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High Status Women in Viking Age Norway
Sigríður & her sisters

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Ágrip

Í ritgerðinni er sjónum beint að aristókratískum konum, einkum drottningum, á víkingaöld í Noregi frá sögulegu sjónarhorni. Lítið hefur verið skrifað um þetta efni í enskumælandi fræðaheimi samanborið við mörg önnur lönd eða landsvæði. Kvenhetjur fornsagna eru vel þekktar í þessum fræðiskrifum en hinar, sögulegu persónur hafa hlotið minni athygli þar til nýverið. Þær frumheimildir sem hér eru teknar til skoðunar eru konungasögur: Heimskringla, Fagurskinna og Morkinskinna. Auk þeirra eru fornleifar teknar til samanburðar. Niðurstöðurnar eru eigindlegar ásamt einfaldri tölfræði. Fyrsti kafli fjallar um fræðahefð um efnið og viðvíkjandi álitamál. Annar kafli fjallar um frumheimildirnar, aldur þeirra og hneigðir, og að hvaða marki ætla megi að þær endurspegli raunverulega, sögulega atburði. Í þriðja kafla eru dæmi úr heimildum rakin og þau rannsökuð. Rannsóknarspurningarnar eru: Hvaða mynd er dregin upp af aristókratískum konum og konum sem stóðu hátt í samfélaginu? Að hvaða marki fóru þær með völd og höfðu áhrif? Hvert var hlutverk þeirra á pólitísku sviði og í stjórnámálum? Breyttist staða þeirra? Má ætla að framgangur kristni hafi haft grundvallaráhrif?

Abstract

This thesis looks, from a historical perspective, at Viking Age royal, aristocratic and high status women in Norway, particularly queens. Whilst work has been published on this for other lands, there has been less done on this in English. The heroines of saga literature are well known, but these women have been relatively neglected until recently. The primary sources are kings' sagas: Heimskringla, Fagrskinna and Morkinskinna. In addition, archaeological evidence is also utilised. The results are qualitative with some basic statistics. The first chapter covers the historiography and relevant scholarly debates. The second, the sources and methodology including: dating, biases and degree to which they reflect actual historical events. Chapter three is the analysis with quotations from primary sources. The research questions are: How were high status women perceived? How far did they hold power and authority? What was their role in politics and government? Did it change? Did Christianity make a fundamental difference?

A note on spelling and quotations

Every effort has been made to ensure the spelling of names and places, particularly in Old Icelandic, is consistent. Where they are included in quotations, the spelling is unchanged from the source text. For primary sources the spelling will be that used in the Íslenzk fornrit editions published by Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, Reykjavík, Iceland or an equivalent text. Quotations from the three key primary sources are given first in Old Icelandic, then from the relevant, appropriate, English translation.

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Dedication

In memory of my late father:

Lionel Clarence Weedon of Portsmouth, England,

(22nd October 1927 - 17th December 2014),

and his father,

William Frederick Weedon, of Fulham, London, England,

(1881-1962), Royal Marines.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Research questions & structure

What can we say of the perception of high status women in Viking Age Norway? Did they wield real power and authority? If so how and for what purposes? Were they more fictional characters than historical? What role did they play in politics and government? Did it change? Did Christianity make a fundamental difference?¹

This dissertation looks specifically at high status women in three kings' sagas (*konungasögur*). These were written in a Christian context in the vernacular and mainly in Iceland in the early thirteenth century.² The choice of Norway is due to limitations of space but also because we have three comprehensive sources.

The first chapter of this dissertation covers the historiography and relevant scholarly debates. It also touches on how archaeological evidence increasingly shows women were not “the weaker sex.” The second, the sources and methodology including: dating, biases and degree to which they reflect actual historical events. The third is the analysis with quotations from primary sources.

1.2 Historiography

1.2.1 Overview

Leszek Gardęła argued (as did Judith Jesch): “some people still hold the opinion that the period between the eighth and eleventh centuries AD, commonly known as the Viking Age, belonged to men, and that women were merely passive and silent companions of their proactive husbands.”³ Gardęła notes: “Jesch ... refrained from discussing the images of women in the so-called kings' sagas and *fornaldarsögur* (“legendary sagas”).”⁴ He also has reservations over Jenny Jochens' conclusion that: “the

¹ Women exercised authority and leadership elsewhere in the Viking era. David J. Hay, *The military leadership of Matilda of Canossa, 1046-1115* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008).

² *Heimskringla & Morkinskinna* were written in Iceland. *Fagrskinna* may have been written in Norway, possibly by an Icelander. For an overview, see Ármann Jakobsson, “Royal Biography,” in ed., Rory McTurk, *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 388-402.

³ Leszek Gardęła, *Women and Weapons in the Viking World. Amazons of the North* (Oxford: Oxbow books, 2021), 17.

⁴ Gardęła, *Women and Weapons*, 18-19. Referring to Judith Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1991).

Norse world was profoundly patriarchal” and that “the human ideal that was most admired and to which both men and women aspired was more masculine than feminine.”⁵

1.2.2 Archaeology

The Viking era⁶ Birka grave Bj.581 in Sweden has been widely publicised.⁷ Originally identified as a male grave, due to weapons among the grave goods, it was reviewed and the gender established as female. The Oseberg ship burial from Norway has also been reassessed. The remains of the two persons found within it are both female. There was a consensus the burial was royal,⁸ though this is now disputed, probably they were high status.⁹ The Oseberg burial is one of the most intriguing, “impressive” and magnificent of women’s graves.¹⁰ Marianne Moen has discussed the arguments in some detail.¹¹ Some argued the burial was an anomaly and not part of the local power structure. She feels earlier scholars could not contemplate an “independent” female ruler and “political player” rather than a wife, mother or daughter of a king. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir considers one or both women could have been important landowners.¹²

⁵ Gardela, *Women and Weapons*, 19. Referring to: Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1995). Jochens may be heavily influenced by her view of society in Viking Age Iceland and the *Íslendingarsögur*.

⁶ The Viking Age is conventionally dated by English historians to 793-1066. Others have extended the dates backwards and forwards.

⁷ Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson, Anna Kjellström, Torun Zachrisson, et al., “A female Viking warrior confirmed by genomics,” *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 164 (2017): 853–860. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajpa.23308> & Neil Price, Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson, Torun Zachrisson, et al., “Viking warrior women? Reassessing Birka chamber grave Bj.581,” *Antiquity* 93, 367 (2019): 181-198. Marianne Moen, “Gender and Archaeology: Where Are We Now?” *Archaeologies* 15.2 (2019): 206–226. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11759-019-09371-w>.

⁸ One theory is the “semi-legendary” Queen Ása, “Queen Regent”, mother of Hálfdan svarti and grandmother of Haraldr inn hárfagri (“finehaired”). In *Heimskringla* she allegedly murdered her husband. Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, I., translated by Alison Finlay & Anthony Faulkes, 2nd edition (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2017). (Three volumes)

⁹ Gardela warns against assuming opulent grave goods meant high status. Gardela, *Women and Weapons*, 7. Referencing: Nina Nordstrom, “From Queen to sorcerer,” in *Old Norse Religion in Long Term Perspectives. Origins, Changes and Interactions*. An International Conference in Lund, Sweden. June 3-7, 2004, eds., Anders Andrén, Kristina Jennbert & Catherina Raudvere (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2006), 399-404.

¹⁰ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Valkyrie. The Women of the Viking World* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 188-190. See: Per Holck, *Skjelettene fra Gokstad og Osebergskipet* (Oslo: Universitetet i Oslo, 2009).

¹¹ Marianne Moen, “Challenging Gender - a reconsideration of gender in the Viking Age using the mortuary landscape” (Doctoral Thesis, University of Oslo, 2019). <http://urn.nb.no/URN:NBN:no-85086>. Especially 4.3 “The Oseberg Women”. 44-47.

¹² Friðriksdóttir references: Arne Emil Christensen, et al. *Osebergdronningens grav: Vår arkeologiske nasjonalskatt I nytt lys* (Oslo: Schibsted. 1994).

Neil Price and others have suggested one of the women might have been a seeress or *vǫlva*.¹³ Price suggests, referring to Ann Stine Ingstad, a *vǫlva* could have higher status than a queen and this explains the lavish burial.¹⁴ The grave goods include a staff and cannabis seeds, both linked to the practice of *seiðr*.¹⁵ Price refers to Queen Gunnhildr,¹⁶ and also the “Gausel Queen” burial, in Rogaland, contemporary with Oseberg and also of a high status woman.¹⁷

From an archaeological perspective the historiography of scholarship on women in the Viking age was summarized by Leszek Gardęła, who notes the significant number of female scholars and feminist perspectives.¹⁸ He feels women were often marginalised by scholars until the 1980s.¹⁹

Gardęła notes Liv Helga Dommasnes’s article which “discussed the value of archaeological finds in illuminating the lives of Viking Age women.”²⁰ She has considered “the potential of burial evidence in addressing social roles and ranks.”²¹ A key area of archaeological debate, is the extent to which burials and grave goods reflect the deceased and their role in life.²² Dommasnes “emphasised women could exercise considerable power in their own right.”²³ Her studies of Norwegian graves suggested that: “More women obtained higher rank in the ninth century than any other period.”²⁴ Nanna

¹³ Neil Price, *The Viking Way: magic and mind in late Iron Age Scandinavia* (2nd edn.) (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2019), 115-118.

¹⁴ Price, *The Viking Way*, 115-118. Ann Stine Ingstad, “Osberg-dronningen – hvem var hun?” in eds., Arne Emil Christensen, Ann Stine Ingstad & Bjørn Myhre, *Osbergdronningens grav* (Oslo: Schibsted, 1992): 224-256. Anne Stine Ingstad, “The interpretation of the Oseberg-find,” in eds., Ole Crumlin-Pedersen & Brigitte Munch Thye, *The ship as symbol in prehistoric and medieval Scandinavia* (København: National Museum, 1995).

¹⁵ Other possible seeress graves include Aska, Sweden, Fyrkat, Denmark and a Birka grave which contained both a crucifix and a “staff”. Steve Ashby & Alison Leonard, *Vikings. Pocket Museum* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2018), 76-77, 157, 162.

¹⁶ Price, *Viking Way*, 59, 226, 273. “Gunnhildr, was notorious as a sorceress and shape changer.”

¹⁷ Price, *Viking Way*, 114-115. “Gausel Queen” and other high status female burials: Helge Sørheim, “Three Prominent Norwegian Ladies With British Connections,” *Acta Archaeologica* 82.1 (2011): 17-54.

¹⁸ Gardęła, *Women and Weapons*, 17-26. Especially: “Researching women in the Viking Age.”

¹⁹ Gardęła, *Women and Weapons*, 17. Women were: “Resourceful matriarchs, craftspeople, travellers and traders.”

²⁰ Liv Helga Dommasnes, “Et gravmateriale fra yngre jernalder brukt til å belyse kvinners stilling,” *Viking. Tidsskrift for norrøn arkeologi* Bd. 42. S. (1979): 95-114. Cited by Gardęła, *Women and Weapons*, 17.

²¹ Gardęła, *Women and Weapons*, 17.

²² Gardęła, *Women and Weapons*, 18. This “is now seriously contested”.

²³ Gardęła, *Women and Weapons*, 18. She looked at medieval laws & saga literature as well as archaeological material.

²⁴ Gardęła, *Women and Weapons*, 18. Liv Helga Dommasnes, “Male/Female Roles and Ranks in Late Iron Age Norway,” in *Were They all Men? An Examination of Sex Roles in Prehistoric Society*, eds., Reidar Bertelsen, Arnvid Lillehammer & Jenny-Rita Næss, Acts from a Workshop Held at Utstein Kloster, Rogaland 2.-4. November 1979. NAM-Forskningsseminar nr. 1. (Stavanger: Arkeologisk Museum I Stavanger. 1987), 65-77.

Løkka wrote a noteworthy overview of the scholarship on women in the Viking era²⁵ and went on to work with Karoline Jjesrud on women and power.²⁶

Marianne Moen's PhD thesis considered Viking age burials in the Vestfold region of Norway.²⁷ She concludes women were not necessarily subordinate or unequal to men in terms of status and social roles, though she cautioned the evidence comes from high status elite graves and one specific part of Norway. Moen has also written on gender and archaeology more generally.²⁸ Referring to her own field of "Viking Age studies", she is critical of works which only associate women with the family and the home ("inside") and men with "active" pursuits ("outside"). She argues there are very few activities which women cannot participate in.²⁹

1.2.3 General works

Many of the standard reference works only mention royal women in passing. The "Cambridge History of Scandinavia" has few references to queens in the Viking age.³⁰ There are references to the presence of queens at pagan worship/festivals, royal marriages and Queen Gunnhildr. A Queen Dowager's role is noted and said to be powerful. The most frequent references are to Queen Margrét of Denmark and the Kalmar Union (c.1397) where her political skills are praised.³¹

The "Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia" notes: "In the Konungasögur, few women are mentioned, and they normally play a subordinate role."³² There is an interesting reference to one of Snorri's likely sources for the saga of Óláfr Tryggvasonar. The author, the monk Oddr, had three women amongst his "informants" and this shaped how women were portrayed.³³

²⁵ Gardela, *Women and Weapons*, 21. Nanna Løkka, "Vikingtidskvinnen i ettertidens lys," in *Kvinner i vikingtid (Women in the Viking Age)*, eds., Nancy Louise Coleman & Nanna Løkka (Oslo: Scandinavian Academic Press, 2014), 11-36. Note the chapter on "female presence at Norse assemblies."

²⁶ Karoline Kjesrud & Nanna Løkka, eds., *Dronningen i vikingtid og middelalder*. (Oslo: Scandinavian Academic Press, 2017).

²⁷ Marianne Moen, "Challenging Gender." *Passim*.

²⁸ Marianne Moen, "Gender and Archaeology," 206–226.

²⁹ Marianne Moen, "No Man's Land or Neutral Ground. Perceived Gendered Differences in Ideologies of War," in *Viking Wars*, Viking LXXXIV Special Volume 1, eds., Frode Iversen and Karoline Kjesrud (Oslo: Norwegian Archaeological Society, 2021).

³⁰ Knut Helle, ed, *Cambridge History of Scandinavia*, vol. 1. Prehistory to 1520 (Cambridge: CUP, 2003).

³¹ Helle, *Cambridge History*, 742. Also 388 & 661.

³² Phillip Pulsiano & Kirsten Wolf, eds., *Medieval Scandinavia: an encyclopedia* (London: Routledge, 2016), 724. (Entry on "Women in Sagas" by Else Mundal).

³³ Ludvig Holm-Olsen, "Forfatterinnslag I Odds munks saga om Olav Tryggvason," in *Festskrift til Alfred Jakobsen*, eds., Jan Ragnar Hagland, Jan Terje Faarlund & Jarle Ronhovd (Trondheim, Tapir, 1987), 79-90.

Anne Duggan's work gives examples of medieval Queenship but only one chapter relates to Scandinavia and that is late medieval.³⁴ William Layher's three core Scandinavian examples are also all late medieval.³⁵ Yet the coronation of a queen had significance by the thirteenth century in Norway and the succession³⁶ and inheritance issues stemming from a queen's estate could be problematic.³⁷

Sverre Bagge's key monograph has no references to queens in general though there are some to specific queens.³⁸ His main focus is on the 100 years from 1240 and the period before 1130 is not covered in any detail.³⁹ There is a reference in Berend's volume to an "Indo-European myth of queens choosing their husbands."⁴⁰ Though Queen Ástriðr of Norway (c.1020s-30s) gets a reference, most other queens are from the later Middle Ages, other than Þyri, Queen of Denmark.

Stefan Brink and Neil Price have a valuable chapter on "Women and Sexual Politics" by Auður Magnúsdóttir.⁴¹ She suggests queens had real power, but this often came after their husband died and notes society's expectations that queens should not seek power. Friðriksdóttir remarks queen mothers had their own "entourage", took part in politics and were not as easily sidelined as wives or daughters.⁴² The most famous queen & queen mother in a Norwegian context is Queen Gunnhildr, who features in *Íslendingasögur* as well as kings' sagas.⁴³

³⁴ Anne J. Duggan, ed., *Queens and Queenship in Medieval Europe: proceedings of a conference held at King's College London, April 1995* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1997). See Steinar Imsen, "Late Medieval Scandinavian Queenship," 53-74.

³⁵ William Layher, *Queenship and Voice in Medieval Northern Europe* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). The three queens are: Agnes of Denmark (d. 1304), Eufemia of Norway (d. 1312) and Margareta of Denmark/Sweden (d. 1412).

³⁶ Helle, *Cambridge History of Scandinavia*, 778. Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, III., viii.

³⁷ The coronation of Hákon Hákonarsson in 1247 is arguably when "the principle Norway should be ruled by a single legitimate heir to the dynasty, ordained by God and supported by the church" was established. Hákon's wife was crowned Queen. Diana Whaley, *Heimskringla. An Introduction*. (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, UCL, 1991), 27. The coronation of Magnús Erlingsson in 1163/64 is stated to be the first royal coronation. Sverre Bagge & Sæbjørg Walaker Nordeide, "The kingdom of Norway," in *Christianization and the Rise of Christian Monarchy. Scandinavia, Central Europe and Rus c.900-1200*, ed., Nora Berend (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 146-147. Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, III., ix.

³⁸ Sverre Bagge, *From Viking stronghold to Christian kingdom: state formation in Norway, c. 900-1350*. (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2010).

³⁹ "Review" by Ármann Jakobson of Sverre Bagge, *From Viking stronghold to Christian kingdom: state formation in Norway, c. 900-1350*, in *Scandinavian Studies Vol. 86*. No. 2 (2014): 236-239.

⁴⁰ Petr Sommer, Dušan Třeštík, Josef Žemlička and Zoë Opačić, "Bohemia and Moravia," in Nora Berend, ed., *Christianization and the Rise of Christian Monarchy: Scandinavia, Central Europe and Rus c. 900-1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 218.

⁴¹ Auður Magnúsdóttir, "Women and Sexual Politics. Concubines to Queens," in eds., Stefan Brink & Neil S. Price, *The Viking World* (London: Routledge, 2008), 40-48.

⁴² Friðriksdóttir, *Valkyrie*, 134.

⁴³ Egil's saga, translated by Bernard Scudder, edited with an introduction and notes by Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir (London: Penguin (Classics) Books, 1997/2004). *Njal's saga*, translated with an introduction

There was a political significance to high status marriages,⁴⁴ and concubines also had influence.⁴⁵ It was not uncommon for kings to have multiple wives and partners. A classic case is King Haraldr gillie, his wife Queen Ingigerðr and one of his concubines, Þora.⁴⁶ Auður Magnúsdóttir argues that this was not unusual amongst the elite and that Þora was of significant status.⁴⁷ Jenny Jochens highlights the importance for the concubines kin group of a royal liaison and also for a king, in terms of producing an heir.⁴⁸ There is a debate about how much independence Viking women had with respect to sexual relations and marriage and whether this changed with the coming of Christianity.⁴⁹

In Theresa Earenfight's work on "queenship" her second chapter deals with the Viking Era.⁵⁰ It has been argued that whatever the laws and customs were in existence, the "situation" of each individual queen was the main influence on how she exercised her "queenship". Christianity was seminal to the development of "queenship" and gender was key to how a queen was expected to behave.⁵¹

The Sawyers (Birgit & Peter) also suggested women's status was impacted by religion in Scandinavia, though their example is England. "In England, for example, before the Norman Conquest of 1066, the fact that some women had a leading role in public affairs excited no particular comment from contemporaries, but twelfth-century historians of Anglo-Saxon England thought it was extraordinary."⁵²

and notes by Robert Cook (London: Penguin (Classics) Books, 1997/2001). Briefly in *The Saga of the Jónsvikings: A Translation for Students*. Alison Finlay & Þórdís Edda Jóhannesdóttir. Northern Medieval World. (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2019).

⁴⁴ Sverker I sought to legitimise his Kingship by marrying Ulfrid, the widow of Inge II. Brink & Price, *Viking World*, 670.

⁴⁵ Pauline Stafford, *Queens, Concubines and Dowagers: The Kings Wife in the Middle Ages* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1983). Auður Magnúsdóttir, "Women and Sexual Politics," 40-48.

⁴⁶ He probably had at least six concubines and sons with each, plus a son Ingi with his wife. Four of them ruled Norway after his death, jointly, often quarrelling. Auður Magnúsdóttir, "Kingship, Women and Politics," in *Disputing Strategies in Medieval Scandinavia*, eds., Kim Esmark, Lars Hermanson, Hans Jacob Orning & Helle Vogt. (Leiden: BRILL, 2013), 83-106.

⁴⁷ Auður Magnúsdóttir, "Kingship, Women and Politics," 83. Sverre Bagge, *Mennesket i middelalderens Norge. Tanker, tro og holdninger 1000–1300* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1998), 124.

⁴⁸ Jenny M. Jochens, "The Politics of Reproduction: Medieval Norwegian Kingship," *The American Historical Review* 92, no. 2 (1987): 327–49. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1866620>. Auður Magnúsdóttir, "Kingship, Women and Politics," 97.

⁴⁹ Neil Price, *The Children of Ash & Elm. A history of the Vikings* (London: Penguin Books, 2020), 160-162. Else Mundal, "The double impact of christianization for women in Old Norse culture," in *Gender and religion: European studies*, eds., K. E. Børresen, S. Cabibbo and E. Specht (Rome: Carocci, 2001), 237-254.

⁵⁰ Theresa Earenfight, *Queenship in Medieval Europe* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). Lisa B. St John, "Review" of *Queenship in Medieval Europe* in *Gender & History* Vol 27. No.2 (August 2015): 514-517.

⁵¹ Bagge & Nordeide, "The kingdom of Norway," 121-166.

⁵² Birgit & Peter Sawyer, *Medieval Scandinavia: from conversion to Reformation, circa 800-1500*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 191.

1.2.4 Women in non-Scandinavian primary sources

Beowulf is a noted example where Queen Wealhtheow has the role of the “Lady with a mead cup,” peacemaker and diplomat. The date of the story is unknown (the manuscript is late tenth/early eleventh century) but may go back to the eighth century.⁵³ There is archaeological evidence from Scandinavia of women’s role as “cup bearer” which is also associated with the Valkyrie.⁵⁴ Finally, Svante Norr has written on the queens of Germanic Kingdoms in the Migration Age.⁵⁵

There are a few non-Scandinavian contemporary written sources. One is the Arab account of al Ghazāl who appears to have visited Denmark and met its queen.⁵⁶ William Allen discussed the possibility Queen Nud was a seeress or volva, which may tie in with the archaeological evidence.⁵⁷ There is some doubt on how far his portrayal of elite Viking Society reflected the reality.⁵⁸

1.2.5 The sagas and literary works

The part played by women in the Icelandic “family sagas” (*Íslendingasögur*) has been a feature of scholarship for some decades. David Clark and Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir noted that women in the sagas are often depicted offering counsel and support in private and public. Yet they also behave as badly, “cunningly, deceitfully” as men. They do not always obey male relatives or stay within the traditional female roles.⁵⁹

Carol Clover’s article on “maiden warriors” looks at the portrayal of women in sagas, such as “Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks.”⁶⁰ Hers is a literary and linguistic approach. She argues, on occasion women could assume a male gender in terms of their status and

⁵³ Seamus Heaney, *Beowulf: a new verse translation* (London: Faber and Faber, bilingual edition, 2007). Lines 1161-1231.

⁵⁴ Micheal J. Enright, *Lady with a mead cup : ritual, prophecy and lordship in the European warband from La Tène to the Viking age* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2013). Helen Damico, *Beowulf's Wealhtheow and the Valkyrie tradition* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984). Helen Damico & Alexandra Hennessey Olsen, eds., *New readings on women in Old English literature* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1990).

⁵⁵ Svante Norr, *To Rede and to Rown. Expressions of Early Scandinavian Kingship in Written Sources*, Occasional Papers in Archaeology 17 (Uppsala: Department of Archaeology and Ancient History, Uppsala University 1998), 124-127.

⁵⁶ Brink & Price, *The Viking World*, 464-465.

⁵⁷ William E. D. Allen, "The poet and the Spae-wife," *Saga-Book*. 15 (1957): 149-260.

⁵⁸ Carol J. Clover, “Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe,” *Speculum* 68, no. 2 (1993): 363–87. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2864557>. 367.

⁵⁹ Gardęła, *Women and Weapons*, 12. David Clark & Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, “The Representation of Gender in Eddic Poetry,” in *A Handbook to Eddic Poetry: Myths and Legends of Early Scandinavia*, eds., Carolyn Larrington, Judy Quinn & Brittany Schom (Cambridge: CUP, 2016), 331-348.

⁶⁰ Carol J. Clover, "Maiden warriors and other sons," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 85, no. 1 (1986): 35-49.

actions, even if biologically female, the “surrogate son” model.⁶¹ Clover’s theory that Viking society has a “one sex model” is much referenced.⁶² She also points out, elements of the stories may have “pagan roots” but also “Christian resonances”, for example the “ideal” of “wifely loyalty”.⁶³ On the historicity of the sagas she states. “I am here as elsewhere proceeding on the neo traditionalist assumption that although the written sources may exaggerate or fabricate at some points, there is a large grain of truth in their collective account.”⁶⁴

On the portrayal of women, she comments scholars have: “been startled and not infrequently appalled by the extraordinary array of “exceptional” or “strong” or “outstanding” or “proud” or “independent” women, whose behaviour exceeds what is presumed to be custom and sometimes the law as well.”⁶⁵ In terms of women acting as men or in a male way, Clover argues that, with the exception perhaps of Hallgerðr, they are generally admired.⁶⁶ Is Queen Gunnhildr then, the Hallgerðr of Norway?

Clover has also written on female succession and status and states that in some circumstances, women could inherit, could be considerable landowners, traders and businesswomen. Clover argues, again in an Icelandic context, that women were not entirely excluded from governance.⁶⁷

Chris Callow has studied the representation of women in the Icelandic *Landnámabók*.⁶⁸ He considers the degree to which “conscious or subconscious attitudes towards gender affected the practice of storytellers in Medieval Iceland.”⁶⁹ He argues the picture is pretty mixed for women but suggests “that they could inhabit the same roles as men was perfectly acceptable to some writers.” He also thinks that while wealthy males dominated society “women were not excluded from social dominance if they behaved in the correct ways.”⁷⁰

⁶¹ Clover, “Regardless of Sex,” 370.

⁶² Clover, “Regardless of Sex,” 386-387.

⁶³ Clover, “Regardless of Sex,” 364-365.

⁶⁴ Clover, “Regardless of Sex,” 365. Footnote 7 & 8.

⁶⁵ Clover, “Regardless of Sex,” 366.

⁶⁶ Clover, “Regardless of Sex,” 371. Footnote 30. She argues the author of *Njal’s saga* is the most “consistently misogynist in Icelandic literature”.

⁶⁷ Clover, “Regardless of Sex,” 367.

⁶⁸ Chris Callow, “Putting Women in their Place? Gender, Landscape, and The Construction of *Landnámabók*,” *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 7 (2011): 7–28. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45019147>.

⁶⁹ Callow, “*Putting Women*,” 25.

⁷⁰ Callow, “*Putting Women*,” 26.

With respect to *Morkinskinna*, Auður Magnúsdóttir has commented on Ármann Jakobsson's views.⁷¹ "We do get glimpses of women taking political decisions, or at least decisions that might lead to political consequences, but the focus on women in *Morkinskinna*, as in other kings' sagas, is often limited to their function as "highlighters" of the king's character. However, women in *Morkinskinna* are neither encountered frequently enough nor are they sufficiently important for the story as a whole for them to find a place in Ármann's discussions of "images of society" or "images of men."⁷²

Later it is argued: "to show a king submitting to the power of women and sexuality is a way of showing his inability to hold the position of royal power. Thus, women play a comparatively subordinate role in *Morkinskinna*. However, there are, as we have seen, exceptions."⁷³

1.2.6 "Succession"

Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir has written on "Royal and Aristocratic Women" and after commenting on the tendency to see them in terms of wives and producers of heirs, she argues that some of them were "politicians" in their own right.⁷⁴ Queen Ástríðr (Óláfsdóttir) is an example in *Heimskringla*.⁷⁵ Women can operate as they do, in part due to their status and rank. Arguably this also applies to men, though the obstacles for women were greater. Royal women such as Ástríðr have their own estates and followers.⁷⁶ Aristocratic and high status women also had a degree of political and economic independence.⁷⁷

The influence of queens on their husbands and sons is significant. In the debate on how Gunnhildr and others are treated in the sagas, Friðriksdóttir states there was hostility and misogyny, sometimes overt.⁷⁸ High status women could exercise "statecraft" but not always successfully. Álfífa was less politically skilled than Gunnhildr, who was more ruthless.⁷⁹ Friðriksdóttir notes that whilst men were often trained in political skills

⁷¹ Ármann Jakobsson, *Staður í nýjum heimi: Konungasagan Morkinskinna* (Reykjavík: Hástölaútgáfan, 2002).

⁷² Auður Magnúsdóttir, "Kingship, Women and Politics," 87.

⁷³ Auður Magnúsdóttir, "Kingship, Women and Politics," 95.

⁷⁴ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words, and Power* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

⁷⁵ Judith Jesch, "In Praise of Ástríðr Óláfsdóttir," *Saga-Book XXIV* (1994): 1–18.

⁷⁶ Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 87.

⁷⁷ Dommasnes, "Male/Female Roles," 75. Note the story of Bjorn of Gauntland, granted lands and titles by Ástríðr and despite later crimes, granted exile rather than death due to her influence. Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, II. 200-201.

⁷⁸ Icelandic writers especially. Friðriksdóttir, *Valkyrie*, 106.

⁷⁹ Friðriksdóttir, *Valkyrie*, 108.

such as alliance making, this was rare for women. Álfifa faced opposition to her rule on behalf of her son, due to being a woman, but the fact she was “foreign” counted for more, though there were other factors such as crop failures and new laws.⁸⁰

One of the core obstacles for women was that they could not generally be sole rulers or inherit the crown or titles.⁸¹ The existence of concubines complicated the issues, though Lois L. Huneycutt has said twelfth century clerics focused on lineage rather than gender.⁸² Melisende, daughter of Baldwin II of Jerusalem and two queens of Cyprus (Caterina and Charlotte) illustrate that women could succeed to the throne.⁸³

Henry I of England sought to ensure his daughter (Matilda) succeeded him, but ultimately failed. One of the traditional arguments made, is that the English nobility would not accept a woman as sole or even joint ruler.⁸⁴ Yet she clearly exercised a degree of authority, nor was the wife of King Stephen, an irrelevance. Aethelflaed of Mercia ruled on her own and sought to have her daughter Ælfwynn succeed.⁸⁵ She may have done briefly, but youth and the ambitions of her uncle, Edward the Elder prevented her. Her mother succeeded because she ruled, first during her husband’s illness and then as his widow.

1.2.7 The portrayal of queens: “good and evil”

Whilst Queen Gunnhildr is generally portrayed negatively in medieval accounts of her activities, Ástrídr, mother of Óláfr Tryggvason fares better. She is a contemporary of Gunnhildr and her husband was slain by Haraldr gráfeldr (“grey cloak”), one of that queen’s sons. The two are struggling over whose son will rule Norway. Ástrídr is successful and Friðriksdóttir argues “the narrator’s admiration is undeniably on Ástrídr’s side.”⁸⁶ It may be because she is protecting her infant son, as much as for her political

⁸⁰ Friðriksdóttir, *Valkyrie*, 107. She does not say what these covered or why they were so disliked,

⁸¹ Friðriksdóttir, *Valkyrie*, 108.

⁸² Lois L. Huneycutt, “Female Succession and the Language of Power in the Writings of Twelfth-Century Churchmen,” in *Medieval Queenship*, ed., John Carmi Parsons (Gloucestershire: St Martin’s Press, 1994), 189–201. Pauline Stafford, *Queen Emma and Queen Edith. Queenship and Women’s Power in Eleventh Century England*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 73-74.

⁸³ Holly S. Hurlburt, *Daughter of Venice: Caterina Corner, Queen of Cyprus and Woman of the Renaissance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015). James Petre, *Crusader castles of Cyprus: the fortifications of Cyprus under the Lusignans: 1191-1489* (Nicosia: Cyprus Research Centre, 2012), 50, 171-172 & 45-48, 81-83, 90, 306, 360.

⁸⁴ Matilda married Geoffrey of Anjou, perhaps the English nobility opposed a “foreigner” as King.

⁸⁵ Charles Insley. “Southumbria,” in Pauline Stafford, ed., *A Companion to the Early Middle Ages. Britain and Ireland, c.500-c.1100* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009). 330. Pauline Stafford, “Queens and Queenship,” in Pauline Stafford, ed., *A Companion to the Early Middle Ages. Britain and Ireland, c.500-c.1100* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009). 463. Stafford, *Emma & Edith*, 93-94.

⁸⁶ Friðriksdóttir, *Valkyrie*, 131.

acumen. Snorri “recounts a different and much more gripping version” of Ástrídr’s escape from Gunnhildr than earlier versions of the story.⁸⁷

Friðriksdóttir considers women acting as “intercessors”.⁸⁸ Hildr Hrólfsdóttir, an aristocratic Norwegian woman, acted on behalf of her outlawed son.⁸⁹ She was the daughter of a Jarl, married to another and performed skaldic verse in front of King Haraldr hárfagri, a friend of her husband.⁹⁰ It was her aristocratic status, her social position, that allowed her to do this, but it illustrates women were willing and able to act in the political sphere.⁹¹ There is no suggestion she was acting in an unusual or outrageous fashion.

A poem by Sigvatr in *Heimskringla*, refers to Queen Ástrídr’s support for Magnús góði and her political skills, rhetorical abilities and “godliness”, but not her abilities as a housewife nor her beauty.⁹² In context, this Ástrídr was illegitimate and may have had some sympathy with Magnús’s position.⁹³ In terms of Ástrídr’s marriage to King Óláfr, proposing to a man “ran contrary to everything we know about the conventions for betrothal in Norse society, ...”⁹⁴ Yet even if officially men proposed, women sometimes sought to engineer this. In the earliest version of the story, Ástrídr is “assertive”, makes a political case and also plays on Óláfr’s honour and the need to avenge an insult, whilst in a later one, she acts in a pious Christian context stating she wants to avoid bloodshed.⁹⁵ Both versions may have had some truth but Friðriksdóttir claims Snorri suppressed Ástrídr’s agency, giving more credit to Sigvatr and Jarl Rognvaldr.⁹⁶

Queen Ástrídr was “assertive”, “proud”, “competitive” and “it is clear that she was remembered as a talented woman who wielded significant power because of her intelligence, boldness and charisma, and, most importantly, her skills as a public speaker

⁸⁷ Friðriksdóttir, *Valkyrie*, 130-131. She refers to a 13th century Kings’ saga & Hákon Hákonason, whose mother has a similar experience. This Ástrídr is also praised highly. Sturla Þorðarson, *Hákonar saga Hákonarsaga*, edited with introduction & notes by Þorleifur Hauksson, Sverrir Jakobsson & Tor Ulset, Volume 31 & 32 (Reykjavik: Hid íslenska fornritafélag, 2013).

⁸⁸ Friðriksdóttir, *Valkyrie*, 131-134.

⁸⁹ Hrolf or “Walking Hrolf” who may also have been Rollo.

⁹⁰ Sandra Ballif Straubhaar, editor & translator, *Old Norse Women’s Poetry: The Voices of Female Skalds*, Library of Medieval Women (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2011). Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, I. 71-72.

⁹¹ Friðriksdóttir, *Valkyrie*, 131-132.

⁹² Friðriksdóttir, *Valkyrie*, 132-134. Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, III. 4-5.

⁹³ Friðriksdóttir, *Valkyrie*, 38. Women supporting their stepsons. Queen Áslaug in “*The Sagas of the Volsungs with the Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok*,” translated by Jackson Crawford (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett, 2017). Friðriksdóttir, *Valkyrie*, 135-136.

⁹⁴ Friðriksdóttir, *Valkyrie*, 39.

⁹⁵ Friðriksdóttir, *Valkyrie*, 40-41. *The Legendary Saga of Olaf Haraldsson*, translated by Joyce Scholz & Paul Schach. Wisconsin Introductions to Scandinavia, II 14. (Madison, Wisconsin: Department of Scandinavian Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2014).

⁹⁶ Friðriksdóttir, *Valkyrie*, 40-41. Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, II. 93-94.

and politician.”⁹⁷ Yet Friðriksdóttir suggests, the relative lack of criticism of her behaviour is because she was seen to be ultimately acting on behalf of her stepson.⁹⁸

Barbora Davídková’s work on “Gender, Queenship and Kingship Ideologies”,⁹⁹ also focuses on royal women. Her main source is the “Separate saga of King Óláfr helgi.”¹⁰⁰ For Davídková the role of “mother” had particular importance in Medieval Europe but little work has been done on Scandinavia.¹⁰¹ She feels “Saga Queens” studies are separated from their political and cultural context and where female characters appear in the kings’ sagas, they are not looked at in terms of their political role.¹⁰²

1.3 Some initial thoughts

As indicated above there are a range of opinions and views in the secondary sources on the position of women in the Viking Age. The nature and biases of the primary sources is a major topic of debate. It is probably uncontroversial to argue that until the latter part of the twentieth century, women’s roles in the Viking Age were “marginalised” and when they were mentioned, it tended to be in a domestic context. Even queens were often only considered in passing.

Arguments continue over how patriarchal the Viking era was in reality, but this does not mean that all women were “passive.” They worked within the prevailing society. Nor is it clear they necessarily had to adopt a “male persona.” There is evidence that widows, including Queen Mothers, may have had more independence than wives or daughters, but this does not mean the latter had no agency. Archaeology is revealing how varied women’s roles were and it is difficult now to argue that sites such as Oseberg are anomalies. Light may be shed on whether more women held positions of power and influence in the Viking Age than the written sources suggest.

⁹⁷ Friðriksdóttir, *Valkyrie*, 134. Jesch, *Women*, 156-157. Notes *Sigvatr*’s skaldic praise poem for *Ástríðr* is unique and “something totally new when the poet ascribes this important political development entirely to the actions of a woman.”

⁹⁸ Friðriksdóttir, *Valkyrie*, 134.

⁹⁹ Barbora Davídková, “*Óláfr and the Queens. Gender, Queenship and Kingship Ideologies in the Separate saga of Saint Óláfr*” (MA thesis in Viking and Medieval Norse Studies, University of Iceland, 2017), <https://www.duo.uio.no/handle/10852/58218>. The women: Ásta Guðbrandsdóttir, Álfífa, Ingigerðr & Ástríðr.

¹⁰⁰ Oscar Albert Johnsen and Jón Helgason, eds., *Saga Óláfs konungs hins helga: Den store saga om Olav den hellige efter pergamenthåndskrift i Kungliga biblioteket i Stockholm nr. 2 4^o med varianter fra andre håndskrifter*. 2 vols. Det norske historiske kildeskriftfond skrifter 53. (Oslo: Jacob Dybwad, 1941). Attributed to Snorri Sturluson and much of the saga appears to be incorporated into *Heimskringla*.

¹⁰¹ Davídková, *Óláfr and the Queens*, 4.

¹⁰² Davídková, *Óláfr and the Queens*, 5. Margaret Clunies Ross, *The Cambridge Introduction to The Old Norse-Icelandic Saga* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010). 88. Ármann Jakobsson, “Royal Biography,” 388-402.

Women's' nationality, the influence of Christianity, the expectations of Viking Age society, as well as misogyny, often dictated how they were portrayed. The kings' sagas used here are part of the wider Old Icelandic corpus of sagas. Yet it would not do to assume that the role of women in the *Íslendingasögur* can be carried over to them, any more than to the *fornaldarsögur*. Queen Gunnhildr is a different type of character to *Hervarar* though admittedly *Hallgerðr* might be a better comparison.

An important point made by scholars is that where we have different versions of the same story, the way women are represented can be radically diverse. There are differences between scholars on the degree to which the authors of the kings' sagas admired the women they wrote about. Women were not given as much space as men, but they were not ignored, nor were they always portrayed as subordinate or weak.

Some of the secondary works appear overly pessimistic, dismissive even of women's roles. Women may have had to use different methods to men and rarely ruled in their own right officially, but they could play the "political game" just as well. Their aims might sometimes be personal and family oriented but not exclusively. Whether behind the scenes or in "full view" women governed, had power and influence. This was often met with hostility if they acted beyond the official conventions of the time.

2. Sources and methodology

2.1 Sources

The primary sources do not make the study of women's roles easy.¹⁰³ They were mostly written by men in the Christian period, long after the events they describe.¹⁰⁴ Diana Whaley, writing about *Heimskringla*, explains no original manuscript(s) survive and that there were probably lost versions between the “archetype” and the oldest surviving manuscripts.¹⁰⁵

The kings' sagas vary in the period of time they cover. *Morkinskinna* covers 1030-1157 but probably originally extended to 1177. The final part is believed to have been lost and *Morkinskinna* is the shortest work of the three. *Fagrskinna* starts with Hálfdan svartí (“the black”) in the mid ninth century and ends in 1177. *Heimskringla* has a “legendary” first chapter on the Ynglinga, the supposed ancestors of the Swedish kings and ends in 1177.

Debate continues over many elements of the kings' sagas used here, including authorship, structure, style, the agenda of their authors and usefulness as a historical source. Recent translations all have scholarly introductions.¹⁰⁶ *Morkinskinna* is dated to c.1220, *Fagrskinna* was compiled a little later in the 1220s and *Heimskringla* which drew on both was written c.1220-1230/35.¹⁰⁷ *Morkinskinna* and *Fagrskinna* are anonymous but Diana Whaley suggests that the latter may have been written by an Icelander or a Norwegian, in Trondheim, possibly commissioned by King Hákon Hákonarsson.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰³ Auður Magnúsdóttir, “Kingship, Women and Politics,” 96.

¹⁰⁴ With the possible exception of skaldic poetry. Whaley does not consider Snorri Sturluson a churchman, but the authors of *Morkinskinna* & *Fagrskinna* likely were. Whaley, *Heimskringla. An Introduction*, 39. Earlier works “showed an ecclesiastical viewpoint”, but Ágrip and later works were more secular. 70.

¹⁰⁵ Whaley, *Heimskringla. Introduction*, 42. For *Heimskringla*, textual variations between different versions are relatively small, but there are significant differences in content. Some variants have interpolations, including from works such as *Morkinskinna*. 45.

¹⁰⁶ *Morkinskinna. The Earliest Icelandic Chronicle of the Norwegian Kings*, translated with introduction & notes by Theodore M. Andersson & Karen Ellen Gade. *Islandica LI* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2000). *Morkinskinna*, edited with introduction & notes by Ármann Jakobsson & Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson, Volumes XXIII to XXIV (Reykjavik: Íslenzk Fornrit, 2011). *Fagrskinna, a catalogue of the kings of Norway: a translation with introduction and notes*, Vol. 7., translated by Alison Finlay (Leiden: Brill, 2003). *Ágrip Af Noregskonunga Sögum. Fagurskinna – Noregs Konunga Tal*, edited with introduction & notes by Bjarni Einarsson, Volume XXIX (Reykjavik: Íslenzk Fornrit, 1985). Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, translated by Alison Finlay & Anthony Faulkes. 2nd edition. (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, University College London, 2017). Three volumes. Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, edited with introduction & notes by Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Volumes XXVI-XXVIII (Reykjavik: Íslenzk Fornrit, 1941, 1945, 1951).

¹⁰⁷ Ármann Jakobsson, “Royal Biographies,” 395-397. Whaley, *Heimskringla. Introduction*, 74.

¹⁰⁸ Whaley, *Heimskringla, Introduction*, 71-72. Finlay, *Fagrskinna*, 15.

There is no direct evidence for the authorship of *Heimskringla*, but it is commonly attributed to Snorri Sturluson.¹⁰⁹ Whaley has summarised the arguments and argued Snorri was the author and that *Heimskringla* should be regarded as a single work.¹¹⁰ Some scholars are sceptical, but there is a degree of consensus the work originated in Snorri's circle. However, it is unknown how far the surviving versions resemble the original work and whether parts of it were written by others.¹¹¹

Other early medieval sources for Scandinavia exist including Saxo Grammaticus, Adam of Bremen or in a Norwegian context, the *Ágrip*.¹¹² The first two originate in Denmark and Germany and were written in Latin but the author of *Ágrip* was probably Norwegian and wrote in Old Norse.

There are many difficulties with the sources, not least the degree to which Snorri and others used oral tradition.¹¹³ In terms of how far each source borrowed from others, examples include the following. In *Heimskringla*, the section on Óláfr Tryggvason relies heavily on *Fagrskinna*, *Ágrip*, the “*Saga of Óláfr*” by Oddr Snorrason and *Jómsvíkinga saga*.¹¹⁴ The later sagas are significantly dependent on *Morkinskinna*, while the early *Ynglinga* saga may have been created by Snorri.¹¹⁵

Are the kings' sagas primarily works of fiction or history? Snorri discusses his sources, particularly skaldic verse which he uses extensively.¹¹⁶ In some cases, he states the poet has talked to eyewitnesses of events or an acquaintance.¹¹⁷ The usefulness of

¹⁰⁹ It was first attributed to Snorri in the 16th century. Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, I. vii.

¹¹⁰ Whaley, *Heimskringla, An Introduction*, 9-19.

¹¹¹ Viðar Pálsson, Personal Communication, August 2024. I am grateful to him for alerting me to the debate on this. Finlay & Faulkes also suggest attribution to Snorri is “circumstantial.”

¹¹² Whaley, *Heimskringla. Introduction*, 69-70. *Ágrip af Nóregskonungasögum: A Twelfth-Century Synoptic History of the Kings of Norway*, edited & translated by Mathew J. Driscoll (Viking Society for Northern Research: London. 1995). Theodoricus Monachus, *Historia De Antiquitate Regum Norwagiensium. An Account Of The Ancient History Of The Norwegian Kings*, translated & annotated by David & Ian McDougall, with an Introduction by Peter Foote, XI. (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, UCL, 1998). Saxo Grammaticus, *The History of the Danes*, translated by Hilda Ellis Davidson & Peter Fisher. (Cambridge: Brewer, 1996). Adam of Bremen, *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, translated by Francis J. Tschan. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959).

¹¹³ Whaley, *Heimskringla. Introduction*, 63-64, 77-80. Theodore Andersson, “The Oral Sources of Óláfs Saga Helga in *Heimskringla*,” *Saga Book* Vol. 32 (2008): 5-38. Andersson & Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 57-65, 83. Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, I. ix-xiii.

¹¹⁴ Clunies Ross, *The Old Norse-Icelandic Saga*, 84-89.

¹¹⁵ Whaley, *Heimskringla. Introduction*, 64, 90. By Haraldr hárfagri, Snorri is borrowing from *Ágrip*.

¹¹⁶ Clunies Ross, *The Old Norse-Icelandic Saga*, 87. Andersson & Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 25-56.

¹¹⁷ Whaley, *Heimskringla. Introduction*, 65.

skaldic poetry to historians has been questioned by Shami Ghosh but Sverre Bagge is more optimistic.¹¹⁸

Diana Whaley argues *Heimskringla* stylistically fits the *Íslendingasögur* well, in particular that the “characters and events are largely kept within the bounds of credibility.”¹¹⁹ She concludes it is not entirely Literature or History.¹²⁰ It is “not factually dependable, it constantly ranges through the spectrum from the true to the untrue via the unverifiable.”¹²¹ This is also the view of the current author, especially where known historical figures are concerned.

Margaret Clunies Ross states earlier parts of the kings’ sagas are in essence myths. With Haraldr hárfagra and other kings who reigned immediately before conversion to Christianity, the sagas while ambivalent, intimate this is coming. Later sagas, especially those of Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr helgi are heavily influenced by the Christian context.¹²² Liv Helga Dommasnes reminds us that the written sources influence how women were perceived and she has suggested their power and influence declined over the first millennium.¹²³

Diana Whaley notes over half the middle volume of *Heimskringla* (Óláfr helgi) is taken up with direct speech, though “Óláfr Tryggvason saga” also includes a great deal.¹²⁴ In *Morkinskinna* some 60% of the text focuses on Magnús goði and Haraldr harðráði.¹²⁵ Whaley suggests Snorri focuses on the Christianisation of Norway and the miracles attributed to Óláfr helgi.¹²⁶ She argues Snorri’s overall theme was “kingly power”, the

¹¹⁸ Shami Ghosh, *King’s Sagas and Norwegian History. Problems and Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2011). “Review” by Sverre Bagge of *King’s Sagas and Norwegian History. Problems and Perspectives* by Shami Ghosh in *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, vol. 112, No.1 (January 2013): 98-100.

¹¹⁹ Whaley, *Heimskringla. Introduction*, 83. Yet *Heimskringla* is not particularly objective, despite some suggesting Snorri is “even handed”. *Morkinskinna* especially, shows much “ecclesiastical bias”. 99-100.

¹²⁰ Whaley, *Heimskringla. Introduction*, 113. In general, 20th century arguments tended towards *Heimskringla* as a literary work rather than history, but not uniformly.

¹²¹ Whaley, *Heimskringla. Introduction*, 126.

¹²² Clunies Ross, *The Old Norse-Icelandic Saga*, 89. On the “Conversion” see: Anders Winroth, *The conversion of Scandinavia: vikings, merchants, and missionaries in the remaking of Northern Europe* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2012).

¹²³ Liv Helga Dommasnes, “Women, kinship, and the basis of power in the Norwegian Viking Age,” in *Reader in Gender Archaeology*, eds., Kelley H. Gilpin & David. S. Whitley (London: Routledge, 1998), 337-45.

¹²⁴ Whaley, *Heimskringla. Introduction*, 94.

¹²⁵ Andersson & Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 2.

¹²⁶ Whaley, *Heimskringla. Introduction*, 92. This is not the case she says for *Fagrskinna*.

role of women was not something she regards as even a subsidiary theme.¹²⁷ “The few women who appear are mainly either passive nonentities or viragoes.”¹²⁸

Yet Birgit Sawyer has argued: “Among medieval authors, Snorri, like Saxo Grammaticus, is unusual in giving women so much space in his work.”¹²⁹ She regards Whaley as overly dismissive. She concludes: “to Snorri, it seems quite acceptable and natural that women can be dangerous enemies, and they are allowed to operate on the same footing with men.”¹³⁰ With due respect to Whaley’s work, even considering the length of *Heimskringla*, a large number of women are referred to by Snorri and for a significant number, we know something of their story. Nor can they all be classified as “nonentities” or “viragoes”.

Magnus Fjalldal argued *Heimskringla* was, at least in part, “propaganda” on Snorri’s part.¹³¹ He discusses whether his work was intended primarily for an Icelandic audience or a Norwegian and favours the former. Theodore Andersson had discussed the issue of “audiences” earlier and concluded that “There is no reason why Snorri, if he authored both *Egils saga* and *Heimskringla*, could not have written politically contradictory books at the same time around 1230, one conceivably for a Norwegian audience, the other for an Icelandic audience.”¹³² Both views are likely correct.

2.2 Methodology

A basic spreadsheet was created, one tab for each source. Each individual woman in the Index of each source was given a line for each reference, so some had more than one. The women were listed alphabetically by forename in the first column.¹³³ Other columns were used for: source and page reference, status &/or relationship (queen, daughter etc.), country of origin, reign (of relevant king), further context and comments

¹²⁷ Whaley, *Heimskringla. Introduction*, 98-99. Sverre Bagge, *Society and politics in Snorri Sturluson’s Heimskringla* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 152. “Characterizations of women are short and extremely stereotyped. Women whom the kings fall in love with or marry are usually described as beautiful but nothing more is said about their appearances.”

¹²⁸ Whaley, *Heimskringla. Introduction*, 101 & 126. She argues it is very difficult to ascertain what the status of women was in Snorri’s time or the period when the sagas were set.

¹²⁹ Birgit Sawyer, *Heimskringla. An interpretation* (Tempe, Arizona: ACMRS, Arizona State University, 2015), 111, 129. She argues Snorri “admires” strong women unlike Saxo and that both sometimes explicitly praised women as a way to criticise men for “authoritarian” use of power and violence.

¹³⁰ Sawyer, *Heimskringla. An interpretation*, 128.

¹³¹ Magnus Fjalldal, “Beware of Northern Kings. *Heimskringla* as Propaganda,” *Scandinavian Studies* Vol 85, No. 4 (Winter 2013): 455-468.

¹³² Theodore M. Andersson, “The Politics of Snorri Sturluson,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 93 (1) (1994): 55–78.

¹³³ Appendix 2 provides some basic information on women’s names.

on their “story”. Once the page references had been collected for each woman, the source was gone through noting the data and “story” for each occasion where they were mentioned.

2.2.1 Initial analysis

A basic analysis was conducted covering all the women referred to in each of the three sources. Some figures are given in the following table.

Source	Morkinskinna	Fagrskinna	Heimskringla
Number of references to women	101	133	274
Individual women – all	69	118	181
Individual women - Norwegian	44	102	129

Table 1 References to women in each source

Auður Magnúsdóttir notes “Morkinskinna mentions proportionately few women, most of them only in passing. Women enter the scene as consorts and concubines, as daughters, widows, and mothers.”¹³⁴ For *Fagrskinna* 74 individual women are in the main text, the others in appendices. Sawyer says for *Heimskringla* there are: “more than 150 ... half of them only incidentally, but a considerable number of women still remain to whom closer attention is given.”¹³⁵ The final line includes women only where the source states or it is implied, the woman is Norwegian. The larger numbers in *Heimskringla* reflects its length and there are far more women mentioned more than once.¹³⁶

The analysis has not looked at men, but the “Index of persons” in *Fagrskinna* runs to 14 pages and on the first page there are c.40 people listed.¹³⁷ The numbers per page vary a little but probably some 560 people are named in total. Only 118 of them are women, about one fifth. Some female skalds are named and ordinary woman.

2.2.2 Chronological patterns

It is not always easy to assign a reference to the correct reign and in some cases, two or more kings rule concurrently. See Table 2. For *Morkinskinna* the largest number

¹³⁴ Auður Magnúsdóttir, “Kingship, Women and Politics,” 84.

¹³⁵ Sawyer, *Heimskringla. An interpretation*, 128.

¹³⁶ An approximate tally for *Heimskringla* shows the majority of women were royal, including by marriage (c.75). There are c.29 from the aristocracy but a surprising c.47 are neither. (c.21 are “foreign”).

¹³⁷ Finlay, *Fagrskinna*, 320-334.

of female references relate to the reigns of Magnús goði, Haraldr harðráði and the sons of Magnús berfoettr. Only three to Óláfr kyrri (“the quiet”), despite his long reign.

In *Fagrskinna* many women are mentioned only in Appendices.¹³⁸ Appendix II in Finlay’s edition skews the figures. Most of the 44 references to individual women named in the Appendices are found here and of the 118 women mentioned in *Fagrskinna*, 74 are in the main text. If we restrict the analysis to 74, we find some differences with *Morkinskinna*, though of course the former covers a shorter period of time.

In *Fagrskinna* Óláfr kyrri is the context for 16 women. Haraldr harðráði 11, Óláfr helgi 7 and Óláfr Tryggvason 7. There are references to Sigurðr, Ingi and Eysteinn but only single references to Haraldr hárfagri, Eiríkr blóðøx, Hákon inn góði and Hálfðan svárti. There are none for some kings in the latter period. The author is unsure why, for King Óláfr kyrri, there is such a difference in emphasis.¹³⁹ It may relate to the sources used or the authors’ interests.¹⁴⁰

It is not surprising given Snorri’s focus on Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr helgi, that there are many references to women in them, 28 and 33 respectively.¹⁴¹ Haraldr harðráði has 23. (There are 19 women noted in the *Ynglinga saga*). Double figures include: Haraldr hárfagri (13), the sons of Haraldr gilli, the sons of Magnús berfoettr and Magnús Erlingson. Óláfr kyrri accounts for two. The same goes for Hákon góði. King Haraldr gráfeldr gets 3.

With the exception of Queen Gunnhildr there are almost no women in the text from the reigns of Haraldr hárfagri’s sons or grandsons. Since *Morkinskinna* does not start until 1035, there is no mention of Queen Gunnhildr there, but copious references to her in *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*, 12 in the former and 19 in the latter.

¹³⁸ Finlay, *Fagrskinna*, 296-302.

¹³⁹ Finlay, *Fagrskinna*, 35-37. Andersson & Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 80.

¹⁴⁰ Andersson & Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 3, 33, 80.

¹⁴¹ Whaley discusses the particular interest of Icelanders in Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr helgi, the sources Snorri used and how he used them. Whaley, *Heimskringla. An Introduction*, 66-67.

Reign(s) of Kings c.932-1177	Morkinskinna (1030-1157)	Fagrskinna (c.850-1177)	Heimskringla (c.600-1177)
Ynglinga dynasty		-	19
Hálfðan svarti ?		1	5
Haraldr harfagri/Eiríkr Blóðox ?-934		2	13
Hákon goði 934-961		1	2
Haraldr gráfeldr 961-965/70		3	4
Jarls Sveinn & Hákon 965/70-995		1	-
Óláfr Tryggvason 995-99/1000		7	28
Jarls Hákon & Eiríkr ?		5	-
Óláfr helgi 1015-1028		7	33
Álfifa/Sveinn 1028-1035		2	-
Magnús goði 1035-1047	12	-	7
Magnús/Knútr ?	1	-	-
Haraldr harðráði 1046-1066	13	11	23
Óláfr kyrri 1066-1093	3	11	2
Magnús berfoettr 1093-1103	3	3	7
Sons of Magnús (berfoettr) 1103-1130	17	-	14
Eynstein & Magnús 1130-1135	-	2	-
Sigurðr Jórsalafari 1103-1130	-	1	-
Magnús blindi/Haraldr gilli 1130-1136	2	3	9
Haraldr & Magnús 1130-1136	7	4	-
Sons of Haraldr 1136-1161	4	-	20
Sigurðr 1136-1155	7	-	-
Sigurðr & Eynstein 1136-1157	3	6	-
Hákon herðibreiðr 1161-1162	-	-	7
Magnús & Hákon 1161-1177	-	3	-
Magnús Erlingsson 1161-1177	-	-	10

Table 2 Number of references to women by reign in each source

Notes. 1. The dates of reigns are approximate.¹⁴² 2. Snorri starts Heimskringla with the origin of the Old Norse gods, so a definitive start date is not realistic. 3. A further 5 women in *Fagrskinna* are not allocated, but relate in part to Óláfr kyrri's reign. 4. Eight women (all except one in *Morkinskinna*), are not allocated, not being directly connected to Norway.

¹⁴² See: Appendix 1 & 2 in Sawyer, *Heimskringla. An Interpretation*, 149-50, she also has genealogies on the following pages. Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, xvi-xviii, for a useful chronology and genealogy.

2.2.3 Relationships and status

The relationship of each woman (often to their father, husband, son etc.) is often given in the source. Sometimes the text does not give the name, this has been supplied by the translator, but does give the relationship. One example from *Morkinskinna* is Álfhildr, mother of King Magnús góði.¹⁴³ “The king’s mother asked the captives who they were...” Elsewhere it can be “she”, once the context is established. In *Fagrskinna* in relation to Ása, a translators footnote says “she was ‘kolluo ... konungs ambótt. Hon var þó af gooum tettum komin’ called the king’s concubine, but was of good family” (Hkr II 209).¹⁴⁴

There are cases where a woman is explicitly referred to as “Queen”. For example, towards the end of *Morkinskinna* it states. “Queen Ingiríðr had a son by Ívarr Sveinsson.”¹⁴⁵ A range of royal women are Queen Mothers though not necessarily referred to as such. Sometimes a woman is introduced by name. For example, in *Morkinskinna*: “One evening he (Þórðr) came to the house of a woman called Ása. She was a woman of good family and was wealthy.”¹⁴⁶

In *Fagrskinna*, women are frequently referred to as “daughter.” For instance: “By the advice of his friends King Óláfr made peace with the king of the Swedes and married his daughter Ástriðr, and their daughter was Ulfhildr.”¹⁴⁷

In *Heimskringla*, women can be referred to by their female family relationship, mother, sister, daughter, wife etc., or occasionally “mistress”. For example: “In the night of the first day of Yule, Bergljót, the jarl’s wife, gave birth to a boy child.”¹⁴⁸ Not all women are “royal”, a fair number were from the aristocracy, as illustrated early in the saga of Haraldr hárfagri. “Rognvaldr was married to Hildr, daughter of Hrólfr nefja (Conk). Their sons were Hrólfr and Þórir. Jarl Rognvaldr also has sons by mistresses.”¹⁴⁹

¹⁴³ Andersson & Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 543. Index and 180-1 & 184. In *Fagrskinna* she is noted by name. Index 320, 158. “His (Magnús) mother was called Álfhildr.”

¹⁴⁴ Finlay, *Fagrskinna*, 158. Footnote 458.

¹⁴⁵ Andersson & Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 388.

¹⁴⁶ Andersson & Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 330.

¹⁴⁷ Finlay, *Fagrskinna*, 144. For *Morkinskinna*: Auður Magnúsdóttir, “Kingship, Women and Politics,” 98.

¹⁴⁸ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, I. 96.

¹⁴⁹ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, I. 71.

3. Analysis

Analysis is restricted to those women from or connected to Norway and does not include figures such as Queen Emma and Queen Edith of England or Empress Zoe of Miklagarðr (Byzantium). This chapter (3) is subdivided according to certain themes, though Queen Gunnhildr is exceptional in the amount of space she is granted in *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*. So, she has two sub-sections to herself. She also appears in a number of *Íslendingasögur*, in particular Egil's saga and Njal's saga but her portrayal there is not covered.¹⁵⁰ Certain figures such as Sigríðr in *stórráða* and Ástriðr (wife of Óláfr helgi) have been much discussed in the scholarly literature and feature heavily here. In some cases, the sub-sections are divided into the stories of individual women. The limitations of space mean only a few representative examples are given, but some additional stories and themes are included in Appendix 1.

3.1 The early tales: violence and sorcery

Heimskringla alone covers the semi-legendary Yngling dynasty of Sweden from which kings of Norway were apparently descended.¹⁵¹ The Yngling in turn were said to descend from the Old Norse gods *Freyr* and *Njorðr*.¹⁵² Friðriksdóttir suggests women in the early tales can be compared to those in the *fornaldarsögur* ("legendary sagas"). Here they often give "socially cohesive" counsel but occasionally appear in a more male role and associated with violence including murder.¹⁵³ "When mentioned specifically, the queens of the earliest part of *Heimskringla* can be described as powerful, independent, forceful, and often violent characters. They use means unavailable to queens later in history,"¹⁵⁴ or were unacceptable to thirteenth century authors.

Archaeological evidence increasingly suggests that women in the pre-Christian period did not lack agency and whilst these tales may owe much to an early thirteenth century male authors imagination, they should not be dismissed as pure fiction. Nor was violence and sorcery limited to the legendary past, as 11th century *Álfifa* shows.¹⁵⁵ Beauty is also a feature of these early tales and this is covered in Appendix 1.

¹⁵⁰ *Egil's saga*, Scudder, 1997/2004. *Njal's saga*, Cook, 1997/2001.

¹⁵¹ Whaley considers the influence of "folktales" on *Heimskringla*, particularly *Ynglings saga*. Whaley, *Heimskringla. Introduction*, 80-81.

¹⁵² Some Yngling Kings were probably real and are mentioned in other sources and texts such as *Beowulf*.

¹⁵³ Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 82.

¹⁵⁴ Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 82.

¹⁵⁵ See sections on "Foreign Rule."

3.1.1 Ása

Ása is the daughter of Haraldr inn granrauði (“red bearded”) who is killed by King Guðrøðr inn gøfuglári (“the munificent”) after he refuses consent for him to marry her. Guðrøðr kidnaps her and marries her. Ása has him murdered. We do not know if her father refused consent because of her wishes, but *Heimskringla* makes clear she had agency, even if she did not do the deed herself.

En um morguninn eptir, er ljóst var, þá var maðr sá kenndr. Var þat skósveinn Ásu dróttningar. Dulði hon þá ekki, at þat váru hennar ráð.¹⁵⁶

And the next morning when it got light the man was recognised. It was the “page” of Queen Ása. She did not conceal the fact that this was her plan.¹⁵⁷

There follows an extract from a poem¹⁵⁸ which refers to the “page” as “Ása’s cunning errand-boy”, she is “the hate-driven queen”, the whole plan is “treacherous”. There is little sympathy for Ása, despite the circumstances, yet she does not suffer any ill consequences. Later, in “Hálfðanar saga svarta”, in a “matter of fact” way it is said:

Hálfðan var þá vetr gamall, er faðir hans fell. Ása, móðir hans, fór þegar með hann vestr á Agðir ok settisk þar til ríkis þess, er átt hafði Haraldr, faðir hennar.”¹⁵⁹

Hálfðan was a year old when his father died. His mother Ása straightway took him west to Agðir and established herself there in the position of power that her father Haraldr had had.”¹⁶⁰

Ása rules in her sons name. The themes of kidnap, forced marriage, revenge and women taking power, are not uncommon in the early sagas. Snorri may have been hedging his bets. He had to condemn the killing of a King but also shows Queen Ása was successful, avenges her father’s death and her treatment by Guðrøðr. It is not said what happened to the “page” and we do not know what compelled him to act on Ása’s behalf.

¹⁵⁶ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, I. 80.

¹⁵⁷ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*. I. 45.

¹⁵⁸ References to “poems” are extracts from skaldic poems contained within the prose text of the sources. In turn, these are mostly extracts from the full poem, though not all of it may have survived. The author of the poem is frequently named in the source.

¹⁵⁹ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, I. 84.

¹⁶⁰ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, 48.

3.1.2 Skjálf,

Sorcery and magic are often present in the kings' sagas and associated with the Sami or Finns.¹⁶¹ Skjálf, daughter of King Frosti in Lappland, is kidnapped by King Agni after he kills her father. He proceeds to marry her, but with her men, she tricks him and hangs him after her father's funeral feast, she then escapes. In the following poem her actions are referred to as "plots" and the poet implies Agni's men should have spotted the scheme.¹⁶² The practice of sorcery is generally portrayed negatively. Not all such women are portrayed harshly, but there is an element of stereotyping and well-worn tropes.¹⁶³

3.2 Gunnhildr konungamóðir

She was "notorious", "formidable" and "powerful."¹⁶⁴ Gunnhildr has an "exceptional" place in the "*konungasögur*" but the sources are unreliable and biased.¹⁶⁵ Friðriksdóttir considers the elements concerning her sexuality and practice of magic are likely fictitious, and regards Gunnhildr as a transitional figure between the legendary saga queens and the historical figures who had a political role. This does not wholly explain the attention given her in *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*, whatever the accuracy of the accounts.¹⁶⁶ It is also, this author believes, credible that Queen Gunnhildr and other women, old and young, were sexual beings, nor should it be surprising that they practiced "magic". Perhaps, far enough back in time; these elements could be discussed. Though pleasing an audience cannot be ruled out as a factor.

Finlay notes the claim Gunnhildr was the daughter of Qzurr toti ("teat") of Halogaland (near the lands of the Sami), though it is also suggested she was fostered by Mottull, King of the Finns who was skilled in magic.¹⁶⁷ The historical view is Gunnhildr was the daughter of Gorm inn gamli ("the old"), King of Denmark.¹⁶⁸ While the *Historia*

¹⁶¹ Davídková, *Óláfr and the Queens*, 33 & footnote 78. Based on the Flateyjarbók version of the "Separate Saga." She notes women in "Scandinavian literature" are often given prophetic abilities. Though this applies to men also, for example Njal Þorgeirsson.

¹⁶² Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, I. 21-22.

¹⁶³ Whaley, *Heimskringla. Introduction*, 95.

¹⁶⁴ Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 82. Sawyer regards her as "the most influential and dangerous." Sawyer, *Heimskringla. An interpretation*, 124. She thinks Snorri was fascinated by her, if not approving. 126.

¹⁶⁵ Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 83. They give contradictory accounts, such as Gunnhildr's origins.

¹⁶⁶ Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 84. She argues *Heimskringla* is more neutral than other accounts, but that even here, any good qualities assigned to Gunnhildr, are balanced by negative ones.

¹⁶⁷ Finlay, *Fagrskinna*, 60.

¹⁶⁸ Viðar Pálsson, *Language of power: feasting and gift-giving in medieval Iceland and its sagas* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016), 66. Footnote 50. An occasion when Gunnhildr was welcomed in Denmark.

Norwegie gives this Danish origin story, the Icelandic sources go with the Sami tradition.¹⁶⁹

Snorri has Eiríkr blóðøx first meet Gunnhildr in Finnmark. She is there to learn sorcery from two Finns. She was: “einum konu þá, er þeir höfðu enga sét jafnvæna.”¹⁷⁰ “A woman whose equal in beauty they had never seen.”¹⁷¹ Eiríkr proceeds to marry her after she has demonstrated her magical skills on her Sami hosts.¹⁷² In both Icelandic sources Gunnhildr is associated repeatedly with magic and described as “malicious” and “wicked.”

In *Fagrskinna* it is said she knew through magic that Eiríkr’s brother Hákon inn góði (“the good”) was still alive.¹⁷³ In *Heimskringla*, Gunnhildr is accused of getting a witch to poison Hálfðan (Eiríkr’s nephew?).¹⁷⁴ She is described as: “var kvinna fegrst, vitr ok markkunnig, glaðmælt ok undirhyggjumaðr mikill ok in grimmasta.”¹⁷⁵ “The fairest of women, intelligent and of wide knowledge, cheerful in speech and a very deceitful person and the fiercest.”¹⁷⁶ When King Hákon góði dies in battle, Gunnhildr is blamed, though it was one of her “pages” that is alleged to have fired the fatal arrow. Snorri is dubious about the veracity of the story. Queen Gunnhildr was a complex character across a range of the sources and illustrates the difficulties a high status woman had to deal with in the tenth century.

3.3 Gunnhildr and governance

What is consistent is the role Gunnhildr plays in government, as the wife of King Eiríkr blóðøx and then “mother of kings”, the most well-known being her son Haraldr gráfeldr (“grey cloak”). Jochens argues that in *Heimskringla*, Snorri emphasises her political skills and her concern with the unification of Norway.¹⁷⁷ In relation to her use of

¹⁶⁹ Finlay, *Fagrskinna*, 54. *Historia Norwegie*, Inger Ekrem & Lars Boje Mortensen, eds., translated by Peter Fisher, (1st ed.) (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2006).

https://doi.org/10.26530/OAPEN_342356. Believed to have been written in Norway at the start of the sixteenth century. Whaley, *Heimskringla. Introduction*, 117.

¹⁷⁰ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, I. 135. The translation into English is a little unclear here.

¹⁷¹ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, 78-79.

¹⁷² This parallels the story of his father and Snæfríðr. Sawyer argues Gunnhildr took the initiative. She compares her to Queen Gyða (of England) who “chooses” Óláfr Tryggvason as a husband. Sawyer, *Heimskringla. An interpretation*, 115-116. See Appendix 1. 6.1.2.5.

¹⁷³ Finlay, *Fagrskinna*, 54.

¹⁷⁴ There appears to be some confusion with Hálfðan svartí, who was Eiríkr’s grandfather. See Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, I. 85-86.

¹⁷⁵ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, I. 149.

¹⁷⁶ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla I*, 87. A very mixed view.

¹⁷⁷ Sawyer states, as a widow, she was more powerful than her husband. Sawyer, *Heimskringla. An interpretation*, 117.

“goading” or “egging” she asks: “One might ask how else a physically weak woman without power could act in a society as dominated by male wars as Norway was during the viking age, especially when she was close to the center of power and, in addition, had a clear vision of how the power ought to be used.”¹⁷⁸ However, women were not necessarily physically or mentally weak, nor were all men strong (e.g., Sveinn Álfifuson). Leaving aside the debate on women wielding weapons, in the kings’ sagas women do use physical force.¹⁷⁹ Guðrún tries to murder Óláfr Tryggvason and Queen Sigríðr in stórráða (“the haughty”) slaps the face of Óláfr inn helgi (“the saint”). Earlier she had two of her suitors burned to death.

Bagge argues: “women rarely pursue long-term political aims in the same way as the male protagonists in the game.” Yet he goes on to say: “One who does is Queen Gunnhildr, the moving force behind the ruthless policy of the Eiríkssons.”¹⁸⁰ He also notes Queen Ingridr, King Ingi’s mother and Queen Ástríðr, Óláfr helgi’s widow, are active in politics. One could respectfully argue Bagge has successfully contradicted his own argument.

Bagge wonders if female characters are literary figures or if Snorri is describing historical reality “inspired by the negative picture of women in contemporary clerical literature.”¹⁸¹ He remarks women in *Heimskringla* and how they are viewed, deserve closer attention. In contrast to some contemporaries, such as Saxo Grammaticus, he argues Snorri does not express a negative attitude to them or suggest they were subordinate.¹⁸²

Yet Jochens believes Snorri did not approve of strong women and that as he approached the more clearly Christian era in *Heimskringla* he tended to omit stories involving “inciting”.¹⁸³ Arguably though, the latter does not necessarily support the former argument. Friðriksdóttir compares Gunnhildr’s role to those of later English queens in the tenth and eleventh century, where “Queen Mothers” in particular had the

¹⁷⁸ Jenny Jochens, “The Female Inciter in the Kings’ Sagas.” *Arkiv För Nordisk Filologi* 102 (1987): 100-119. She notes “hetzerin” were generally older women, married or widowed.

¹⁷⁹ This is a considerable area of research. Gardela, *Women & Weapons, passim* is a good starting point.

¹⁸⁰ Bagge, *Society & Politics*, 117.

¹⁸¹ Bagge, *Society and politics*, 117. “See Clover ... who sees a close connection between women’s lament for the dead and their demand for revenge in numerous societies, including medieval Iceland, whereas Jochens, ... is more inclined to explain the figure as a literary construction.” Footnote 14. Carol J Clover, “Hildigunnr’s Lament,” in *Cold counsel: women in Old Norse literature and mythology: a collection of essays*, edited by Sarah M. Anderson with Karen Swenson (New York: Routledge, 2002), 15-54. Jochens, “Female Inciter”, 100-119.

¹⁸² Bagge, *Society and politics*, Footnote 15. 117.

¹⁸³ Jochens, *Female Inciters*, 119.

opportunity to exercise power.¹⁸⁴ She argues this was partly due to the fact that, in both countries, the practice of monogamous marriages and primogeniture, had not yet been fully accepted.¹⁸⁵ Nevertheless, medieval queens such as Eleanor of Aquitaine, had considerable influence during their husbands' lifetime.

Did the phrase “mother of kings” mean anything other than in a literal sense? Friðriksdóttir argues it might and refers to the use of the term directly in the saga of Haraldr gráfeldr:

Gunnhildr, móðir þeira, hafði mjök landráð með þeim. Hon var þá kolluð konungamóðir.¹⁸⁶

Gunnhildr, their mother, was heavily involved in ruling with them. She was at that time called konungamóðir.¹⁸⁷

Later it is said:

Gunnhildr konungamóðir ok synir hennar vǫru opt á tali ok málstefnum ok réðu landráðum.¹⁸⁸

Gunnhildr Mother of Kings and her sons often held conversations and conferences and managed the government of the country.¹⁸⁹

The role of “Queen Mother” is not an official one and the term is applied anachronistically perhaps.¹⁹⁰ Friðriksdóttir rightly notes that the degree to which a woman could exercise power depended on their personality, their economic and political base and their relationship with their son(s).¹⁹¹ It is unclear what Gunnhildr's economic and political base might have been, though she probably came with a dowry and support from her family. She certainly had a distinct personality.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁴ Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 84. Pauline Stafford, “The King's Wife in Wessex, 800—1066,” in *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, eds., Helen Damico & Alexandra Hennessey Olsen (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 56–78. Pauline Stafford, “Sons and Mothers: Family Politics in the Early Middle Ages,” in *Medieval Women*, ed., Derek Baker (Oxford: Blackwell for the Ecclesiastical History Society, 1978), 79–100.

¹⁸⁵ Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 85. Sawyer suggests most Norwegian Kings were illegitimate. Sawyer, *Heimskringla. An interpretation*, 119.

¹⁸⁶ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, I. 198.

¹⁸⁷ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, I. 120.

¹⁸⁸ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, I. 204.

¹⁸⁹ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, I. 124.

¹⁹⁰ Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 85.

¹⁹¹ Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 86–87.

¹⁹² Friðriksdóttir refers to Max Weber's “model of power”, though she accepts this is not easy to apply in the current context. Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 88–90. Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriss der verstehenden Soziologie) eds., Guenther Roth & Claus Wittich. 2 vols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 1: 215.

Whilst relatively little is said about Gunnhildr's role in government in *Fagrskinna*, in *Heimskringla* it is plain she is heavily involved. She gives a long speech to her sons on the need to increase their power and states that Haraldr should rule all Norway. He objects to Gunnhildr's initial plan, but she listens and they follow her second plan. "Mun ek ok fara með yðr. Skulu vér þá öll saman freista, hvat at sýslisk."¹⁹³ "I will go with you too. We shall then all together try what can be done."¹⁹⁴ In matters of strategy she is the equal of her sons. Since Haraldr had many surviving brothers, he perhaps needed his mother's support to ensure his primacy, but it is equally possible he recognised her intelligence and valued her counsel.

Their plan is partially successful and a peace deal is made with Jarl Hákon, one of their chief rivals. Snorri makes the fascinating comment:

Þá gerðisk kærleikr mikill með þeim Hákonu jarli ok Gunnhildi, en stundum beittusk þau vélræðum.¹⁹⁵

Then there developed great intimacy between Jarl Hakon and Gunnhildr, though sometimes they schemed deceitfully against each other.¹⁹⁶

It is not clear what "intimate" entailed but perhaps there was a degree of respect between them, despite her role in the death of his father. The Queen and the Jarl appear as equals.

Haraldr is later tricked into coming to Denmark, in part by claims that Jarl Hákon is close to death. Snorri states: "Haraldr gráfeldr bar þetta mál fyrir Gunnhildi ok aðra vini sína."¹⁹⁷ "Haraldr gráfeldr referred this business to Gunnhildr and other friends of his."¹⁹⁸ Frustratingly we are not told what Gunnhildr's advice was, only that there was a difference of opinions and clearly some suspected the Danish King's invitation.

3.4 Inciters and goaders¹⁹⁹

Jochens uses the term "hetzerin" to describe women in Old Norse literature who incite, goad and "egg on" their menfolk, often in pursuit of revenge.²⁰⁰ She looked specifically at their presence in the kings' sagas, which were probably written before most of the *Íslendingasögur*. A significant number of the women are connected to the death of

¹⁹³ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, I. 205.

¹⁹⁴ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, I. 125.

¹⁹⁵ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, I. 211.

¹⁹⁶ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, I. 129.

¹⁹⁷ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, I. 236.

¹⁹⁸ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, I. 144.

¹⁹⁹ Sawyer, *Heimskringla. An interpretation*, 122-128. She focuses on four women.

²⁰⁰ Jochens, "The Female Inciter," 100-119.

King Óláfr helgi, including Sigríðr Þórisdóttir and her namesake Sigríðr Skjálgsdóttir, both appear in *Heimskringla*.²⁰¹ Jochens argues both are associated with paganism or were originally pagan and that there are no such examples post 1060, with few exceptions.²⁰² She feels Snorri's version is largely an invention, modelled on a third Sigríðr in *Stórráða* ("the haughty"), widowed Pagan Queen of Sweden.²⁰³

Jochens argues in *Heimskringla*: "goading men is the chief, if not the only function ascribed by Snorri to the female sex."²⁰⁴ This is particularly so in Óláfr helgi. Jochens compares Sigríðr "the haughty" to Þyri of Denmark, her Christian counterpart, both incite and goad their kings. She looks at how they appear in other sources and concludes Snorri upgrades the latter's role and the pagan element.²⁰⁵ She also compares the role of female inciters in 1000/1030 and the deaths of both Óláfr's.²⁰⁶ While it is evident that key female characters did have a "whetting" role in the kings' sagas, they should not be reduced to this.

Bagge also considered in *Heimskringla*, whether women play the role of inciters.²⁰⁷ "To women, who are not constant participants in the political game, the ties of kinship and the loss of a dear relative are the most important consideration, whereas long-term political interests often make men seek another solution." This may be true for some women, some of the time, but arguably, either through necessity or design, women did participate in politics and not just for the short term, though they sometimes used different, less direct methods than their menfolk.

Friðriksdóttir also notes Sigríðr and Þyri engaging in the "whetting" common in *Íslendingasögur*. Both women are blamed for "inciting" their husbands against King Óláfr Tryggvason and his death at the battle of Svǫld in 1000. Though Ingibjörg, his sister, in terms of persuading her husband Jarl Rǫgnvaldr to support Óláfr helgi, acts similarly.²⁰⁸ It's a question of perspective.

²⁰¹ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, 194-195, 212 & 332-323. Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, 127-128, 141 & 223.

²⁰² Jochens, "Female Inciter," 111.

²⁰³ Jochens, "Female Inciter," 106, 112. That Snorri names all three as "Sigríðr" is significant. See 3.6.

²⁰⁴ Bergljót Hákonardóttir is also cited. Sawyer, *Heimskringla. An interpretation*, 126-127. Other women noted are: Ásta, mother of Óláfr helgi, Ingibjörg, wife of Jarl Rǫgnvaldr Úlfsson, Ástríðr, wife of Óláfr helgi and Ragnhildr Erlingsdóttir.

²⁰⁵ Jochens, "Female Inciter," 112-115. Sources include: Oddr Snorrason, Ólaf's Saga Tryggvasonar, Adam of Bremen, Ágrip and Historie Norwegiae.

²⁰⁶ Jochens, "Female Inciter," 115-116. Lauritz Weibull, *Kritiska undersökningar i Nordens historia omkring år 1000* (Lund, 1911), rpt. *Forskningar och undersökningar 1* (Lund, 1948), 310-323.

²⁰⁷ Bagge, *Society and politics*, 116. He accepts women also played the role of peacemaker.

²⁰⁸ She argues if some characteristics of *Íslendingasögur* "whetting" are absent, the wording used is similar. Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 88.

Jochens understandably includes Gunnhildr in her study of “female inciters”. She argues the older sources deliberately created an “evil, pagan, woman” due to their “misogynist, clerical Christian background.”²⁰⁹ Gunnhildr is the “prototype” “female inciter” and she links this to the later medieval fear of witches. Snorri, she argues, makes it explicit she is an “inciter”, though more successful with her sons than her husband, Eiríkr Blóðøx.²¹⁰ Though less successful with respect to Egil Skallagrímsson, she was historically effective over a long period of time.²¹¹

3.5 Saga queens

The concept of women being the “power behind the throne”, is an old one, often with a negative connotation. Friðriksdóttir asks whether they ever held “legitimate authority” or worked more covertly through “male agents”, working in a “grey area”.²¹² The widowed Ástrídr speaks publicly at an Assembly in order to raise Swedish troops for her stepson Magnús. It is an open question whether she had the authority to call it and speak at it. Yet Friðriksdóttir argues, nowhere is it suggested this is unusual or undermining the Swedish king’s authority. She is accorded the rank of Queen and is described as eloquent as well as intelligent.²¹³ Jesch notes this story is only mentioned in *Heimskringla* and there the information is in three stanzas attributed to Sighvatr.²¹⁴ Jochens also looks at Ástrídr rallying support for Magnús. However, she argues Snorri has edited and added to the original verses, including the motive of revenge.²¹⁵ Stanza five reads:

Mildr á mennsku at gjalda
Magnús, en því fǫgnum,
þat gerði vin virða
víðlendan, Ástríði.
Hon hefr svá komit sínum,

²⁰⁹ Jochens, “*Female Inciters*,” 116. She returns to the issue of misogyny and Christianity in: Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 2 & 163-166. The former increasing due to the latter.

²¹⁰ Jochens, *Female Inciters*, 116-117. Sawyer, *Heimskringla. An interpretation*, 121-122.

²¹¹ *Egils saga*, Scudder, 1997/2004. *Passim*.

²¹² Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 90.

²¹³ Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 93-94.

²¹⁴ Jesch, “*In praise of Ástrídr Óláfsdóttir*,” 1-18.

²¹⁵ Jochens, “*Female Inciter*,” 109-110. She believes Sighvatr had motive for praising Ástrídr so highly.

sonn, at fǫ' mun ǫnnur,
 orð gerik drós til dýrðar,
 djúprǫð kona, stjúpi.²¹⁶
 He owes Ástríðr a debt for
 her action, and we are glad of it;
 it made generous Magnús,
 men's friend, wide-landed.
 She has aided, as will few
 others, her step-son, deeply
 wise woman; I honour
 with words of truth that lady.²¹⁷

Jesch argues the stanzas have been neglected and translators and commentators have been unsure what to make of them. This is because these stanzas of a “praise poem” are about a woman. “A poem in praise of a woman is anomalous in a genre of poetry designed for the praise of warriors and chieftains.”²¹⁸ There are runic inscriptions, but these praise women for typical “female” skills and achievements. She argues Ástríðr makes a “successful political intervention which puts her stepson on the Norwegian throne.” This makes a praise poem appropriate; all be it rare.²¹⁹ This may be a question of survival and bias and there were more poems in praise of women than we know of.

Jesch notes Ástríðr offers “wise counsel” in a “manly” way. “The Queen qualifies for praise because she has acted like a man.” She speaks successfully at a public assembly and is instrumental in putting Magnús on the Norwegian throne.²²⁰ Jesch also comments on why Ástríðr was remembered in this way. “The verses celebrate Ástríðr’s eloquence, and there are other indications in prose texts that she was remembered for her rhetorical gifts and her powers of persuasion.”²²¹ All this suggests queens and other high status

²¹⁶ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, III. XXVIII. 6.

²¹⁷ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, III. 5. Stanza 5. Jesch, “In praise of Ástríðr Óláfsdóttir,” 2.

²¹⁸ Jesch, “In praise of Ástríðr Óláfsdóttir,” 6.

²¹⁹ Jesch, “In praise of Ástríðr Óláfsdóttir”, 6-7. She suggests Sighvatr has a particular interest in women, they feature more frequently in his work.

²²⁰ Jesch, “In praise of Ástríðr Óláfsdóttir,” 8-9. Jochens however argues it is unlikely any women, even high status, would have addressed an Assembly. Jochens, “Female Inciters,” 109-110.

²²¹ Jesch, “In praise of Ástríðr Óláfsdóttir”, 16. She notes Ástríðr’s eloquence in *Heimskringla* where she persuades King Óláfr helgi to marry her.

women, could persuade men, wield influence and project power, albeit how they did so and, in whose cause, influenced how they were remembered.

With her marriage to King Óláfr helgi, Friðriksdóttir describes Ástrídr taking the initiative and proposing to him as “startlingly subversive.” She considers if this is a literary influence, from continental romances.²²² However this does not occur in the *Heimskringla* version but in the “Separate Saga” and a third version. The reason for this, she suggests, is Snorri felt it lowered Óláfr helgi’s status and made him look weak.²²³ Yet the fact the “subversive” version exists at all, means it may well have been true.

Other women in politics include Ingibjörg (wife of Jarl Rognvaldr) and her role in the negotiations between Ingigerðr of Sweden and King Óláfr helgi. Friðriksdóttir argues her actions are personal, she is the sister of the late Norwegian king and desires revenge on the King of Sweden whom she holds partly responsible for his death. She fears her husband’s honour might be compromised if he does not support Óláfr helgi. These reasons may be true, but it is arguable that she had a political agenda here, in terms of ensuring her husband retained his lands and status.²²⁴ Sometimes “the personal is the political.” It is not clear Ingibjörg’s role is a “literary device” as Friðriksdóttir suggests.²²⁵

Ingigerðr’s agenda, Friðriksdóttir suggests, is also personal, she wishes to ensure marriage to a King and fears being given to a lower status male. She gets her way, even if she fails to get her first choice. She has agency and influences the course of events. She uses politics as well as personal connections in her strategy. It is possible she saw settling the dispute between the two kings as a “good thing” in itself and beneficial to her agenda.²²⁶ There are limits to Ingigerðr’s influence with her father, but it is significant she chooses to save her ally Ingibjörg and gets her dowry.

²²² Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 101-103.

²²³ The “separate saga” is also attributed to Snorri.

²²⁴ His lands lay on the then border between the two kingdoms.

²²⁵ Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 94-96. Óláfr soenska makes it clear he blames Ingibjörg for Rognvaldr’s actions in supporting his Norwegian rival. Whaley argues Snorri was ambivalent towards Norway and its King. Whaley, *Heimskringla. Introduction*, 39.

²²⁶ Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 98-99.

3.6 Status

This is important to characters in the kings' sagas.²²⁷ Throughout the period, kings' of Norway had multiple wives, some at the same time and also mistresses or concubines.²²⁸ There is a difference in status between these roles.²²⁹

Álfhildr is “descended from a good family.” She becomes the “King’s Hand-Maid” or “she was in the Kings Household” for King Óláfr helgi.²³⁰ She becomes pregnant with Magnús góði. Later when he is King, his mother falls out with his stepmother Queen Ástríðr. The author blames Álfhildr for this saying:

En Álfhildi varð sem mörgum kann verða, þeim er fá ríkdóminn, at henni aflaðisk eigi sienna metnaðrinn, svá at henni líkaði illa þat, er Ástríðr dróttning var nokkuru meira metin en hon í sessi eða annarri þjónostu. Vildi Alfhildr sitja nær konungi, en Ástríðr kallaði hana ambátt sína, svá sem fyrr hafði verit, þá er Ástríðr var dróttning yfir Nóregi, þá er Óláfr konungr red landi. Vildi Ástríðr fyrir engan mun eiga sess við Álfhildi. Máttu þær ekki í einu herbergi vera.²³¹

But it was with Álfhildr as can happen with many that receive power, that her ambition grew in proportion, so that she did not like it that Queen Ástríðr was rather more highly honoured than she in precedence with seating and other treatment. Álfhildr wanted to sit closer to the king, but Ástríðr called her her servant woman, which was what she had been before, when Ástríðr was queen over Norway, while King Óláfr was ruling the land. Ástríðr wanted by no means to share a seat with Álfhildr. They could not bear to be in the same room.²³²

There was a “pecking order”, status mattered and the Queen got her way. but it is significant Álfhildr “had power”.

Friðriksdóttir notes in some versions of Ástríðr’s marriage to King Óláfr helgi, she openly says marrying him will improve her status. In a third version of the story though, the emphasis is on the fact that marrying her will help secure peace with Sweden.²³³ Ástríðr may have had both personal and political motives for seeking Óláfr’s hand in marriage.

²²⁷ On social-economic status, equality and the influence of Christianity on marriage: Sawyer, *Heimskringla. An interpretation*, 113.

²²⁸ Sawyer, *Heimskringla. An interpretation*, 115. Jan Rüdiger’s “five aspects” of polygyny.

²²⁹ Auður Magnúsdóttir, “Kingship, Women and Politics,” 83. Sawyer, *Heimskringla. An interpretation*, 112.

²³⁰ Finlay & Faulkes provide a “respectable’ translation”, while Hollander’s term “King’s Hand-Maid” is more suggestive. Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, II. 139. Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla. History of the Kings of Norway*, translated with introduction and notes by Lee M. Hollander (Austin, Texas: The American-Scandinavian Foundation, University of Texas Press, 1991), 389-390.

²³¹ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, III. 14.

²³² Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, III. 9. A relatively rare occasion when the narrator makes a comment on “human behaviour”. Whaley, *Heimskringla. Introduction*, 93. Appendix 1, 6.1.4.1 for more on Álfhildr.

²³³ Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 102.

The status of a King's wife is illustrated by the tale of Ásta, and her husband Haraldr inn grenski ("the grenlander"), a minor King in the Vestfold. The tale involves Queen Sigríðr in stórráða, to whom he was foster-brother.²³⁴ Unusually, Ásta "chose" her first two husbands, but it is not clear why and her father is a somewhat shadowy figure.²³⁵

Sigríðr was a wealthy widow (and Queen Mother) when Haraldr visited while on a raiding expedition. She invites him to a banquet; they drink together and continue speaking in his room.²³⁶ The following day she appears to insult him saying her estates were comparable to his whole kingdom. Yet he visits again and asks to marry her.

Hon segir, at þat var honum hégómamál ok hann er áðr svá vel kvángaðr, at honum er fullrædi í. Haraldr segir, at Ásta er góð kona ok gøfug – "en ekki er hon svá stórborin sem ek em." Sigríðr segir: "Vera kann þat, at þú sér ættstærri en hon. Hitt mynda ek ætla, at með henni myndi vera nú beggja ykkur hamingja."²³⁷

She says that he was talking nonsense and he was already so well married that he was by no means ill-matched. Haraldr says that Ásta is a good woman and nobler "But is not as high-born as I am." Sigríðr says: "It may be that you are of greater descent than she. But I would have thought that with her you would now both be very happy."²³⁸

He is saying that his wife is not of the same status as him, he wants to "trade up". She thinks he is trying to get "above his station", her next move is ruthless.

Þá let Sigríðr dróttning um nóttina veita þeim atgöngu bæði með eldi ok vápnum. ... Sigríðr sagði þat, at svá skyldi hon leiða smá konungum at fara af öðrum löndum till þess at biðja hennar."²³⁹

Then Queen Sigríðr had an attack made on them during the night with both fire and weapons. Sigríðr said thus would she make petty kings stop going from other countries to ask to marry her.²⁴⁰

²³⁴ There is some doubt over Queen Sigríðr and it has been suggested she might be a fictional character based on a number of real women. Whaley wonders how likely it is that there are three women called Sigríðr who all incite their menfolk. Whaley, *Heimskringla. Introduction*, 116-118. See 3.4.

²³⁵ Davidková, *Óláfr and the Queens*, 8-9. She suggests Christianity and the concept of "consent" influenced this, but given she also argues this "agency" is highly unusual, it is not clear what she means.

²³⁶ It is Sigríðr who makes the running throughout. Though perhaps portrayed as the archetypical temptress.

²³⁷ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, I. 288.

²³⁸ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, I. 179.

²³⁹ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, I. 288-289.

²⁴⁰ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, I. 178-179. It is her actions here that give rise to her nickname. The other person killed was a rival suitor from Garðaríki.

Ásta is later described in the time her son Óláfr helgi. Her then husband Sigurðr sýr is described positively while his wife was “liberal and imperious.”²⁴¹ When King Óláfr visits his mother she sends Sigurðr firm instructions:

Þá mæltu sendimenn: “Þau orð, bað Ásta, at vit skyldim bera þér, at nú þætti henni allmiklu máli skipta, at þér tækisk stórmannliga, ok bað þess, at þú skyldir meirr líkjask í ætt Haralds ins hárfagra at skaplyndi en Hrana mjónef, móðurfour þínum, eða Nereið jarli inum gamla, þótt þeir hafi verit spekingar miklir.”²⁴²

It was now very important that you should behave nobly, and requested this, that you should take more after the line of Haraldr inn hárfagri (the Fine-Haired) in disposition than be like your maternal grandfather Hrani mjónefr (Thin-Nose) or Jarl Nereiðr the Old, though they have been great sages.²⁴³

King Sigurðr’s response is barbed but prophetic, that Óláfr will earn the enmity of Sweden and Denmark which will be dangerous for him. Ásta however says:

Svá er mér um gefit, sonr minn, at ek em þér fegin orðin ok því fegnust, at þinn þroski mætti mestr verða. Vil ek til þess engi hlut spara, þann er ek á kosti, en hér er lítt til ráðastoda at síá, er ek em. En heldr vilda ek, þótt því væri at skipta, at þú yrðir yfir konungr í Nóregi, þótt þú lifðir eigi lengr í konung dóminum en Óláfr Tryggvason, heldr en hittm at þú værir eigi meiri konungr en Sigurðr sýr ok yrðir elli dauðr.²⁴⁴

My attitude, my son, is that I am pleased with you, and will be the most pleased if your advancement could be as much as possible. I will spare nothing within my power, though you can look to me for little in the way of helpful counsel. But I would rather, if there was the choice, that you should become supreme king in Norway, even if you lived no longer in your kingdom than Óláfr Tryggvason, rather than the alternative, that you were no greater a king than Sigurðr sýr and died of old age.²⁴⁵

Ásta starts off playing the expected role of a supportive mother, but her comments on her husband are not normal. Davídková suggests the reference to “helpful counsel” means Ásta is indicating she will not interfere with her son’s plans and she is aware of the limits

²⁴¹ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, II. 25. Davídková notes in the “Separate Saga”, the description of Sigurðr is more negative. He is “ambitious” or “vain-glorious”, which contradicts what has gone before.

²⁴² Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, II. 41.

²⁴³ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, II. 25.

²⁴⁴ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, II. 46.

²⁴⁵ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, II. 28. Davídková comments on the direct and implied criticisms of Sigurðr which also appear in the “Separate Saga”. She compares the adjectives for Ásta, e.g., “haughty” with those in *Heimskringla*, finding the latter more positive but still ambivalent. It may be a contrast is being drawn between Sigurðr and Óláfr and also between Ásta and Ástrídr, Óláfr’s future wife. Davídková, *Óláfr and the Queens*, 14-16.

on a “konungamóðir’s” role.²⁴⁶ Her power, her influence, is in support of her son, yet surely it benefitted her personally too? Davídková has argued that Ásta derived little status from her family and that her status and power grew with the success of her son Óláfr who becomes King of Norway. Motherhood is what gave her influence.²⁴⁷ The author of *Heimskringla* may have an agenda, criticising King Óláfr helgi for his “adventurousness” and by extension his mother who is implicitly blamed for her son’s actions. Sigurðr says Óláfr has “taken on the ways of foreign rulers” which is also seen as a fault.

3.7 Marriage alliances

Women being used by kings to form alliances was not new in the Viking age. Brigitha, daughter of King Haraldr gilli, went through four husbands. She first married King Ingi Hallsteinsson of Sweden, followed by Jarl Karl Sónason, then a King Magnús of Sweden and finally Jarl Birgir brossa (“smile”).²⁴⁸

Some women resisted and used such marriages for their own ends.²⁴⁹ Nor did such alliances always work out.²⁵⁰ Sawyer believes women “created important networks in other kingdoms by their marriages.”²⁵¹ Though she implies they often played a “helping” role, many women were not passive.²⁵²

In the saga of Óláfr Tryggvason, he visits Vinöland (Wendland²⁵³) and its King, Búrizláfr, who has three daughters, Geira, Gunnhildr and Ástrídr. Ástrídr married Jarl Sigvaldi a leader of the Jómsvikings who captures King Sveinn “tjúguskegg” (“forkbeard”) of Denmark. As part of a multi-party agreement, King Sveinn would marry Gunnhildr and King Búrizláfr would marry Þyri, sister of King Sveinn. Þyri flatly refused to marry King Búrizláfr.

²⁴⁶ Davídková, *Óláfr and the Queens*, 17. She contrasts this with Álfifa and she could have mentioned Gunnhildr. When Óláfr goes on his first “expedition”, Ásta arranges troops for him, not her husband.

²⁴⁷ Davídková, *Óláfr and the Queens*, 7-8.

²⁴⁸ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, III. 204. She is mentioned briefly within *Magnús Erlingsson*. 257.

²⁴⁹ “Marriage Alliances” in the context of *Morkinskinna*: Auðr Magnúsdóttir, “Kingship, Women and Politics,” 95-100. Detailed list of alliances: Sawyer, *Heimskringla. An interpretation*, 118-119.

²⁵⁰ Bagge, “*Society and Politics*,” Note 19 to chapter 3. “As described in *Heimskringla* this marriage pattern thus gave women an important position in the political game.”

²⁵¹ Sawyer, *Heimskringla. An interpretation*, 119-120. She regards *Ingiríðr* wife of King *Haraldr gilli*, (her second of four husbands) as the most successful.

²⁵² Sawyer, *Heimskringla. An interpretation*, 120. She lists: Ása, (mother of Hálfðan svarti), Ástrídr, mother of Óláfr Tryggvason, Ásta, mother of Óláfr helgi, Ástrídr his wife, Ingiríðr, widow of Haraldr gilli and Kristin, daughter of Sigurðr Jórslafari.

²⁵³ Hollander refers to modern Pomerania ruled by a historical King Boleslav I 992-1025. Hollander, *Heimskringla*, 162. Notes 1 & 2.

því at Þyri setti þar þvert nei fyrir, at hon myndi giptask vilja heiðnum konungi ok gömlum.²⁵⁴

Þyri had declared a flat “no” to the idea that she should want to be given in marriage to a heathen king, and an old one at that.²⁵⁵

Jarl Sigvaldi goes to Denmark and Sveinn agrees to hand her over with Gunnhildr’s lands in Vinðland added to the dowry.²⁵⁶ “Þyri grét sárliga ok fór mjök nauðig.”²⁵⁷ “Þyri wept bitterly and went very much under compulsion.”²⁵⁸ Once married, she first refuses to eat or drink and then escapes. Eventually she reached Norway where she asks King Óláfr Tryggvason for asylum.

Þyri var kona orðsnjöll, ok virðisk konungi vel ræður hennar. Sá hann, at hon var fríð kona, ok kœmr í hug, at þetta myni vera gott kvánfang, ok víkr þannug rœðunni, spyrr, ef hon vill giptask honum.²⁵⁹

Þyri was an eloquent woman and the king was favourably impressed by what she said. He saw that she was a beautiful woman, and it occurs to him that she would be a good match, and turns the discussion on to that, asking if she would take him in marriage.²⁶⁰

She has doubts, but because, the saga implies, she feels her position is weak, she agrees.²⁶¹ However, she is not without ambition. She bitterly says to Óláfr that she does not have any lands in Norway “such as were suitable for a Queen.” She incites him to travel to Vinðland and claim her lands. He is reluctant as it might mean encountering King Sveinn. She incites him further, comparing him unfavourably to King Haraldr Gormsson. He agrees but it does not end well.²⁶²

Queen Sigríðr in stórráða is also part of Óláfr Tryggvason’s story and allegedly contributed to his death alongside Þyri. At one point, King Óláfr Tryggvason decides to court her and proposes marriage. When the two meet he asks her to convert to Christianity and she refuses, not unreasonably, but is prepared to compromise.

²⁵⁴ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, I. 341.

²⁵⁵ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, I. 214.

²⁵⁶ Gunnhildr died after bearing several children.

²⁵⁷ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, I. 342.

²⁵⁸ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, I. 214.

²⁵⁹ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, I. 342.

²⁶⁰ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, I. 214. Sawyer suggests he married her to insult her brother the King of Denmark. Sawyer, *Heimskringla. An interpretation*, 117.

²⁶¹ *Fagrskinna* explicitly notes she does this without the agreement of Sveinn. Finlay, *Fagrskinna*, 116.

²⁶² *Fagrskinna* relates how King Óláfr reclaims these lands. He is assisted by Ástrídr though her husband covertly supports Sveinn. Óláfr is opposed by the Swedish king over his treatment of his mother Sigríðr, now married to Sveinn. Óláfr may or may not have been previously married to Geira, which could explain Ástrídr’s support. Finlay, *Fagrskinna*, 114, 117 & footnote 304.

Ekki mun ek ganga af trú þeiri, er ek hefi fyrr haft ok frændr mínir fyrir mér. Mun ek ok ekki at því telja, þótt þú trúir á þann guð, er þér líkar.²⁶³

I shall not abandon the faith that I have previously held, as have my kinsmen before me. I shall also make no objection to your believing in whatever god you like.²⁶⁴

Not haughty, but King Óláfr reacts intemperately.

Þá varð Óláfr konungr reiðr mjök ok mælti brálliga: “Hví mun ek vilja eiga þik hundheiðna?” – ok laust í andlit henni með glófa sínum, er hann helt á. Stóð hann upp síðan ok bæði þau. Þá mælti Sigríðr: “Þetta mætti verða vel þinn bani.”²⁶⁵

Then King Óláfr got very angry and spoke hastily: “Why would I want to marry you, heathen dog as you are?” And he struck her in the face with his glove which he had in his hand.” She says, “That could well cost you your life.”²⁶⁶

Those familiar with the *Íslendingasögur*, know a man slapping a woman is inadvisable.²⁶⁷

Sigríðr marries again to King Sveinn tjúguskegg (“forkbeard”) of Denmark. This helps cement an alliance between him and her son, King of Sweden, along with Jarl Eiríkr Hákonarson, who later rules Norway after Óláfr’s death. By this point:

Sigríðr var inn mesti óvinr Óláfs konungs Tryggvasonar ok fann þat til saka, at Óláfr konungr hafði slitit einkamálum við hana ok lostit hana í andlit.²⁶⁸

Sigríðr was the greatest enemy of King Óláfr Tryggvason and gave as the reason for this that King Óláfr had broken agreements with her and struck her in the face.²⁶⁹

She incites King Sveinn by stating King Óláfr “had lain with his sister Þyri.” This in fact was consensual, but Sigríðr’s point is Óláfr had done this without Sveinn’s permission.

Hafði Sigríðr dróttning slíkar fórtlur opt līga í munni, ok kom hon svá sínum fórtlolum, at Sveinn konungr var fullkominn at gera þat ráð.²⁷⁰

²⁶³ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, I. 310.

²⁶⁴ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, I. 193.

²⁶⁵ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, I. 310

²⁶⁶ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, I. 193.

²⁶⁷ E.g. Hallgröðr. *Njal’s Saga*, Robert Cook, 82 & 128. This is not the only such occasion in the kings’ sagas. Ingigerðr in Garðaríki, Malmfríðr of Garðaríki, wife of King Sigurðr “the crusader.” Andersson & Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 89, 350.

²⁶⁸ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, I. 349.

²⁶⁹ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, I. 217.

²⁷⁰ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, I. 349.

Queen Sigríðr frequently had such arguments in her mouth, and she brought it about by her arguments that King Sveinn was fully persuaded to carry out her proposal.²⁷¹

As a result of this, the three allies plus Jarl Sigvaldi bring Óláfr to battle and he dies. Snorri may be pinning the blame for King Óláfr's death and subsequent Danish rule, on women, along with treachery.²⁷² Whaley argued “clerical misogyny” influenced Sigríðr's portrayal.²⁷³ Bagge states: “This is foreign policy at a very personal level.” Óláfr's actions and his enemies alliance against him are due to women's initiatives over “private property or hurt feelings.”²⁷⁴ While true in part, personalities and how they interact, is as important to international politics as policy matters and Bagge trivialises this somewhat.

3.8 Sisterhood and diplomacy

Women dealt with each other in positive ways and three key women worked together in diplomacy. Friðriksdóttir believes their story has “been surprisingly neglected by scholars.”²⁷⁵ Ingibjörg was a daughter of King Tryggvi, a minor King of Vik.²⁷⁶ She later marries Jarl Rognvaldr and plays a key part in persuading him to support Óláfr helgi.

Hon gekk at með öllu kappi at veita Óláfi konungi. Hon var aftakamaðr mikil um þetta mál. Helt þar til hvárt tveggja, at frændsemi var mikil með þeim Óláfi konungi ok henni, ok þat annat, at henni mátti eigi fynask við Svíakonung þat, er hann hafði verit at falli Óláfs Tryggvasonar, bróður hennar, ok þóttisk fyrir þá sök eiga tiltölu at ráða fyrir Nóregi. Varð jarl af for tölum hennar mjök snúinn til vináttu Óláfs konungs.²⁷⁷

She set about supporting King Óláfr with all her energy. She was very keen indeed on this. There were two reasons for this, she and King Óláfr were closely related, and secondly, she could never get out of her mind about the king of the Svíar that he had been there at the fall of her brother Óláfr Tryggvason, and for that reason thought he had a claim to rule over Norway. As a result of her persuasive arguments the jarl became very inclined to friendship with King Óláfr.²⁷⁸

Later there are negotiations between King Óláfr helgi and King Óláfr of Sweden on the former marrying his daughter Ingigerðr. The discussions do not go well, but

²⁷¹ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, I. 218.

²⁷² Sigríðr's role is dealt with more briefly in *Fagrskinna* but the story is the same. Finlay, *Fagrskinna*, 117. She is briefly noted in *Morkinskinna* in the genealogies. Andersson & Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 113 & 150.

²⁷³ Whaley, *Heimskringla. Introduction*, 117-118. Jochens, “The female inciter,” 102.

²⁷⁴ Bagge, *Society and politics*, 101.

²⁷⁵ Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 79-105.

²⁷⁶ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, I. 187. She was the sister of King Óláfr Tryggvason.

²⁷⁷ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, II. XXVII. 85.

²⁷⁸ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, II. 53-54. There is a separate story of how she knows Hjalti Skeggjason.

messages are exchanged between Ingigerðr and Ingibjörg (& Jarl Rognvaldr). Probably the two knew of each other and Ingigerðr knew a woman would get her messages.²⁷⁹

Hjalti bar henni kveðju Ingibjargar, konu jarls, ok segir, at hon hefði sent hann þangat til trausts ok vináttu, ok bar fram jartegnir. Konungsdóttir tók því vel ok kvað honum heimila skyldu sína vináttu.²⁸⁰

Hjalti brought her the jarl's wife Ingibjörg's greeting, saying that she had sent him to her for support and friendship, and brought out tokens. The king's daughter responded kindly and said he would be welcome to her friendship.²⁸¹

Ingigerðr warned them her father dislikes Óláfr and negotiations will be difficult. However, the emissaries continue to meet her on her estates.²⁸² It is suggested the Norwegian emissaries sought to undermine the "authority and honour" of the King of Sweden.²⁸³ Probably true but Ingigerðr also played the political game.

When the King of Sweden learns of the plan, it is significant that he blames Ingibjörg, not her husband.

... kvað þat makligt, at Rognvaldr væri rekinn or ríkinu, ok segir, allt slíkt hlaut hann af áeggjan Ingibjargar konu sinnar, ok kvað þat verit hafa it ósnjallasta ráð, er hann skyldi fengit hafa at girndum slíkar konu.²⁸⁴

... saying it would be proper for Rognvaldr to be driven from the land, and says that he had got all this from the egging on of his wife Ingibjörg and declared that it had been the stupidest idea that he should have married such a woman for the sake of lust.²⁸⁵

In the "Separate Saga" Ingigerðr cleverly advises her father on the relationship with Norway. In particular, that he should give up plans for invasion and "reclaiming" territory. She deliberately describes Norway in disparaging terms, implying invasion is not worth the risks and that the Norwegians would never accept a Swedish King.²⁸⁶

²⁷⁹ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, II. 64.

²⁸⁰ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, II. 96.

²⁸¹ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, II. 60.

²⁸² Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, II. 71-72.

²⁸³ Davídková, *Óláfr and the Queens*, 29.

²⁸⁴ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, II. 115.

²⁸⁵ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, II. 74.

²⁸⁶ Davídková, *Óláfr and the Queens*, 26-27. She considers the "Separate Saga" implies Óláfr helgi is successful and "gets one over" on his Swedish rival. However, given Ástrídr's lower status, this is only partially true. Perhaps Snorri is trying to justify the marriage and negate any loss of status. We don't know if Ástrídr's presence in Norway was a factor in the Swedish King abandoning his plans.

Both royal women know their own minds and act accordingly. Davídková argues Ingigerðr is unsuccessful and is threatened with marriage below her status (in the “Separate Saga”). However, she continued to be involved in governance and politics.²⁸⁷

Ingigerðr sends messages to Norway warning them of potential hostilities. King Óláfr helgi is persuaded not to start a war over it and Ingigerðr lets them know that she is to be married to King Jarizleifr of Hólmgarðr (Garðariki). The Swedish King also had an illegitimate daughter Ástriðr and she travelled to the court of Jarl Rognvaldr and it is suggested she marry the Norwegian King and that neither needed her father’s permission.²⁸⁸ Perhaps King Óláfr helgi saw an opportunity to put his rival King’s “nose out of joint”. Ástriðr’s motives are less certain, but probably saw it as a positive move.²⁸⁹

Davídková argues the “anger” the Swedish King displays on multiple occasions is part of the author (of the “Separate Saga”) portraying him in less than flattering terms while implying his daughters are acting “properly and legitimately.”²⁹⁰ She also argues that in other versions of the tale, Ástriðr has more agency. Both she and her sister actively intervene to persuade King Óláfr to marry her.²⁹¹

Ingigerðr insists successfully on a castle and Jarldom as part of her dowry on marrying King Jarizleifr, so she is not a mere pawn in this alliance. Not only that, but she gives Rognvaldr the castle and Jarldom. Probably she and Ingigerðr remained friends.²⁹²

Later, Ingigerðr in Garðariki shows wisdom in warning her husband and the Norwegians who come to plead for young Magnús to return to Norway. Her logic is that some Norwegians had not supported King Óláfr helgi and that King Knútr’s people were powerful.²⁹³ She reluctantly agrees after further entreaties on condition that:

Viltu gørask forsjámaðr Magnúss ok fósturfaðir hans þá munu vér til þessa hætta ok þó með því móti at þú sverir honum áðr trúnaðareið ok tólf menn með þér, þeir sem vér viljum til kjósa.²⁹⁴

²⁸⁷ Davídková, *Óláfr and the Queens*, 27. She considers if Ingigerðr fulfils a “continental intercessory role”, based on biblical models and emphasising feminine virtues. However, she concludes Ingigerðr is acting in a more political manner. Rationally, a peace deal between Sweden and Norway suited her purposes.

²⁸⁸ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, II. 93.

²⁸⁹ Davídková, *Óláfr and the Queens*, 30.

²⁹⁰ Davídková, *Óláfr and the Queens*, 30-31.

²⁹¹ Davídková, *Óláfr and the Queen*, 48-50. She is referring to the Bergsbók and Tómasskinna versions.

²⁹² *Fagrskinna* has a shorter, less prosaic account of the whole affair: “King Olaf in Norway and Ingigerðr sent many valuable presents and confidential messengers to each other.” Finlay, *Fagrskinna*, 144. Note. “Castle” is a misleading term here. “Fortification” or “Fortified settlement” might be better. The place was called Aldeigjuborg in the sagas and may be Ladoga (Old Ladoga).

²⁹³ Her husband echo’s her reasoning.

²⁹⁴ Ármann Jakobsson & Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson, *Morkinskinna*, I. XXIII. 20.

If you [Einarr Þambarskelfir] agree to be Magnús's regent and foster father, we will risk it, but with the stipulation that you and twelve others of our choosing will swear oaths of loyalty to him.²⁹⁵

Einarr is somewhat discomfited by her demands but he agrees. His problem is perhaps not that it is a woman, as a foreign ruler pressurising them in regard to Norwegian matters.

3.9 Survivors

Sometimes women had to adapt to survive. Queen Ingiríðr of Sweden who married King Haraldr gilli is instructive. She was first married to Heinrekr skotulær (“skate-thigh”), then King Sveinn Sveinsson of Denmark, with whom she had three sons.²⁹⁶ She and King Haraldr have a legitimate son, called Ingi, but Haraldr has three illegitimate sons with other women. Sigurðr slembidjárn (“gadabout deacon”, a pretender), plots the death of the King, who is murdered while with one of his mistresses.²⁹⁷ All of the king's sons are still children at this point, his legitimate heir being only a year or so old.

Ingiríðr dróttning ok með henni lendar menn ok hirð sú, er Haraldr konungr hafði haft, réðu þat, at hleypiskip var gort ok sent norðr til Þrándheims at segja fall Haralds konungs ok þat með, at Þrændir skyldu taka til konungs son Haralds konungs, Sigurð,²⁹⁸

Queen Ingiríðr together with landed men and the following that King Haraldr had had, decided this, that a fast ship should be dispatched and sent north to Þrándheimr to tell of King Haraldr's fall, and this too, that the Þrændir were to take as King Haraldr's son Sigurð,²⁹⁹

At the same time, she heads for Vik where her son Ingi is fostered and a Borgarþing was called where Ingi was also made King. It is Queen Ingigerðr, who takes charge after the murder and ensures that her son rules at least part of Norway. At the same time, she accepts one of her illegitimate stepsons as a King, “real politick” perhaps. The Queen took the lead in deciding to resist the pretender.³⁰⁰

In *Morkinskinna*, a similar tale is told:

En Ingiríðr dróttning ok hirðmenn ok lendar menn bera ráð sín saman, ok fylgja Víkverjar henni í Vík austr. Ferr hon til Inga sonar síns, ok taka hann til konungs

²⁹⁵ Andersson & Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 98.

²⁹⁶ Finlay, *Fagrskinna*, 262.

²⁹⁷ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, III. 184.

²⁹⁸ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, III, XXVIII. 303.

²⁹⁹ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, III. 186.

³⁰⁰ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, III. 197.

á Borgarþingi. Var hann þá á annan vetr. Váru í þeim ráðum Ámundi ok Þjóstólfr Álason ok margir aðrir stórir höfðingjar.³⁰¹

Queen Ingiríðr, the royal retainers, and the district chieftains took counsel. The men of Vik accompanied her east to Vik. She went to her son Ingi, and they accepted him as King at the Borgarþing. At that time he was two years old. Their plan was promoted by Ámundi and Þjóstólfr Álason and many other powerful chieftains.³⁰²

Frustratingly we hear nothing about her role as her children grow up but she remained a presence. When three adult kings fall out and one of King Ingi's followers, an old man, had been killed by two men of King Sigurðr. The Queen responds:

Þá gekk hon þegar til Inga konungs ok sagði honum, kvað hann lengi mundu lit inn konung, ef hann vildi ekki at færask, þótt hirðmenn hans væri drepnir, annarr at öðrum, svá sem svín. Konungr reiddisk við átölur hennar, ok er þau hnippðusk við, kom Grégóriús inn gangandi, hjálmaðr ok brynjaðr, bað konung eigi reidask, kvað hana satt mæla³⁰³

So she went straight to King Ingi and told him, said he would always be an insignificant king if he was unwilling to do anything even when his followers were slaughtered one after another just like pigs. The king got angry at her criticism, and as they were arguing together, Gregorius came walking in, helmeted and mailcoated, telling the king not to be angry, saying she was quite right.³⁰⁴

The “whetting” has the desired effect, King *Ingi* decides to fight and King *Sigurðr* is slain.³⁰⁵

3.10 Foreign rule

Álfifa (Ælfgifu) effectively ruled Norway in the name of her son Sveinn Knútsson for five years 1030-1035.³⁰⁶ She tends “to get a bad press”, perhaps because Icelandic authors disliked Danes and Englishers ruling Norway, even if they also disliked kings of Norway interfering in Icelandic affairs. Álfifa comes to Norway after the death of King Óláfr helgi and is the first wife or mistress of King Knútr inn ríki who remains in England.³⁰⁷

³⁰¹ Ármann Jakobsson & Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson, *Morkinskinna*, II. XXIV. 178-179.

³⁰² Theodore M. Andersson & Karen Ellen Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 372.

³⁰³ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, III. XXVIII. 339.

³⁰⁴ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, III. 209. King Ingi was injured as a child and was in “poor health.”

³⁰⁵ *Morkinskinna* has almost identical language. Andersson & Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 399-400. Sawyer, *Heimskringla. An interpretation*, 123-124.

³⁰⁶ She was never referred to as Regent, though Stafford uses the term. See Davidková, *Óláfr and the Queens*, 20. Footnote 48. Stafford, *Emma & Edith*, 25.

³⁰⁷ Viðar Pálsson, *Language of power*, 125. Stafford refers to her as Knútr's “other wife” & “first wife.” Stafford, *Emma & Edith*, 9, 229, 233.

They had another son, Haraldr “harefoot” who briefly ruled England on his father’s death, though it is said it was she who was really in charge.³⁰⁸ Davídková indicates in the “Separate Saga”, it is not said that King Knútr intended Álfifa to have any role in the governance of Norway.³⁰⁹ She makes the point that her son Sveinn was referred to as “Álfifusonr” rather than by a patronym as usual. Only the sons of King Eiríkr blóðøx and Queen Gunnhildr are sometimes thus named.³¹⁰ The lack of direct evidence of Knútr’s intentions does not mean he expected Álfifa to play a passive role.³¹¹ He would know Sveinn’s limitations, he had reason to send his mother with him. Nor was it King Knútr who removed them from Norway.

Heimskringla refers to new laws introduced following King Sveinn’s accession which were based on those of the Danes but in some cases harsher.³¹² Álfifa got the blame.

Brátt höfðu menn ámæli mikit til Sveins konungs, ok kenndu menn mest þó Álfifu allt þat, er í móti skapi þótti.³¹³

People soon had much cause of complaint against King Sveinn, and yet people mostly blamed Álfifa for everything that they found contrary to their minds.³¹⁴

Álfifa is also blamed for her reluctance to believe the lack of decomposition of King Óláfr helgi’s body, when it was disinterred by Bishop Grímkell, was a miracle.³¹⁵ Given the sainthood of Óláfr helgi, it seems likely Álfifa is deliberately put in a negative light and compared unfavourably to Óláfr helgi.³¹⁶ Davídková also suggests Álfifa sees the future saint as a threat to her sons reign. In this case misogyny is not the main cause of her poor reputation, though it may underlie it.³¹⁷ She is referred to as “in ríka” (“the great”) so she was not as weak as the surviving sources might suggest.³¹⁸

The author of *Heimskringla* makes plain she was not liked in Norway.

³⁰⁸ Frank Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 421.

³⁰⁹ Davídková, *Óláfr and the Queens*, 20. Footnotes 47 & 48.

³¹⁰ In the “Separate Saga.” Davídková, *Óláfr and the Queens*, 18-19. She argues that the use of matronym’s implies a criticism of sons who are too much under their mothers. Davídková suggests it implies they were effeminate, but this seems unlikely for the sons of Gunnhildr.

³¹¹ Stafford states: “Ælfifu was sent with her son Swein to rule Norway ...”. Stafford, *Emma & Edith*, 234.

³¹² Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, II. 267-268.

³¹³ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, II. XXVII. 401.

³¹⁴ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, II. 268.

³¹⁵ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, II. 269-271. Jochens, “Female Inciters,” 110.

³¹⁶ Davídková, *Óláfr and the Queens*, 22-23. She suggests the legitimacy of a woman ruler is questioned and that Álfifa goes beyond the norms of how a “Queen Mother” should behave. The “foreign” element seems due to the Danish connection not her English heritage. 24. She emphasises the concept of customary law and that in seeking to change it, Álfifa was acting beyond how a ruler should govern.

³¹⁷ Davídková, *Óláfr and the Queens*, 21.

³¹⁸ Bjarni Einarsson, *Ágrip Af Noregskonunga Sögum*, 201. Finlay, Fagrskinna, 161.

Sveinn konungr Knútsson réð fyrir Nóregi nokkura vetr. Hann var bernskur bæði at aldri ok at ráðum. Álfifa, móðir hans, hafði þá mest landráð, ok váru landsmenn hennar miklir óvinir, bæði þá ok jafnan síðan. Danskir menn höfðu þá mikinn yfirgang í Nóregi, en landsmenn kunnu því illa.³¹⁹

King Sveinn Knútsson ruled over Norway for a few winters. He was childish both in age and discretion. His mother Álfifa had most of the government of the country in her hands, and the people of the country were great enemies of hers, both at that time and for ever after. Danish people had tyrannical power in Norway, and the people of the country greatly resented it.³²⁰

Fagrskinna gives a similar account.

Sveinn konungr var mikill æskumaðr, fríðr sjónum, ekki grimmhugaðr né ágjarn. Álfifa móðir hans, er kǫlluð var en ríka Álfifa, hún réð mest með konunginum, ok mæltu þat allir, at hún spillti í hvern stað ok fór fyrir þá sök stjórnin illa við landsfólkit, ok svá margt illt stóð af hennar ráðum í Nóregi, at menn jǫfnuðu þessu ríki við Gunnhildar ǫld, er verst hafði verit áðr í Nóregi,³²¹

King Sveinn was a very young man, fair in appearance, not fierce in temperament or ambitious. His mother Álfifa, who was called “in ríka” (“the Great”) Álfifa, decided most things for the king, and everyone said that she did damage in every situation, and for that reason the government was unpopular with the people of the land, and so much ill resulted from her counsels in Norway that people compared this reign with the time of Gunnhildr, which was the worst there had ever been in Norway before that.³²²

She does get a backhanded compliment: “Þessu olli ríki Knúts konungs, at eigi váru rán né manndráp, en ekki kenndu menn þat Álfífu.”³²³ “King Knútr’s power brought it about that there was no plundering or killing; but people did not give Álfifa credit for that.”³²⁴

It was hard for a woman to rule, especially in a foreign country. Presumably King Knútr trusted her, though he may have had political and personal motives for sending her away from England, including tensions with his second wife, Emma. Friðriksdóttir suggests a comparison between Álfifa’s role and that of Queen Emma and her son Horðaknútr. With the latter, the “plot” to elevate him to the throne of Denmark without

³¹⁹ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, II. XXVII. 410.

³²⁰ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, II. 274. Sveinn was 15 years old when he became King, not a child. Possibly Snorri meant he acted like a child.

³²¹ Bjarni Einarsson, *Ágrip Af Noregskonunga Sögum*, 201-202.

³²² Finlay, *Fagrskinna*, 161.

³²³ Bjarni Einarsson, *Ágrip Af Noregskonunga Sögum*, 202.

³²⁴ Finlay, *Fagrskinna*, 162.

his father's permission fails. She suggests in both cases the sons are shown as "puppets" and it is their mothers who take action.³²⁵

The overall image of Álfifa in the sources is not positive but it is not unique. Davídková speculates a number of factors are in play, while male authors might have an inbuilt bias against women who exercise power, as opposed to those who fulfil the stereotypical loyal mother/wife/daughter role.³²⁶ The first is that the noblemen and others of wealth and status in Norway disliked a woman having such influence over the King. The second is that Álfifa is blamed for the "childishness" of her son Sveinn. She has not brought him up to be King as Ásta did King Óláfr helgi. This in turn threatens the stability of the realm. Álfifa is seeking power for herself not for her son.³²⁷

Davídková's conclusion is that Queen Ásta is deliberately compared (in her sources) favourably to Álfifa, the former being a "model" queen/queen mother. One could extend this to include Ingibjörg, Ingigerðr and Ástrídr on one side and Gunnhildr on the Álfifa side.³²⁸

³²⁵ Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 91.

³²⁶ Davídková, *Óláfr and the Queens*, 22.

³²⁷ There is more to Álfifa's story. See Appendix 1, 6.1.11.

³²⁸ Davídková, *Óláfr and the Queens*, 53.

4. Conclusions

Helga Kress takes a pessimistic view of women's position in the Viking Age, at least as outlined in the saga literature.³²⁹ Returning to the research questions posed at the start of this paper, how far have they been answered?

The evidence of the kings' sagas has to be used with care. The authors were a product of their time. For example, "foreign" women directly involved in governing Norway are not popular. There is a degree of ambivalence in how the sources portray high status women. This extends to recent scholarship, there is no consensus yet on Snorri's attitude to women for example.

Whatever their formal status, women could, if they chose or were forced to, influence events and people. They counselled and encouraged their menfolk but also took direct action. They were rarely, if ever, permitted to rule in their own right, but could still govern, albeit with varying degrees of success. They were not limited to the domestic sphere. In some cases, they may have been acting primarily to protect or support their male kinfolk and children, but often had their own political agenda.

There is an element of misogyny and the influence of the Christian church coloured the roles thought appropriate for women. Supportive wives and mothers such as Ástrídr, mother of Óláfr Tryggvissón, were good, women such as Queen Gunnhildr directing men were not. Women inciting men was bad, unless it was in a good cause such as supporting Óláfr helgi. Women with power are associated with magic and sorcery in a way men rarely were in these sagas and were sometimes viewed as dangerous to the kingdom, feared for their influence.

Were women in the kings' sagas fictional characters, semi-legendary or historical figures? In the early Viking Age, it is impossible to know for certain at present, though archaeology is providing increasing evidence.³³⁰ For later figures, we do sometimes have corroboration from other written sources, at least that they existed. The authors or compilers chose certain stories to highlight and there can be several different versions of the same tale.

³²⁹ Helga Kress, "Taming the shrew: The Rise of Patriarchy and the Subordination of the Feminine in Old Norse Literature," in *Cold counsel : women in Old Norse literature and mythology : a collection of essays*, Ed., Sarah M. Anderson with Karen Swenson (New York: Routledge, 2002), 81-92.

³³⁰ Jan Bill, "The Ship Graves on Kormt – and beyond," ed. Dagfinn Skre, *Rulership in 1st to 14th century Scandinavia. Royal graves and sites at Avaldsnes and beyond* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2020).

The place of women in history, including the Viking Age, was long neglected, but from the 1970s received an increasing amount of attention, often from female academics. This is significant not simply for its own sake or “redressing the balance”, but because it changes our perception of past societies. It also provides lessons for the present and hope for the future, in particular for women’s role in government and leadership.

High status women in the Viking Age are of increasing interest to scholarship and to the public. In the twenty-first century, streamed TV series, such as “Vikings” or “The Last Kingdom” have portrayed Viking Age women, some of them historical figures, in prominent and assertive roles.³³¹ Though men outnumber women in the three primary sources on which this dissertation is based, there are a significant number of women referenced. While some only merit a brief note, there are many where the reader learns something of their lives, including the degree of power and influence they wielded and how they did this.

Whilst this study focused on Viking Age Norway, there is enough evidence to suggest it could be extended to Denmark and Sweden and chronologically into the later Middle Ages. High status Norwegian women could also be compared with their counterparts outside Scandinavia. The Latin sources for Norway and Denmark, Saxo Grammaticus for example, and other vernacular sources such as the *Ágrip*, might provide useful additional material, though they are not without their problems.³³²

The classical world provides examples of female leadership, such as Artemisia I of Halicarnassus (c.480 BC).³³³ Female figures in Old Norse mythology have received attention, for example the Valkyrie, Norns and *Dísir*.³³⁴ They were an important feature of women’s lives in pre-Christian Scandinavia.³³⁵ The Amazons of classical mythology could be compared to the “shield maiden.”³³⁶ There is evidence the myths are based on

³³¹ History Channel/Amazon Prime Video, “Vikings,” 2013-2020. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2306299/>. BBC/Netflix, “The Last Kingdom,” 2017-2022. <http://www.thelastkingdom.tv>.

³³² Robert Bartlett, “From Paganism to Christianity in medieval Europe” in *Christianization and the Rise of Christian Monarchy. Scandinavia, Central Europe and Rus’ c.900-1200*, ed., Nora Berend (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 47-72.

³³³ It is said the Emperor Xerxes lost the battle of Salamis because he ignored her advice. She was physically present with her ships. Pamela D. Toller, *Women Warriors. An Unexpected History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2019), 83-86.

³³⁴ Karen Bek-Pedersen, *The Norns in Old Norse Mythology* (Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic Press, 2011).

³³⁵ Viking era female grave goods include items such as the “Freya Miniature”, “Woman with a drinking horn” and the “Valkyrie pendant”. Ashby & Leonard, *Vikings*, 30-31, 122-123, 157.

³³⁶ Judith Jesch, “Women, War and Words: a Verbal Archaeology of Shield-maidens,” in *Viking Wars*, Viking LXXXIV Special Volume 1, eds., Frode Iversen and Karoline Kjesrud (Oslo: Norwegian Archaeological Society, 2021).

reality and women among nomadic peoples of the steppes fought on horseback, though they did not necessarily live apart from men.³³⁷

John Knox's polemical work of 1558 was directed at three contemporary queens and he regarded women in positions of power as "unnatural".³³⁸ There are examples of influential female rulers in Europe in the Early Modern period, but they are few and far between. Catherine the Great, Empress of Russia in the 18th century for example.³³⁹

In Iceland, the fourth elected President, Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, was the first democratically elected female Head of State in the world.³⁴⁰ Iceland now has a second female President, Halla Tómasdóttir. Since 1945 there have been a number of elected female leaders in Europe including: Norway, Finland, Denmark and Sweden. European monarchies are now ceremonial, but there have been reigning queens in the Netherlands, Denmark and the UK. The heirs apparent in Belgium, Netherlands, Spain and Sweden are women.

The experience of female leaders is still tough, even given the ruthless environment within which politicians operate. The Prime Minister of Australia (Julia Gillard, 2010-2013) faced a degree of criticism and misogyny beyond that directed at male politicians. It is possible the United States will elect its first ever female President this year (2024). Some of the wilder comments from her opponents suggest she too will face attacks in part because she is a woman. Some men, and indeed women, still think a woman's place is in the home.³⁴¹ There is hope, increasingly historians, archaeologists and scholars of many disciplines, are telling the stories of women who had a place in government in the past, who may inspire those of the future.

³³⁷ Adrienne Mayor, *The Amazons: lives and legends of warrior women across the ancient world* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014).

³³⁸ John Knox, "*The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*" (Geneva: Publisher Unknown, 1558). John Knox, "The First Blast of the Trumpet," in *Knox: On Rebellion*, ed., Roger A. Mason, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 3–47. The three women were Elizabeth I of England, Mary Queen of Scots and Mary of Guise, Queen and Queen Regent of Scotland.

³³⁹ Interestingly, she was German, so a "foreign ruler."

³⁴⁰ Isabel Martínez de Perón succeeded to the Presidency of Argentina in 1974 but was not elected. Sirima Ratwatte Dias Bandaranaike was elected Prime Minister of Sri Lanka in 1960 but was not Head of State. Iceland has also had two elected female Prime Ministers.

³⁴¹ "Tradwives' promote a lifestyle that evokes the 1950s. But their nostalgia is not without controversy," by Harmeet Kaur, CNN. Published 11:38 AM EST, 27/12/2022. Last accessed: 28/08/24. <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/12/27/us/tradwife-1950s-nostalgia-tiktok-cec/index.html>.

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6. Appendices

6.1 Appendix 1 – Further women’s stories

There are many more women referred to in the three kings’ sagas than covered in the main text. Further stories are given here to support the main findings, show the variety and indicate some additional themes. The structure is based on that of chapter three.

6.1.1 The early tales: beauty, violence and sorcery

There are a significant number of tales that illustrate these three related themes, particularly in the early chapters of *Heimskringla*. Beauty and wisdom have perhaps been neglected a little historically.³⁴²

6.1.1.1 Ása

Ása appears in the Ynglings saga of *Heimskringla* as Ása “the wicked”, daughter of Ingjald “the wicked” of Sweden. The text states she took after her father. She gets her husband to kill his brother and also causes her husband’s death, but in this case no motive is given. Later her father dies by suicide in a fire. It is not clear if she dies with him.³⁴³

6.1.1.2 Hildiguðr

Hildiguðr, is the daughter of King Granmarr. He entertains King Hjørvarðr and asks his daughter to serve ale to the company at feast. “She was the most beautiful woman.” It is rare a woman is described as ugly in appearance, whatever her character. A cynic might say this is to flatter high status men and justify what may happen afterwards.

What is unusual here is Hildiguðr first drinks half a goblet and makes a toast. This impresses their guest who insists, in breach of “protocol”, on drinking with her “side by side” and they speak together through the evening. In this case all ends well. However, the author makes it clear that: “Hon sagði þat ekki víkinga sið at drekka hjá konum tvímenning.”³⁴⁴ “It was not the custom of Vikings to drink in pairs with women.”³⁴⁵ Neither of the pair are married but it is Hildiguðr who takes the initiative.

³⁴² Friðriksdóttir, *Valkyrie*, 30, 50, 92-93, 102. For beauty.

³⁴³ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, I. 40-41.

³⁴⁴ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, I. 68.

³⁴⁵ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, I. 38. It is more complex or confused than this, earlier in the passage it is stated that when Kings were in the own country they arranged for male/female pairs to drink with each other at banquets. However, King Hjørvarðr is not in his own country and it is a more public feast.

6.1.1.3 Yrsa

Yrsa appears to have been a thrall and/or cow herd who attracts the attention of King Aðils. She “was a remarkably beautiful girl”. “It was soon discovered that she was clever and well-spoken and well informed in every way. People were very impressed by her, the King most of all.” “Then Yrsa was queen in Svíþjóð, and was considered a very outstanding woman.”³⁴⁶ This is an “ordinary woman”, but she is portrayed as extraordinary.

6.1.1.4 Drífa

King Vinlandi of Uppsala marries Drífa in “Lapland” but then abandons her and their son. She sends for a “witch”, Hulð, who she pays to kill Vinlandi via a spell.³⁴⁷ We hear no more of Drífa, but it seems her son took over his father’s kingdom. He too abandons his first wife but lives to rue this as spells and magic, which involve Hulð again, result in his death and in fact the line of the Ynglingar are cursed. There is an ambivalence here. Drífa has been treated badly and the use of sorcery and magic is not condemned.

6.1.1.5 Snæfríðr

King Haraldr inn hárfagri (“finehaired”) is bewitched by Snæfríðr (Shoefrith), daughter of another Lapp, Svási.³⁴⁸ She is of course “a most beautiful woman” and when she serves him a goblet of mead and he takes her hand, he is bewitched. He marries her and proceeds to neglect his kingdom. After she dies, her body does not decay and the King mourns her for three years. The problem is solved, her body decays and the King regains his wits, thanks to Þorleifr spaki (“the wise”).³⁴⁹

6.1.1.6 Gyða

King Haraldr inn hárfagri had multiple wives and mistresses during his long reign.³⁵⁰ He took a liking to Gyða, daughter of King Eiríkr of Horðaland, and wanted her for a mistress, “since she was a very beautiful girl and rather proud.”³⁵¹ It is unclear if her

³⁴⁶ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, I. 31-32.

³⁴⁷ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, I. 16-17. Hollander refers to *Hulð* as a “sorceress”. Both translators use the term “witch” and “troll” woman in the following poem. Hollander, *Heimskringla*, 16.

³⁴⁸ Davíðková, Óláfr & the Queens, 50. She references: Nicolas Meylan. *Magic and Kingship in Medieval Iceland: The Construction of a Discourse of Political Resistance*. Studies in Viking and Medieval Scandinavia 3 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014). 80-82 & Bjørn Bandlien, *Strategies of passion: love and marriage in medieval Iceland and Norway* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2005), 135.

³⁴⁹ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, I. 72-73.

³⁵⁰ For political reasons. Sawyer, *Heimskringla. An interpretation*, 116.

³⁵¹ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, I. 55.

“proudness” is part of her attraction, perhaps kings were attracted by “strong women”. She famously turns Haraldr down saying that:

hon spilla meydómi sínum til þessa taka til manns þann konung, er eigi hefir meira ríki en nokkur fylki til forráða.³⁵²

she is not willing to sacrifice her virginity in order to take as her husband a king who had no more of a realm than a few districts to administer.³⁵³

She later says she finds it surprising there is no one King of Norway as there is for Denmark and Sweden. If *Heimskringla* was aimed partly at a Norwegian audience, this refers to the tradition he unified Norway.³⁵⁴ The author reports the king’s messengers thought her “haughty”, “remarkably bold” and “silly”, but Haraldr is impressed and famously says he will not cut his hair until he is King of all Norway. In this case he does not seek to carry her off by force, though it is unclear whether this is due to his relative weakness or out of consideration for Gyða. Friðriksdóttir argues although Haraldr eventually feels he has achieved his vow and Gyða relents, she may not have been his wife, but one of a number of mistresses.³⁵⁵

6.1.1.7 Símun’s servant

Sorcery is not limited to the semi-legendary period. In the reign of Sigurðr “munnr”, he meets the unnamed servant woman of a farmer, Símun. “She sang wondrously”, which was enough for the King to have a son with her, the future Hákon herðibreiðr (“broad shouldered”). He is raised by Símun and his wife Gunnhildr alongside their sons.³⁵⁶ Later during Hákon’s conflict with King Ingi the tale relates:

Svá segja menn, at Gunnhildr, er Símun hafði átt, fósttra Hákonar, léti sitja úti til sigrs Hákonu, en þat vitraði, at þeir skyldi berjask við Inga um nótt, en aldregi um dag, kvað þá hlýða mundu. En Þórdís skeggja er sú kona nefnd, er sagt er, at úti sat, en eigi veit ek sann á því.³⁵⁷

³⁵² Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, I. 96.

³⁵³ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, I. 55. It is significant she is willing to be his wife but not a mistress.

³⁵⁴ Whaley, *Heimskringla. Introduction*, 18. She suggests it was also aimed at the Icelandic elite. Later she suggests “he is writing primarily for an Icelandic audience.” 123. The truth may be he wrote for both.

³⁵⁵ Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 82. Sawyer argues Gyða had not meant her “condition” for marriage seriously. Sawyer, *Heimskringla. An interpretation*, 116-117.

³⁵⁶ There may be some confusion over the names and relationships here.

³⁵⁷ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, III. 366.

People say that Gunnhildr, who had been married to Hákon's foster-brother Símun, had someone sit outside [at night to cast a spell] to bring victory to Hákon, but it was revealed that they should fight Ingi by night, and never by day, and it said that then it would work. And the woman who it is said sat outside is named as Þórdís skeggja (Bearded Woman), but I do not know the truth of it.³⁵⁸

6.1.1.8 Ragnhildr

Ragnhildr in ríka (“the powerful”) was the grandmother of Eiríkr blóðøx and daughter of the King of Jutland. She apparently forced Hálfðan svartí to “put away” nine of his eleven wives in order to marry her.³⁵⁹ There is a longish tale in *Heimskringla* concerning her father who is killed by a berserker, Haki, who proceeds to kidnap her and her younger brother. He intends to marry her but his wounds delay the ceremony and Hálfðan hearing the news, orders one of his men to rescue her and her brother. He then proceeds to marry her himself.

We don't know what Ragnhildr's wishes might have been.³⁶⁰ Snorri later says after their son Haraldr was born that: “Móðir hans unni honum mikít, en faðir hans minna.”³⁶¹ “His mother loved him greatly, but his father not so much.”³⁶² Snorri then writes: “ok var hon síðan rík dróttning.”³⁶³ “She was afterwards a powerful Queen.”³⁶⁴ Sadly he does not describe how she used her power.

6.1.2 Inciters and goaders

In *Heimskringla*, Bera wife of Álfr of Sweden is described as: “kvinna fríðust ok skörungr mikill, gleðimaðr inn mesti.”³⁶⁵ “a very beautiful and impressive woman, a most cheerful person,”³⁶⁶ in contrast to Álfr who is “morose”. It seems she would sit up and talk at night to Yngvi his brother who was more popular. The brothers kill each other and Bera gets the blame. This becomes explicit in the poem which follows:

³⁵⁸ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, III. 228.

³⁵⁹ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, I. 69.

³⁶⁰ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, I. 50-51.

³⁶¹ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, I. 91.

³⁶² Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, I. 52.

³⁶³ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, I. 89.

³⁶⁴ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, I. 51.

³⁶⁵ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, I. 41.

³⁶⁶ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, 23. Hollander uses the term “of strong character” rather than “impressive.” Hollander, *Heimskringla*, 24.

“Vasa þat bært, at Bera skyldi valsœfendr vígs of hvetja, þás brœðr tveir at þonum urðusk óþurfendr of afbrýði.”³⁶⁷

“It could not be borne that Bera should whet to warfare workers of slaughter, when two brothers brought each other down, uselessly out of jealousy.”³⁶⁸

We do not know what happens to Bera or whether she intended the deaths or gained anything from it. She was her own woman: she often refused her husband’s instructions to “go to bed earlier”. Snorri deliberately paints Bera in a negative light, perhaps on moral grounds.

6.1.3 Status

6.1.3.1 Álfhildr

We have already met Álfhildr, mistress of King Óláfr helgi. In *Morkinskinna* during the period when her son Magnús and King Haraldr harðráði, rule jointly, they raid Denmark and capture twelve men led by Þorkell geysir. Álfhildr is on campaign with them, which is interesting in itself, but she goes on to release Þorkell and his men in direct contradiction to the orders of her son. It is not clear why she does this. Mother and son quarrel over her actions. Later when he regrets who she chose as his father, she says:

You should not quarrel with him on this account because he could have made a lesser choice, but you should rather honour me more for the father I chose for you.³⁶⁹

After her son’s death, Álfhildr goes and lives with Þorkell geysa in Denmark but describes him and his kin as “commoners”. He does not take this amiss and takes her to King Sveinn’s court where she “takes up residence”. Clearly this gave her more status.³⁷⁰ This story does not appear in either *Fagrskinna* or *Heimskringla*.

6.1.3.2 Ástríðr (wife of King Óláfr helgi) & the skald

Friðriksdóttir draws our attention to a story concerning Ástríðr interpolated into “Óttars þátr svartá” within the “Separate Saga”. This concerns a skald from the Swedish court who King Óláfr helgi suspects is a little too fond of Ástríðr. The matter is ultimately resolved but in the “Bergsbók” version of the story, she comments on her status. It is

³⁶⁷ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, I. 42.

³⁶⁸ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, I. 24.

³⁶⁹ Andersson & Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 180. Note 5. Álfhildr is compared with Ragnhildr Magnúsdóttir in respect of Hákon Ívarsson.

³⁷⁰ Andersson & Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 184.

implied she is saying that she has the right to reward the skald as she sees fit. “Ástriðr asserts her autonomy and official, legitimate position as queen, as a full member of the royal household and a power player in her own right.”³⁷¹

6.1.3.3 Ragnhildr, daughter of King Magnús goði

For Ragnhildr, daughter of King Magnús goði, the issue of “status” is important. A certain Hákon Ívarsson has fallen out with the current King, Haraldr harðráði. Finn Arnason, the Kings’ friend, in helping to damp down resistance in the Trondheim region, promises Hákon marriage with Ragnhildr and a Jarldom.³⁷² Later the King states she must consent to the marriage and Ragnhildr states:

Opt finn ek þat, at mér er aldaði Magnús konungr, faðir minn, ef ek skal giptask bónda einum, þó at þú sér fríðr maðr eða vel búinn at íþróttum. Ef Magnús konungr lifði, þá mundi hann eigi gipta mik minna manni en konungi. Nú er þess eigi ván, at ek vilja giptask ótignum manni.³⁷³

I frequently realise that my father King Magnús is truly dead and gone as far as I am concerned, if I must give myself in marriage to just a farmer, even if you are a fine man and endowed with many skills. If King Magnús were alive, then he would not marry me to any man of lower rank than king. So it is not to be expected that I should be willing to marry a man of no rank.³⁷⁴

It may be King Haraldr knew she would take this position. Though Auður Magnúsdóttir suggests that in marrying Ragnhildr off to a person of lower status, Haraldr is trying to prevent her children inheriting the throne of Norway.³⁷⁵

Hákon seems willing to accept the deal but the King appears to go back on his word (though it is not clear why and this may weaken the argument of Auður Magnúsdóttir above on this point.). He is later reconciled with King Haraldr and because a Jarl has died in the meantime, is granted the title he craved and marriage to Ragnhildr.³⁷⁶

³⁷¹ Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 103-104.

³⁷² For a detailed account: Auður Magnúsdóttir, “Kingship, Women and Politics,” 101-105.

³⁷³ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, III. 129.

³⁷⁴ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, III. 77.

³⁷⁵ Auður Magnúsdóttir, “Kingship, Women and Politics,” 104-105. Haraldr underestimated Ragnhildr?

³⁷⁶ Anderson & Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 15-20. The “conflict between love and status.” They indicate this “domestic” element is rare in sagas and unique in *Morkinskinna*.

It is not clear whether she had any say in this, but she got what she wanted. Later she marries again to the son of the King of Denmark.³⁷⁷

Auður Magnúsdóttir argues that Ragnhildr has a higher status than either Hákon or King Haraldr harðráði and that the former seeking her counsel should be seen in this context. This author is not convinced as there are a range of other examples where men seek the counsel of their wives, daughters etc.³⁷⁸

6.1.4 Marriage alliances

6.1.4.1 Kristín

In a Norwegian context, we find, Kristín, daughter of King Knútr lávarðr and Ingibjörg who was probably Danish. She married King Magnús blindi (“the blind”) but:

Magnús konungr varð henni ekki unnandi ok sendi hana aptr suðr til Danmerkr, ok gekk honum allt þyngra síðan. Fekk hann óþokka mikinn af frændum hennar.³⁷⁹

Magnús did not become fond of her and sent her south back to Denmark. After that, things became more difficult for him, and he was in great disfavour with her kin.³⁸⁰

6.1.4.2 Cecilia & King Sigurðr “the crusader”

King Sigurðr “the crusader” towards the end of his life wished to abandon his queen for a woman named Cecilia, “daughter of a powerful man”. Despite the efforts of two bishops, the king goes ahead and marries her, presumably without divorcing his first wife. We don’t know if Cecilia was happy with this but later, she appears to abandon him.

Báðu þá vinir hans at hann léti konuna lausa, ok hon sjálf vildi þá í brot fara ok bað konunginn í sóttinni at hon færi frá honum ok kvazk vildu við hann skiljask, at þat mætti honum bezt gegna ok báðum þeim. Konungr svaraði: “Eigi kom mér þat í hug at þú myndir fyrllá mik sem aðrir.³⁸¹

³⁷⁷ Auður Magnúsdóttir, “Kingship, Women and Politics,” 100-101. Whaley, *Heimskringla. Introduction*, 71.

³⁷⁸ Auður Magnúsdóttir, “Kingship, Women and Politics,” 102-103. Admittedly, she is only considering *Morkinskinna*. She notes Ragnhildr was illegitimate but it is not clear if this would have affected her status. She suggests the author overlooked this fact as he favours her, Hákon (and Magnús) over King Haraldr.

³⁷⁹ Ármann Jakobsson & Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson, ed., *Morkinskinna*, II. XXIV. (Reykjavik: Íslensk Fornrit, 2011). 153-154.

³⁸⁰ Andersson & Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 359-360.

³⁸¹ Ármann Jakobsson & Þórður Guðjónsson, *Morkinskinna*, II. XXIV. 151-152.

His friends urged him to relinquish his new wife, and she herself wished to depart. As he lay ill, she asked to be released because that would serve them both best. The King said: “It never occurred to me that you would abandon me like the others.”³⁸²

It maybe she was uncomfortable with being a second wife or mistress and even that she felt he would suffer less punishment in the hereafter if she left him. Auður Magnúsdóttir argues that in *Morkinskinna*, Sigurðr is deliberately portrayed in a negative way in comparison to King Eynstein, including his non-observance of Christian principles. The implication, the latter is a more worthy King, though he dies before his half-brother.³⁸³

6.1.4.3 Margrét fridkola (“peace maiden”)

There are examples where a marriage alliance works, politically at least. Margrét fridkola (“peace maiden”) became the Wife of King Magnús berfœttr (“barelegs”).³⁸⁴ She was the Daughter of King Ingi of Sweden. Magnús is said to have previously had children with various mistresses though and he and Margrét have no children before he dies a few years later.³⁸⁵ The alliance is between King Magnús of Norway, Ingi of Sweden and Eirík Sveinsson King of Denmark. Later Margrét marries King Níkolás Sveinsson, King of Denmark and has a son, Magnús “the Strong” who subsequently became King of Sweden.

6.1.5 Resistance

Women could and did resist male violence though with varying success.

6.1.5.1 Guðrún

In the Saga of Óláfr Tryggvason, we meet Guðrún the daughter of Járn Skeggi (“iron Skeggi”), a “rich farmer”, in the context of the conversion of Norway to Christianity. Her father is killed when King Óláfr destroys the temple at Mærin in Brándheimer, despite resistance from the “farmers” and his implication he would respect their beliefs and customs. In compensation it is agreed he will marry Guðrún. On their wedding night she try’s but fails to kill him. She leaves but no one goes after her. Snorri says:

³⁸² Anderson & Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 358.

³⁸³ Auður Magnúsdóttir, “Kingship, Women and Politics,” 94.

³⁸⁴ In terms of *Morkinskinna*: Auður Magnúsdóttir, “Kingship, Women and Politics,” 99.

³⁸⁵ “Saga of Magnus Barelegs.” Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, III. 139.

Tók Guðrún þá ok klæði sin ok allir þeir menn, er henni hófðu þannug fylgt. Fóru þau í brot leið sína, ok kom Guðrún ekki síðan í sama rekkju Óláfi konungi.³⁸⁶

Guðrún then also got her clothes and all the people who had come there with her. They went off on their way, and Guðrún never again came into the same bed as King Óláfr.³⁸⁷

It is not clear why King Óláfr takes no action nor what happens to her. However she had “agency” and was not afraid to take a great risk in seeking to avenge her father and probably a marriage she did not want. It is possible the King felt some guilt for both or perhaps the author wants to put the King in a positive light here.

6.1.5.2 Margrét

In one tale, the woman avoids the attentions of a king only to end up marrying a local steward.³⁸⁸ The woman is Margrét, daughter of Þrándr. The king is Magnús goði and the steward is Sigurðr “kings’ kin”. She tells her father, when it is rumoured the king will visit, that she is apprehensive of him. The king tells her father he wishes to sleep with her. She is not surprised and says:

... at konungr býsk við því einu um er í móti er mínim vilja, ok þykki mér þat þungt at leggja fyrst ást við hann ok týna honum brátt.³⁸⁹

... that the King only has in mind what is contrary to my wishes, and it is difficult to love him first and then lose him immediately.³⁹⁰

The King appears to have a transactional view of matters:

Ekki em ek kenndr við ódrenskap af flestum mǫnnum, en búask má svá um at henni verði gæfa at þessu, ok engi hæfendi munu á qǫru verða en ek ráða fyrir.³⁹¹

³⁸⁶ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, I. 319.

³⁸⁷ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, I. 198-199.

³⁸⁸ See also the story of *Borghildr*.

³⁸⁹ Ármann Jakobsson & Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson, *Morkinskinna*. XXIII. 149.

³⁹⁰ Andersson & Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 168-169.

³⁹¹ Ármann Jakobsson & Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson, *Morkinskinna*. XXIII. 149.

I am not generally reputed to be a scoundrel, and this can be done in a way that turns to her advantage. But there is no fitting alternative to my deciding this matter.³⁹²

In this case Margrét is saved, her honour intact, by Sigurðr who presumably has admired her from afar. He convinces the King that “God and Saint Óláfr” were opposed to his plan. The King gives his blessing to Margrét and Sigurðr’s marriage.³⁹³ We don’t know if she wanted this.

Women are routinely described in terms of their “looks” but they are also praised for their intelligence.³⁹⁴ This is why: “Þat var vanði Þrándar at hann kvaddi dóttur sína nálíga at ǫllum málum.”³⁹⁵ “It was Þrandr’s habit to consult his daughter on practically all matters.”³⁹⁶

6.1.5.3 Borghildr

Borghildr was the daughter of “a wealthy and powerful farmer”. “She was the fairest of women and a sensible person and very knowledgeable.” *Heimskringla* relays a rumour that she spent a lot of time with King Eynstein (Magnússon).

Borghildr was always in talk with the king, and there were different opinions among people about their friendship. Borghildr Óláfsdóttir heard the rumour wherein people slandered her and King Eysteinn about their talk and friendship. So she went to Borg and undertook a fast before an ordeal of carrying hot iron and carried the iron to clear her from this slander and was proved innocent.³⁹⁷

If that wasn’t enough, when news of this reaches King Sigurðr (Magnússon) he:

rode in one day a distance equivalent to two long days travel, and turned up in Dalr at Óláfr’s, and stayed there the night. Then he took Borghildr as his mistress and carried her away with him.³⁹⁸

³⁹² Andersson & Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 168-169.

³⁹³ For an interpretation of this tale highlighting the author of *Morkinskinna*’s positive view of *Magnús goði*: Auður Magnúsdóttir, “Kingship, Women and Politics,” 91-92. The story does not appear in *Heimskringla*. She suggests one motive was to highlight the Christian concept of “consent”. Footnote 30.

³⁹⁴ Auður disagrees on this point. Auður Magnúsdóttir, “Kingship, Women and Politics,” 96. Footnote 43.

³⁹⁵ Ármann Jakobsson & Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson, *Morkinskinna*, XXIII. 148.

³⁹⁶ Andersson & Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 168.

³⁹⁷ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, III. 156-157.

³⁹⁸ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, III. 156-157.

They have a son, who later becomes King as Magnús “the blind”, whose story is an unfortunate one. Again, we do not know what Borghildr thought about this or what Sigurðr’s motives were (he had at least two, possibly three wives over his reign). He may have been impressed by her courage and strength in successfully going through the “ordeal” but maybe it was rivalry with his brother. Sometimes a woman proving a point attracts the wrong kind of male interest.³⁹⁹

6.1.6 Heroines - Ástrídr

In contrast to Gunnhildr and Álfifa, a few women are granted heroic status. Particularly Ástrídr, mother of King Óláfr Tryggvissón.⁴⁰⁰ The story begins when, pregnant with the future King, she flees Norway following her husband’s death and the author of *Heimskringla* indicates she suffered significant hardship. The agents of Queen Gunnhildr (“mother of kings”) are in pursuit.⁴⁰¹

In due course Ástrídr flees to Sweden where she finds safety for a while. The King of Sweden (Eiríkr “Victorious”) is not immune from Queen Gunnhildr’s requests for her and her son to be returned to Norway, but Hákon gamli (“the old”) who is sheltering Ástrídr, says it is her decision: “but Ástríðr will by no means agree that the boy should go.”⁴⁰²

Despite being given men by the Swedish King, Gunnhildr’s agent is driven off. Ástrídr and her son now try to flee to Garðaríki where her brother serves the King there, Valdamarr. However, she is captured by “Vikings” and they are separated and sold into slavery. Her brother rescues the boy Óláfr and he comes under the protection of the Queen of Garðaríki, Allógiá. It is significant it is she, not her husband that fulfils this role.⁴⁰³

Eventually Ástrídr is rescued by one “Loðinn, from Vík, wealthy and of good family”. However, he insists on marrying her in return for this (and he has recognised who she is). The author makes clear that she was reluctant:

³⁹⁹ *Borghildr* briefly appears in *Fagrskinna* in a genealogy in Appendix II. 301. In *Morkinskinna*, 329.

⁴⁰⁰ Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, 15-45. Davíðková notes “the admiration generally given to mothers who protect their infant children and go on long journeys.” Davíðková, *Óláfr and the Queens*, 17.

⁴⁰¹ All be it, King Haraldr gráfeldr and his brother Guðrøðr were also active in this.

⁴⁰² Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, I. 139.

⁴⁰³ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, I. 141. The stories of *Óláfr* and his mother now play out separately.

En með því at Ástríðr var þá nauðuliga við komin ok þat annat, at hon vissi, at Loðinn var maðr stórættaðr, vaskr ok auðigr, þá heitr hon honum þessu til útlausnar sér.⁴⁰⁴

And since Ástríðr was now in a desperate situation, and since she also knew that he was of noble ancestry, valiant and wealthy, so she promises him this for her redemption.⁴⁰⁵

It is true he has to get the consent of her kinsmen to marry her, but we do not know how far she accepted him. She bore him three more children.⁴⁰⁶ There is a contrast in how Ástríðr is drawn in *Heimskringla* and her rival, Queen Gunnhildr. This time there is no reference to her beauty or intelligence and she does not appear to play any role in the governance of Norway. She is shown in the role of a loyal mother who protects her son.

6.1.7 Survivors - Kristín kingsdóttir

Kristín kingsdóttir, has to deal with harsh politics. She was married to Erling skakki (“the crooked”, son of Kyrpinga-Ormr) a major supporter of King Ingi. She was the daughter of King Sigurðr (“the crusader”) and Málmfríðr of Garthariki. *Heimskringla* suggests it was due to the King’s influence that the marriage came about.⁴⁰⁷

In the wars between King Ingi and Hakon herðibreiðr when Kristín kingsdóttir decides to leave Oslo, *Heimskringla* tells us:

So she said she thought it was dangerous and not a place for women to be in. The king asked her not to go away. “If it turns out that we are victorious, as I intend, then you will be well looked after here, but if it turns out that I fall, then my friends will get no chance to see to my corpse, and yet you will be able to request permission to see to the corpse. Thus, you will best be able to repay me for having treated you kindly.”⁴⁰⁸

The King thinks his enemies would not kill or harm Kristín, despite her connections to him. King Ingi is slain and Kristín repays him as he has asked.⁴⁰⁹

⁴⁰⁴ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, I. XXVI. 301.

⁴⁰⁵ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, I. 187.

⁴⁰⁶ There is a passing reference to Ástríðr in *Fagrskinna* and no reference to the court of her son King Óláfr.

⁴⁰⁷ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, III. 199.

⁴⁰⁸ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, III. 228.

⁴⁰⁹ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, III. 230. Bagge, *Society & Politics*, 168. He considers if Snorri is influenced by the ideals of chivalry in his treatment of women.

After King Ingi's death, Kristín arranges and pays for a spy to learn what the new King, Hákon herðibreiðr, is up to and then lets her husband know.⁴¹⁰ She tells him not to trust him. Her husband then assumes leadership of those who had supported King Ingi.

Erling later journeys to Denmark with their son Magnús's and supporters. The then King of Denmark's mother was Kristín's aunt. A political deal was done for King Valdamarr's support for putting Magnús on the throne of Norway.⁴¹¹ Some years later Valdamarr reminds the Norwegians of their agreement (which included Norwegian territory). Despite Erling's efforts, many resist Danish rule and war breaks out.

Kristín then travels to the Danish court and later persuades her husband to join her. Another deal is done whereby hostages are exchanged, with Erlingr remaining in Denmark. Eventually Valdamarr agrees to let Erling rule the lands in Norway promised to him as Jarl, avoiding direct Danish rule. This meant peace for many years after.⁴¹²

It is at this point we learn (from *Heimskringla*) that Erlingr had four illegitimate children by different concubines. Whatever degree of acceptance Kristín may have had (and we don't know the chronology), it appears she had had enough. Snorri records:

Kristín fór af landi með þeim manni, er Grímr rusli var kallaðr. Þau fóru út í Miklagarð ok váru þar um hríð, ok áttu þau börn nokkur.⁴¹³

Kristín left the country with a man that was called Grímr rusli ("useless"). They went out to Mikligarðr and stayed there a while, and they had some children.⁴¹⁴

We don't hear of her again directly but *Heimskringla* also suggests she had a son, Haraldr, with King Sigurðr.⁴¹⁵ When Haraldr is captured, Erlingr (her husband) has him executed despite pleas for mercy. One wonders if he was influenced by Haraldr's supposed parentage and his wife, Kristín, leaving him for another man. We don't know for certain she was the mother of Haraldr, but the story of Haraldr is also mentioned in *Fagrskinna*.⁴¹⁶

⁴¹⁰ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, III. 230.

⁴¹¹ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, III. 249-253.

⁴¹² Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, III. 253-254.

⁴¹³ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, III. XXVIII. 407.

⁴¹⁴ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, III. 254. It is not clear if the nickname for Grímr was given by the author who disapproves of Kristín's choices.

⁴¹⁵ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, III. 256.

⁴¹⁶ Finlay, *Fagrskinna*, 290-291.

6.1.8 Tales of revenge

As in the *Íslendingasögur*, women seek revenge for the violence meted out on their husbands, sons and kinsfolk.

6.1.8.1 Bergljót, daughter of Jarl Hákon

Bergljót marries Einarr pambarskelfir. He fell out with King Óláfr helgi at some point but they were reconciled and he regained his lands including those Bergljót brought as dowry.⁴¹⁷ In the reign of Haraldr harðráði, their son, Eindrithi, had married the king's daughter Sigrith. However, both he and Einar are killed by the king's men in an altercation. Bergljót urges the farmers of Trondheim to avenge her husband's and son's death. She bemoans the absence of her kinsman Hákon Ívarsson.⁴¹⁸

6.1.8.2 Álof

In some cases, it is their menfolk who take revenge. In the time of King Haraldr “greycloak”, his brother Sigurðr slefa visits the home of Hersir (Lord) Klyppr. His wife Álof provides the appropriate hospitality but:

The king went during the night to Álof's bed and lay with her against her will. Then the king went away.⁴¹⁹

Her husband takes revenge later in the year and kills Sigurðr, though he is in turn killed. We hear no more of Álof.

6.1.8.3 Ragnhildr (wife of Dagr Eilífsson)

Ragnhildr appears in *Morkinskinna*. Here her sister Gyða resists the attentions of Geirsteinn, a favourite of King Sigurðr. Her kinsman Gyrðr kills Geirsteinn and Gyða sends him to her sister Ragnhildr, whose son is Grégóriús.⁴²⁰ He is reluctant to defend Gyrðr, but she says:

Give the man aid so that he may be granted life for the deed he has done, for he has washed away a great shame from our kinsmen. You should respect my words and your own honor.⁴²¹

⁴¹⁷ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, II. 126.

⁴¹⁸ Whaley, *Heimskringla. Introduction*, 95. She notes *Bergljót* is just a name in *Morkinskinna* and *Fagrskinna* but is given direct speech by Snorri.

⁴¹⁹ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, I. 133.

⁴²⁰ Andersson & Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 394-395.

⁴²¹ Andersson & Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 395.

He continues to demur, referring to the power of the King, and this makes her angry.

You are destined to be of no account for a long time when you pay no attention even if your kinsmen are killed. You are a far cry from your worthy kinsmen, and the deed that has been committed was amply justified.⁴²²

Ultimately Grégóriús is persuaded and the tale continues with how he defeats and kills the sons of Geirsteinn, despite King Sigurðr's lukewarm support. The author may have had a political agenda, favouring one King over another and the "tropes" of a mother "inciting" her son to heroic deeds and defending family honour are not unusual.

6.1.9 Non-royal women

Whilst much attention is devoted in the three kings' sagas to royal women, there are others whose stories are told.

6.1.9.1 Ragnhildr, daughter of Erling Skjálgsson

Ragnhildr was the wife of Þorbergr Árnason. During the reign of King Óláfr helgi, one Steinn Skaptason (an Icelander and skald), fell out with the king and having killed one of his bailiffs, arrived at Ragnhildr's estates. (As so often, her husband is not at home). The reason she receives him "cordially" was that they had met before. In an unusual twist, he had helped her through a difficult childbirth, including persuading a reluctant priest to be with her and baptise her daughter. Steinn gives the infant a gold finger ring and Ragnhildr promised her help if he needed it in the future.

Steinn reminds her of this promise and she "assigned him a seat next to her son" but asks him to wait until her husband returns. He hears what Steinn has done before he arrives home, including that Steinn has been outlawed. He tells Ragnhildr:

Ok kann ek mér meiri svinnu en at takask a hendr einn útlendan mann ok hafa þar fyrir reiði konungs. Láttu Stein fara í brot heðan sem skjótast." Ragnhildr svarar, segir, at þau mundu bæði í brot fara eða bæði þar vera. "Þorbergr bað hana fara, hvert er hon vildi. "Vænti ek þess," segir hann, "þótt þú farir, at þú komir skjótt apr, því at hér munu vera metorð þín mest."⁴²³

⁴²² Andersson & Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 396.

⁴²³ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, II. XXVII. 245.

“And I have more sense than to take on my hands a foreigner and as a result incur the king’s anger. Make Steinn go away from here as soon as possible.” Ragnhildr answers, saying that either they would both go away or both of them stay. Þorbergr told her to go wherever she wanted. “I expect,” he says, “that even if you go, you will soon come back, for here you will find you are most highly regarded.”⁴²⁴

He accuses her of being obstinate and impetuous but she stands her ground. Steinn stays the winter. The King sends a message summoning Þorbergr and most folk advise him to comply and “get rid of Steinn”. His brother Finn argues:

segir, at honum þótti illt ofkvæni slíkt, at þora eigi fyrir konu sinni at halda einurð við lánardröttin sinn.⁴²⁵

... saying that he thought such female dominance was bad, not to dare because of one’s wife to stay loyal to one’s leige lord.⁴²⁶

Another brother chastises him for supporting an outlawed Icelander. Ragnhildr continues to resist:

Ragnhildr sendi menn austr á Jaðar til Erlings, fōður síns, ok bað hann senda sér lið, þaðan fóru synir Erlings, Sigurðr ok Þórir, ok hafði hvárr þeira tvítögssessu ok a níu tigu manna.⁴²⁷

Ragnhildr sent men east to Jaðarr to her father Erlingr, and asked him to send her men. There set out from there Erlingr’s sons Sigurðr and Þórir, and each of them had a ship with twenty benches with ninety men on them.⁴²⁸

At this point, Þorbergr and his brothers mysteriously have a change of heart and also send ships and men. They try to negotiate with King Óláfr and when he refuses their offer of compensation and terms, threaten to go and join King Knutr inn ríki. At which point, the King backs down. Ultimately the brothers swear and agree to support the King and Steinn is permitted to leave the country and join King Knutr in England.⁴²⁹

⁴²⁴ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, II. 163-164.

⁴²⁵ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, II. XXVII. 246.

⁴²⁶ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, II. 164.

⁴²⁷ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *Heimskringla*, II. XXVII. 247.

⁴²⁸ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, II. 165.

⁴²⁹ Finlay & Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, II. 166.

The point is, that it is Ragnhildr that decides to protect Steinn, all be it in part returning a favour. It is she who stands fast against her husband and his brothers and ultimately the King. Þorbergr later claims he deliberately provoked his brothers in order to get their support for Steinn, but more likely it is Ragnhildr and her family who drive events. There is also the religious aspect, it is implied Ragnhildr is Christian and therefore keen for her infant daughter to be baptised. Steinn is an Icelander and perhaps the author of *Heimskringla* favours him a little in the telling of the tale, despite his misdeeds.

6.1.9.2 Ragnhildr “the Chieftain”

In the time of King Eynstein (Magnússon) and King Sigurðr “the crusader”, the latter was in Bjorgvin.

It happened one summer that a prominent woman named Ragnhildr came to Bjorgvin. She was married to Pall Skoptason, commanded a longship, and travelled in the style of a district chieftain.⁴³⁰

Unfortunately, we hear nothing more of this Ragnhildr and we don’t know what “commanded” meant in this context, but there is no suggestion she was particularly unusual and the King appears impressed rather than displeased at her status.

6.1.9.3 Ása of Niðeróss

Another non-aristocratic women mentioned in the kings’ sagas is Ása of Niðeróss. In the time of King Eynstein and his brothers, an Icelander called Þórðr arrives. He is “able, wise and a good skald.” She is of “good family and wealthy and no longer a young woman.” We assume she was a widow and he increasingly looks after her affairs.⁴³¹

This does not mean that she was “subordinate”. She decides to invest in his trading expedition to England. This was successful as were further voyages. Her kin however don’t like him.

Her kin found the situation dishonourable and took a dislike to him. It was commonly rumoured that he was involved with Asa.⁴³²

Later Þórðr gets into an altercation with a “powerful district chieftain,” Ingimarr of Askr, however he has allies and ultimately King Eynstein takes his side despite the

⁴³⁰ Anderson & Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 394. The King commissions a poem to celebrate her departure.

⁴³¹ Andersson & Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 330.

⁴³² Andersson & Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 331. They were perhaps jealous of his wealth and popularity.

insults aimed at Þórdr's lack of status.⁴³³ We don't know what happens to Ása, other than she "had no lack of wealth".

6.1.10 Foreign rule - Álfifa again

Sveinn and Álfifa travel to Denmark when it becomes clear they cannot gather sufficient support to oppose those supporting King Magnús.⁴³⁴ King Sveinn dies shortly afterwards. Álfifa reappears with King Horðaknútr in Denmark and the author of *Morkinskinna* suggests she poisons him, though it was meant for King Magnús who is visiting. Given Horðaknútr was the son of Emma, Knútr inn ríki's second wife, it is not completely impossible she meant to kill him. It is suggested she has magical powers, something often attributed to women who were feared.⁴³⁵

Ok sýndisk nú þessi svik Álfifu við Magnús konung, því at hon hafði honum ætlat þenna dauðadrykk. En hon var þegar ǫll í brot, ok mátti henni því ekki hegna.⁴³⁶

This demonstrated Álfifa's treachery towards King Magnús because she intended the fatal draught for him. But she vanished instantly so that she could not be punished.⁴³⁷

There seems to be some confusion over Álfifa's later presence in Norway as *Morkinskinna* relates another tale of her alleged duplicity. The Emperor heard that King Magnús had a sister, Úlfhildr, whom he was considering marrying if she was, "a fair women in appearance and highly intelligent."⁴³⁸ He sends Duke Otto, a kinsman, to negotiate. "King Magnús was not in residence, but Álfifa was there in Vik and prepared a banquet." She introduces her daughter as Úlfhildr dressed: "ok skorti eigi a henni gull ok gersimar ok því líkast sem goð væri sett á stalla."⁴³⁹ "With no lack of gold and precious ornaments, not unlike a god set out on an altar."⁴⁴⁰

⁴³³ The author is perhaps biased in favour of Icelanders. Note 6 to chapter 68, 454. The story does not appear in *Fagrskinna* or *Heimskringla*.

⁴³⁴ Andersson & Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 100-101.

⁴³⁵ Davíðková discusses an episode at the court of Knútr inn ríki, where Álfifa appears to have magical powers and talk to troll women about a retainer who has been cursed. This tale appears in two versions, in *Flateyjarbók* and *Tómasskinna*. In the latter, Álfifa is associated with witchcraft, resembling Queen Gunnhildr. In the former she supports her husband by pointing out the risks of a retainer who has been cursed, but there is still criticism of Álfifa's actions. Davíðková, *Óláfr and the Queens*, 44-48.

⁴³⁶ Ármann Jakobsson & Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson, *Morkinskinna*, XXIII. 46.

⁴³⁷ Andersson & Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 111.

⁴³⁸ Andersson & Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 115. The Holy Roman Emperor was probably Conrad II.

⁴³⁹ Ármann Jakobsson & Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson, *Morkinskinna*, I. XXIII. 56.

⁴⁴⁰ Andersson & Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 116.

The Duke is not impressed and returns home but the Emperor asks him to return, despite this. This time he meets the real Úlfhildr and: “ok ser hertoginn at hann er vid brogðum um komin ok Álfifa hefir ætlat at svíkja hann í málinu,”⁴⁴¹ “Realised that he had been tricked and that Álfifa had intended to deceive him with respect to the marriage ...”⁴⁴²

There is more to the story, but Álfifa is not mentioned again. Andersson & Gade state that the story is “garbled” and note there is an English version of the story in William of Malmesbury.⁴⁴³ The suspicion must be that Álfifa is inserted into the story to highlight her perfidious character. It is unlikely she would have been at the court of King Magnús.

Finally in the story of Þorkell dyrðill, a steward of King Magnús, he says of Álfifa:

Ok þá, herra, er yfir oss kom ríki Álfifu ok sú in illa öld, er í ófriði var hvers manns fé, uggða ek at eigi mynda ek fa gætt konungs eigna þessa er vér varðveittum ok vissum at þér áttuð at réttu at hafa.⁴⁴⁴

Sire, when the rule of Álfifa overtook us, that wicked age in which every man’s money was threatened, I was afraid that I would not be able to protect the king’s possessions in my keeping, knowing that they were rightfully yours.⁴⁴⁵

Álfifa “could not catch a break”.

6.1.11 “Get thee to a nunnery” - Ingibjörg

There is an unusual story in *Morkinskinna* concerning Ingibjörg, daughter of Halldórr and a friend of King Haraldr harðráði.⁴⁴⁶

vittr kona ok væn, ok var enn í vináttu við konung, ok jafnan var konungr þar á veizlum ok var með þeim Ingibjörgu tíðrætt. Kunni hon of marga hluti vel at hjala ok hyggiliga.⁴⁴⁷

⁴⁴¹ Ármann Jakobsson & Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson, *Morkinskinna*, I. XXIII. 57.

⁴⁴² Andersson & Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 116.

⁴⁴³ Andersson & Gade, *Morkinskinna*, Notes on 423-424, especially 2-5.

⁴⁴⁴ Ármann Jakobsson & Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson, *Morkinskinna*, I. XXIII. 132.

⁴⁴⁵ Andersson & Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 157.

⁴⁴⁶ This story does not appear in either *Fagrskinna* or *Heimskringla*.

⁴⁴⁷ Ármann Jakobsson & Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson, *Morkinskinna*, I. XXIII. 232.

... a wise and fair woman who has friendly relations with the King. The King was often entertained there, and he and Ingibjörg had much to talk about. She was conversant and knowledgeable about many things.⁴⁴⁸

She becomes ill in such a way that rumours spread she is pregnant by the king whose queen is also “with child”.⁴⁴⁹ The king is summoned by her father and the former advises him on a fairly drastic cure, including the hope of intercession by Saint Óláfr. The cure works but she is not best pleased with it and the King advises her father and Ingibjörg to sing and pray. “Ok nú eptir þetta heit þá batnar henni til fulls; ok sá kostur þykkir enn beztr í Nóregi,”⁴⁵⁰ “And after these prayers she recovered completely and was known as the best match in Norway.”⁴⁵¹

Despite this, the King decides she should not marry and sends her to a nunnery and “there she lived out her days with a good life.” It is not clear whether Ingibjörg had any say in the matter or what the kings’ motives were.

It seems mysterious but probable that King Haraldr is reserving the woman for himself. The story seems to form a matching contrast to King Magnús’s desired liaison with Margrét in chapter 23. King Magnús accedes to the miraculously revealed wishes of St. Óláfr and refrains from the liaison. King Haraldr engages in quasi-magical practices [the cure] and persists in his designs. King Magnús surrenders Margrét to a qualified husband, but Haraldr refuses to follow suit.⁴⁵²

They don’t explain why the king sends her to a Nunnery. We don’t know what the motives of the author were and whether he is trying to make King Magnús look good in comparison to King Haraldr, because the latter is more likely to interfere in Iceland’s affairs.

⁴⁴⁸ Andersson & Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 220.

⁴⁴⁹ Andersson & Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 220-221. The author is less than explicit here.

⁴⁵⁰ Ármann Jakobsson & Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson, *Morkinskinna*, I. XXIII. 234-235.

⁴⁵¹ Andersson & Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 221-222.

⁴⁵² Andersson & Gade, *Morkinskinna*, Note 3. 439.

6.2 Appendix 2 – Personal names

In terms of forenames, it is not surprising women often share a first name but there is a degree of variety. See Table 3. In *Morkinskinna* for example, there are 40 different forenames. The spellings vary reflecting the original author, scribe and translator. The majority of forenames are associated with the Norse Viking world, such as Guðrún, Ingibjörg or Hild. Some appear more modern and reflect the influence of Christianity and the naming of children after saints or other religious figures. For example, Cecilia, Maria and Margaret. *Heimskringla*, I has one or two unusual names such as Bjathmynja who was Irish and Rikiza, named twice in *Fagrskinna*, may be a Polish name. A few women have nicknames. This is more common anecdotally for men, but possibly less likely to be negative for women. Female skalds, in particular Jórunn, appear in all three sources.⁴⁵³

Heimskringla has Ása in illráða (“the wicked” or “the evil”), one of the only female negative nicknames. Generally female nicknames suggest they are not mere cyphers, unless they were accorded in jest. Male nicknames tend to be quirky or downright negative. *Morkinskinna* has Árni fjöruskeifr (“shore-skewed”), Bjorn krepphendí (“withered-handed”), Erlendr gapamunnr (“gaping-mouth”) and Andréás kelduskítr (“well-fouler”).⁴⁵⁴ Since there were more men mentioned in the sources, often with the same forenames, perhaps was a greater need for nicknames.

⁴⁵³ Diana Whaley, “Skaldic poetry,” in *A companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*, ed., Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell publishing, 2007), 479-502. For Jórunn see 480. Judy Quinn, “Women in Old Norse Poetry and Sagas,” in *A companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*, ed., Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell publishing, 2007). 518-535. For Jórunn see 522-523.

⁴⁵⁴ See Andersson & Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 543-545. Index.

Source	Morkinskinna	Fagrskinna	Heimskringla
Total number of female names recorded	(40)	(49)	(75)
Most common personal names	Ingibjörg Kristín Ragnhildr Sigríðr Þora (Thora)	Ástríðr Ingibjörg Ingigerðr Kristín Ragnhildr Sigríðr Þora.	Ástríðr Gunnhild Guðrún Ragnhild Sigríðr Þora
	Nicknames	Nicknames	Nicknames
Examples of nicknames for women	Margréta fridkola (“peace girl”) Sigríðr in Stórráða (“imperious”) or (“of the great undertakings”)	Álfifa in ríka (“the great”), Alof arbot (“seasons bettering”) Helga in sidlata (“the virtuous”) Gunnhildr Konungamóðir (“kings mother” or “mother of kings”) Ingibjörg jarlamóðir (“mother of jarls”) Ragna in ríkuláta (“the magnificent”), Sigríðr Sæta (“grass widow”).	Álof in ríka (“the powerful”), Ása in illráða (“the wicked” or “the evil”) Kristín kingsdóttir Ragnhildr in ríka (“the powerful”)

Table 3 Most popular female names & nicknames⁴⁵⁵

⁴⁵⁵ Sawyer has a list of personal names in Heimskringla. Sawyer, *Heimskringla. An interpretation*, 167-172.