Æthelfryth, we can see it was not always the wife who was disregarded (Leyser, 1995, pp. 44- 45). In addition, if she took the children with her, she was also entitled to half the property which meant she had reasonable independence and financial security, but this particular freedom is not reiterated in later laws (Fell, 1984, p. 57), and if the children stayed with the husband then the wife herself received a child's share (Leyser, 1995, p. 45). Although, if a husband took a bride, paid the marriage gift, and some 'fraud' or falsehood was found, which mostly concerned her already being pregnant with another mans child, he could return her to her natal home and gain the return of his marriage gift (Leyser, 1995, p. 42). As we have seen with pagan marriages, this seems more in response to concerns over property rights and succession than the 'sexual morality and the virginity of the bride' (Leyser, 1995, p. 42). Thus, overall, this is evidence that Anglo-Saxon marriages not only had to be consented by the woman herself but also agreeable to her and in her best interest (Fell, 1984, p. 58).

Another aspect of the laws that appears to have benefited Anglo-Saxon women and remains fairly consistent throughout the period, is the care taken to ensure that a wife was not to be found guilty of her husband's crimes, thus the woman's independence is recognised and retained even after marriage. This included financial matters and there were also many laws protecting a widows financial security and independence (Fell, 1984, pp. 59- 61). The origin of this apparent equality is unclear but stems from the Christian idea that everyone is individually responsible for their own sins. We can see in the section "Of the Penance for Special Irregularities in Marriage" in the Penitential of Theodore, a guide for confessors on sin and penance associated with the archbishop of Canterbury, Theodore of Tarsus, and compiled between 668 and 690 by an anonymous Northumbrian cleric (McCarthy, 2004, p. 44). Both men and women, together or separately, are held responsible for certain aspects of their marriage or for their own deviances, such as adultery or 'foolish vows' unable to be kept after marriage (Pasternack, 2003, p. 126). For example, men can remarry multiple times, even if the wife is taken into

captivity or deserts him, and he is also able to put aside his wife in favour of another, the penance being 'tribulation for seven years or a lighter penance for fifteen years' (McCarthy, 2004, pp. 48- 49). Only men are held accountable for having intercourse that is improper, for reasons such as the position being unnatural, his wife being impure at the time, or it is the Lord's Day (Pasternack, 2003, p. 126). Women, on the other hand, 'may not take a vow without the consent of her husband; but if she does take a vow she can be released, and she shall do penance according to the decision of a priest' (McCarthy, 2004, p. 48) and are held accountable for neglecting to baptise infants, aborting a fetus, or entering a church in an 'impure state' (Pasternack, 2003, p. 126). This demonstrates the moral and social responsibilities related to each gender with regards to marriage and family (Pasternack, 2003, p. 12). Overall, according to this guide, the man appears to govern the marriage as, despite contradicting general Christian teaching, he can remarry multiple times and, according to section "XII of Matters Relating to Marriage", has the sole power to decide on the punishment for an adulterous wife (McCarthy, 2004, p. 51). If he chooses not to reconcile with her, she can either enter a monastery, where she will 'retain the fourth part of her inheritance', or leave with nothing (McCarthy, 2004, p. 51).

4.2 Burial practices

As demonstrated in the first chapter of this thesis, archaeology can reveal a great deal about women's roles in society. Through the grave goods present in Scandinavian female burials, we can see what work was considered normal for women, thus providing an insight into what was considered appropriate gender roles, and there are striking similarities with Anglo-Saxon women. As previously discussed, grave goods cannot tell the whole picture, nor can they be considered an exact mirror to social reality. As we have seen, the same grave goods can be found in the graves of both sexes. Tweezers, for example, are associated with women at the Chessel Down cemetery on the Isle of Wight, but at Long Wittenham in Berkshire they are found in male graves (Leyser, 1995, p. 7). In addition, as Leyser notes, each cemetery in Anglo-Saxon England is unique but, in a similar fashion to Scandinavian graves, certain aspects allow us to identify whether it is female or male, and grave goods is a much relied upon method (1995, p. 5).

As previously mentioned, each cemetery varied in their burial practices, but both Christians and pagans buried their dead with grave goods and both often chose an east to west positioning for their graves (Leyser, 1995, p. 8). In the case of cremations, cinerary urns have been found decorated according to both gender and age, making the sex of the grave easy to identify, as despite geographical differences these urns follow a similar pattern. For example, urns stamped with concentric figures contained remains of women or children and in some cemeteries an area was reserved specifically for the burial of women (Leyser, 1995, p. 5). Another identifying factor is the ritualistic positioning of the body, as seen at Holywell Row in Suffolk. Men were often buried in an extended fashion whereas a significant proportion of women are found with legs flexed (Leyser, 1995, p. 5). In Holywell Row cemetery there is a striking similarity between female and children's graves with regards to the flexed positioning of the bodies, which may indicate the 'marginal position' they were considered to have within society (Leyser, 1995, pp. 12-13). As we have seen with Viking graves, there is an emphasis on warrior and military prowess in Anglo-Saxon male graves and domestic activities like weaving, spinning or embroidery in women's graves with objects like thread boxes containing thread, cloth, or needles as well as spindle whorls and weaving- batons leading to a close association between women and textile production (Fell, 1984, p. 40). Overall, the objects found in the graves of Anglo-Saxon women are far greater in number and diversity than their male counterparts and, like those found in Scandinavian graves, they are gendered (Leyser, 1995, p. 7). This increased number of grave goods in female graves has, as Leyser highlights, led many archaeologists to assume this is due to them being more superstitious than men, dismissing most of the objects as 'junk' (1995, pp. 12- 13). However, other scholars believe this is due to the various meanings of their artefacts and should not be dismissed as superficial (Leyser, 1995, pp. 12- 13).

Most noteworthy are the keys commonly found in Anglo-Saxon women's graves. They are significant as they appear to have had a more symbolic meaning as they did not open locks but lift latches, something easily done without the keys (Leyser, 1995, p 14). It is possible that these keys could have been a symbol of maturity for these women, linked to household responsibilities (Leyser, 1995, p. 14). In the laws of Æthelbert, the following law is mentioned: 'if a freeborn woman, carrying the keys, misconducts herself, she shall pay 30 shillings as compensation' (McCarthy, 2004, p. 98). The 11th Century

law code of King Cnut emphasizes this idea that Anglo-Saxon women were expected to have sole responsibility for certain 'locked places' (Leyser, 1995, p. 43). This also ties in with the laws that retain a woman's independence even after marriage as she was not expected to share her husbands' guilt if he was accused of thievery unless the stolen goods were found in areas she had the key (Leyser, 1995, p. 43). Other notable artefacts found in Anglo-Saxon women's graves are certain types of jewellery. For example, since Christianity condemned the use of amulets, pear shaped amethyst beads, popularly found in Kent, were used instead, replacing amber that was used in pagan times (Leyser, 1995, p. 16). Therefore, it can be safely assumed that thread boxes and other objects, previously referred to as 'junk', may have been a Christian replacement for pagan objects after conversion (Leyser, 1995, p. 16). Since Kent was the richest of the early Anglo-Saxon kingdoms it is unsurprising that the most impressive female graves are found here, containing large amounts of jewellery that demonstrates Frankish influence (Leyser, 1995, p. 8). The gold-brocaded armlets and headbands, brooches and other jewellery also indicates the dead belonged to a higher social class (Leyser, 1995, p. 8). Through such rich grave goods, like jewellery, gold, and the inclusion of rare artefacts like weaving beaters or glass vessels, it is possible to determine the social class of the individual (Owen-Crocker, 2019, p. 32). As Owen-Crocker emphasises, while the grave goods may indicate a higher rank within society, they do not tell us how this rank was achieved, whether it was inherited, through marriage, or earned by the woman herself in some way (2019, p. 32). Furthermore, it is worth being cautious when using grave goods to assume anything about the lives of these women. The grave goods, for example, may represent more the perceptions and personal preference of the living who put said objects with her (Owen-Crocker, 2019, p. 34). Also, grave goods became less common for Anglo-Saxons around 570 and mostly ceased for men but continued for high status women which is more indicative of personal choice regarding customs for the dead than their roles within society (Owen-Crocker, 2019, p. 32).

4.3 Final comparisons

Christianity brought opportunities and new roles for women. Those being, certain positions of power like abbesses and with the introduction of literacy, they could also become learned (Leyser, 1995, pp. 28- 30). In ‘The Ecclesiastical History of the English People’ by the monk Bede in 731, women are praised for their vital efforts in the conversion of Anglo-Saxon England to Christianity and are depicted as resilient and successful, becoming powerful saints, where even in death they hold power through the miracles worked at their shrines (Leyser, 1995, pp. 19- 21). However, these roles are reserved for women with royal blood or nobility (Leyser, 1995, p. 20). Despite this, with the Virgin Mary as a model of the roles available for Anglo-Saxon women, perceptions on women were then altered to passive and peaceable (Leyser, 1995, pp. 53- 54). Under the organisation of Archbishop Theodore and beyond, these perceptions of women were utilised to restrict them from certain activities, for example the stress on a woman’s impure state justified the eventual exclusion of them from assisting in the celebration of Mass (Leyser, 1995, pp. 38- 39). However, as we have seen, some Christian documents and laws, like The Penitential of Theodore and Æthelberht’s laws, make it clear that a woman is responsible for her own acts, can be financially independent and compensated personally, not just through her male relatives (Pasternack, 2003, p. 123). With regards to The Penitential of Theodore, it was designed to educate those on Christian doctrines and ideas of purity, sexuality, and marriage for those to practice the religion faithfully and regulate social behaviors and norms (Pasternack, 2003, p. 124).

Insight into Anglo-Saxon women in textual form, of any social class, is difficult to come by but as previously addressed, widows had certain rights protecting them and it is through them, specifically wealthy widows, that we find wills that give us an idea of their standing in society and abilities (Owen-Crocker, 2019, p. 25). Such as in the wills of Wynflæd and Ælfgifu we can see the numerous estates they owned and ran, including the livestock and workers under their command, and they also reveal the objects they valued (Owen-Crocker, 2019, p. 25). On the other hand, a great deal of evidence survives in the form of grave goods uncovered from the thousands of 5th to 7th Century female Anglo-Saxon graves (Owen-Crocker, 2019, p. 31). In a similar fashion to Scandinavian women’s graves, these finds indicate that women were buried in their clothing, which means that

many of the items like brooches, buckles, wrist-clasps, and pins, as well as jewellery like beads were simply a part of their dress, indicating more about their fashion than the roles they played in society. Additional items, such as keys and other tools, offer some indication of their roles and insight into how the mourners perceived these women (Owen-Crocker, 2019, p. 31).

5 Conclusion

According to the archaeology presented in this thesis, Scandinavian women in the Viking age were widely travelled and an integral part of thriving urban settlements all over the Viking world. As seen from the grave goods, their primary role seemed to consist of household labour and the production of textiles. As we have seen, the most prominent way to distinguish a female's grave is through her jewellery, like with the distinctive oval brooches commonly found in Scandinavian women's burials, and the same can be said for Anglo-Saxon burials. Ultimately then, it is more difficult to generalise about women's lives and work from grave goods than it is to generalise about their style of dress from their jewellery. It is possible, however, to draw some conclusions about the nature of work considered normal for women in the Viking age from these additional grave goods, although they cannot tell the whole story. For example, through the archaeology we find that in places like Birka and Viking settlements abroad like York, it is likely that women engaged in trade and other businesses. Thus, in this respect it would appear Scandinavian women had more autonomy in the Viking age, with the freedom to travel and make new lives for themselves and their families and take on a variety of roles while doing so. This is further emphasized in *Landnámabók* with the story of Aud. With regards to Anglo-Saxon women, additional items, such as keys and other tools, offer some indication of their roles. For example, the keys some of these women possessed could have indicated maturity and social status, the role of household management, and items found in the production of textiles could indicate her profession (Owen-Crocker, 2019, p. 31).

The numerous finds of women buried with weapons, like Bj 381 and in Gerdrup, helped change views on women's roles and gender constructs within Viking age society as they suggest that the role of female warrior was a genuine possibility for Scandinavian

women, at least to some extent, which challenges our preconceived notions of gender roles, ones that assumed and repeatedly hailed the Bj 381 as a great example of a high-status male warrior (Neil Price et al, 2019, p. 182). The female warrior is also addressed in the literary sources, as seen in chapter 3 of this thesis, which gives further creditability to this role as a genuine possibility for Scandinavian women.

Perceptions of Scandinavian women in Old Norse literature vary from the forceful, powerful, independent, and somewhat unpleasant depiction in the Sagas of Icelanders to the peaceful, wise, and trustworthy depiction in eddic poetry. Both allowed women to play a role in men's affairs. Ultimately, however, the imaginative worlds depicted in eddic poetry are, to a great extent, men's worlds in which male power is conditional upon outstanding physical ability and military prowess, extensive knowledge, and sexual conquest. However, as we have seen, many qualities that may appear to belong to one gender may not have been the case, such as women and warfare. As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, the idea that gender is socially constructed has impacted how we analyse Old Norse literature as well. Additionally, the literary sources available for this period are problematic. Notably, they were compiled long after events of the pagan past and thus reflect the medieval Christian attitude towards women. Thus, the representation of women in literature is questionable and should be read with caution.

When comparing the effects of religion on the lives of women in both Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon societies, certain aspects stand out. Firstly, the concept of consent that was introduced with Christianity and secondly, the emphasis on an all-male clergy and exclusion of women which contrasts with the pagan Old Norse religion that included multiple female deities and allowed women to actively participate in ritual spaces. Christianity did, however, bring new opportunities for women like literacy and new powerful roles like abbesses, but ultimately there are far more similarities between Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon women, especially regarding marriage and financial independence, than differences.

Bibliography

- Anderson, S., M., “Introduction: “og eru köld kvenna ráð.” In *Cold Counsel, Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology*, edited by Sarah M. Anderson and Karen Swenson, xi- 1. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Benediktsson, J. *Íslensk Fornrit: Íslendingabók, Landnámabók*. Reykjavik, 1986.
- Clark, D., and Jóhanna K., Friðriksdóttir, “The Representation of Gender in Eddic Poetry.” In *A Handbook to Eddic Poetry: Myths and Legends of Early Scandinavia*, edited by Carolyne Larrington, Judy Quinn, and Brittany Schorn, 331–48. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.
- Davidson, Hilda. E. R. *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe: Early Scandinavian and Celtic Religions*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000.
- Davidson, Hilda E. *Roles of the Northern Goddess*. Taylor & Francis e-library, 2001.
- Edwards, P. Hermann Pálsson, & Cadwr. *The book of settlements = Landnámabók*. University of Manitoba: University of Manitoba Icelandic studies, 1972.
- Fell, C. E., Clark, C., Williams, E. *Women in Anglo-Saxon England*. London: British Museum Publications, 1984.
- Finnur Jónsson. *Brennu-Njálssaga*. Halle: Verlag Von Max Niemeyer, 1908.
- Finnur Jónsson. *De Gamle Eddadigte*. Copenhagen: Gad, 1932.
- Finnur Jónsson. *Den Norsk-islandske Skjaldedigtning*. Copenhagen: Rosenkilde of Bagger, 1967.
- Finnur Jónsson. *Edda: Snorra Sturlusonar*. 1898
- Gardela, L. “‘Warrior-women’ in Viking Age Scandinavia? A preliminary archaeological study.” *Analec ta archaeologica ressoviensia* (2013) vol. 8 273- 339.
- Hall, R. “York.” In *The Viking World*, edited by Stefan Brink and Neil Price, 378- 385. New York: Routledge, 2008.
- Hedenstierna-Jonson, C., T., Kjellstrom, C., Zachrisson, J., Krzewinska, T., Sobrado, Price, N., M., Gunther, V., Jakobsson, M., Gotherstrom, A., Storå. “A female Viking warrior confirmed by genomics.” *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 164 (2017) 853–860.
- Hekman, S. “Feminism.” In *The Routledge companion to critical and cultural theory*, edited by Simon Malpas and Paul Wake, 96- 107. New York: Routledge, 2013.

- Jesch, J. *Women in the Viking Age*. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1991.
- Jesch, J. “Viking ‘warrior women’: Judith Jesch, expert in Viking studies, examines the latest evidence.” 2019 at <https://www.historyextra.com/period/viking/birka-warrior-woman-vikings-female-argument-judith-jesch/>
- Jochens, Jenny. *Old Norse Images of Women*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996.
- Jochens, Jenny. *Women in Old Norse Society*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Jóhanna, K., Friðriksdóttir. *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words and Power*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Johnson, M. *Archaeological Theory: An Introduction*. Wiley Blackwell, 2010.
- Leyser, H. *Medieval Women: A Social History of Women in England 450-1500*. England: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995.
- McCarthy, C. *Love, Sex, and Marriage in the Middle Ages: A Sourcebook*. London: Routledge, 2004.
- McKinnell, J. *Essays on Eddic Poetry*. Edited by Donata Kick and John D. Shafer, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014.
- Mierswa, E. “Women traders of the Viking Age: An analysis of Grave Goods.” *Spectrum* vol. 6 (1) (2017) 1-7.
- Owen-Crocker, G. R. “Anglo-Saxon Women, Woman, and Womanhood.” In *New Readings on Women and Early Medieval English Literature and Culture: Cross-Disciplinary Studies in Honour of Helen Damico*, edited by Helene Scheck and Christine E. Kozikowski, 23- 41. Amsterdam University Press, 2019.
- Pasternack, B., C. “Negotiating Gender in Anglo-Saxon England.” In *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages*, edited by Sharon Farmer and Carol Braun Pasternack, 107- 142. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.
- Price, N., Hedenstierna-Jonson, C., Zachrisson, T., Kjellstrom, A., Storå, J., Krzewinska, M., Gunther, T., Sobrado, V., Jakobsson, M., Gotherstrom, A. “Viking Warrior Women? Reassessing Birka chamber grave Bj. 581.” *Antiquity* 93, 367 (2019) 181–198.
- Raudvere, Catharina. “Popular Religion in the Viking Age.” In *The Viking World*, edited by Stefan Brink and Neil Price, 235- 249. New York: Routledge, 2008.
- Snorri, Sturluson. *Edda*. Translated by Anthony Faulkes. London: Everyman, 1987.

Swenson, K. "Women Outside: Discourse of Community in Hávamál." In *Cold Counsel, Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology*, edited by Sarah M. Anderson and Karen Swenson, 273-280. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Williams, Thomas. *Viking Britain*. London: William Collins, 2017.

Williams, G. "Raiding and Warfare." In *The Viking World*, edited by Stefan Brink and Neil Price, 193- 204. New York: Routledge, 2008.