

The Valkyrie & The Matron:

Images of Women in Old Norse Culture & Society



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This Research Paper is
Dedicated in Memory of

Thora Rom Larsen

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"Thrice nine maidens were they, although one led,
a white-armed maid 'neath helm;
when their steeds stirred them, astride as they sate,
{ ran dew from their manes in deep gales,
fell hail into high woods;
thence come to men good crops;}
'twas hateful for me to behold."

-*Helgakvída Hjorvarthssonar (The Lay of Helgi Hjorvarthsson)*¹

"A wench's words let no wise man trust,
nor trust the troth of a woman;
for on whirling wheel their hearts are shaped,
and fickle and fitful their minds."

-*Hávamál (The Sayings of Hár)*²

Introduction

In May of 1983, I took my first trip to Scandinavia with my older brother and mother, a first generation Scandinavian-American. At the time, I was just eight years old when we visited the Oseberg burial site, near the Oslo Fjord in the region of Vestfold in south-eastern Norway (**Figure #1**) (See Map, p. 31.). The Oseberg gravesite consists of a grouping of burials mounds, which had remained untouched for nearly nine centuries. In 1903, the Oseberg ship was discovered during a period of heightened interest in archeological and anthropological research which was sweeping across Europe, along with waves of intense nationalism. The search for indigenous, ethnocentric cultural heritage not only drove the scientific community, but also inspired political parties and nationalist sentiment.

We also visited the Viking Ship Museum, where the ninth century Oseberg Ship (**Figure #2**) and all its decadent accouterments are housed. The entire length of the wooden ship is

¹ The Poetic Edda, Lee M. Hollander, trans. (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1962), #28:176.

² The Poetic Edda, #84:26.

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lavishly carved in shallow relief whose imagery consists of dense swarms of writhing mythical beasts. In typical Viking fashion, the Oseberg ship served as a burial vessel, symbolizing the deceased's journey into the realm of the dead. Historical and cultural assumptions regarding gender and power may cause most people to readily assume that the Oseberg Ship, recognized as the largest and most opulent gravesite in all of Northern Europe, was the final resting place of a chieftain or king. However, this extravagant ancient relic was the grave of two women, one of whom was Queen Åsa of Norway. It was shocking to me that I only recently encountered this historical fact. However, the books in my research provided only a sentence or two with which to discuss this unique discovery. Apparently my ignorance was not completely unfounded, considering the words of Marie Louise Stig Sørensen,

"Men are used to 'carry' the narrative of the past through the exhibition space. It is through men that history is articulated...the meaning, furthermore is constructed by drawing connections between objects as well...For women to become part of history, its active practitioners rather than its passive bystanders, they must become connected to the narrative, their contributions and lives must be incorporated and made essential for a satisfying engagement with the display."³

Included in the Oseberg burial was a richly decorated wooden cart (**Figure #3**), three sleighs, a sled, ten horses, three beds, a quantity of textiles, and numerous other articles.⁴ The contents of such burials were meant to accompany the deceased into the afterlife. The wooden cart is of particular interest, as it includes narrative and mythical imagery which depicts several representations of women.

A detail from the wooden cart depicts a *valkyrie*, a mythical battle maiden, guiding the arm and sword of a warrior (**Figure #4**), thus determining his fate in battle. Clearly, the artisan who created this image was interested in the decorative representation of the human figure rather than in precise realism. Carved in shallow relief, the female figure is identified by her shift dress, knotted hairstyle, and jewelry, which includes a necklace and large brooch.

This paper researches Scandinavia from the Roman Expansion through the Saga Age,

³ Marie Louise Stig Sørensen, *Gender Archaeology* (Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 2000), 33.

⁴ Thorleif Sjøvold, *The Oseberg Find and other Viking Ship Finds* (Oslo, Norway: Universitets Oldsaksamling, 1959), 12.

3.

a seemingly long period of time between the latter part of the 1st century C.E. and the early 13th century C.E.. During this period, the primary language in Northern Europe was Old Norse, part of the Indo-European, Germanic language group. As such, society and culture from this era are often characterized as Old Norse. Until around 800 C.E., Scandinavia remained almost exclusively insular, resulting in a uniformity of language. Norwegian immigrants to Iceland in the 9th century, geographically isolated from the rest of Scandinavia, retained the Old Norse language. Today, modern Icelandic is almost identical to the Old Norse language. The Viking Age occurred roughly between 800 and 1200 C.E., and thrust Scandinavia onto the European stage. The end of Viking Age corresponded to the conversion of Scandinavia from Paganism to Christianity. Uppsala, Sweden, the last stronghold of traditional Old Norse Paganism, was finally overshadowed by Christianity in the latter part of the 12th century. Sweden's conversion is poorly documented, and a precise historical date which marks this change cannot be determined.⁵ The 13th century's renaissance of literary, historical, and artistic activity is known as the Saga Age. During this time, artisans advanced their skills in wood and stone sculpture and in metal craft, delighting in abstract ornamentation. Most of the artwork produced during this period was decorative, applied art; narrative art such as that found on the Oseberg Cart was quite rare, especially in Scandinavia. Occasionally, however, northern artisans produced narrative and symbolic images which explored both mythical and contemporary subjects.

According to P. Kirkham and J. Attfield, "Relationships between objects and gender are formed and take place in ways that are so accepted as 'normal' as to become 'invisible'. Thus we sometimes fail to appreciate the effects that particular notions of femininity and masculinity have on the conception, design, advertising, purchase, giving and using of objects, as well as on their critical and popular perception."⁶ Kirkham and Attfield's sentiment addresses the value of studying artifacts in attaining knowledge about the society and culture from which such artifacts originated. Knowledge attained from such research may encompass the subject of gender, a category which is flexible and open for

⁵ Else Roesdahl, *The Vikings* (New York: Penguin, 1987), 166.

⁶ P. Kirkham and J. Attfield, "Introduction", *The Gendered Object*, P. Kirkham, ed. (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1996), 1.

interpretation. Images of women, whether symbolic or narrative, suggest ways in which women may have been perceived within a given culture or society. In addition to artifacts, mythology and literature serve as a mirror upon culture and society, highlighting gender structures and relationships. In regards Old Norse society, visual and literary symbols which depict women reflect the condition and perception of women in ancient Scandinavia. While many such images exert a prescriptive bias and attempt to 'normalize' patriarchal hierarchy, the Oseberg Ship along with other visual and literary artifacts point to positive and powerful roles held by historical women in Old Norse society.

Issues of Gender in Art, Literature, and Ancient History

Artifacts such as those contained within the Oseberg ship burial function as mechanisms for ordering and re-ordering our knowledge of history. Artifacts include visual art, which often embody the culture from which it was created. With this assumption, we perceive that visual artifacts also reflect the collective psyche of the society. Robert Logan notes that "A medium of communication is not merely a passive conduit for the transmission of information but rather an active force in creating new social patterns and new perceptual realities."⁷ The 'perceptual realities' created by visual artifacts communicate not only factual historical data, but also may enable us to recreate a past-in-itself.

Essentially, artifacts may be viewed as both objects and agents of representation. Leonard Shlain asserts that "nature and human artifacts both provide the raw material from the outside that the brain relocates in the inner sanctum of consciousness. Because of their close connection to the work of appearances, images appropriate reality: they are concrete."⁸ (author's italics) Shlain rigorously attempts to assimilate artifacts into concrete historical fact. However, this writer argues that material evidence more accurately *approximates* historical reality. The study of artifacts *informs* our historical understanding of a

⁷ Robert Logan, The Alphabet Effect (New York: William Morrow, 1986), 24.

⁸ Leonard Shlain, The Alphabet Versus the Goddess: The Conflict Between Word and Image (New York: Penguin, 1998), 2.

culture via material evidence. Sørensen notes that, "material culture is at the same time active and pliable, meaningful but not absolute."⁹ That said, artifacts do inspire us beyond objective, scholarly inquiry: they are often emotive, represent archetypes, evoke imagination, and fulfill a human yearning for continuity and mystery.

Images of women from the ancient world, in the form of both visual and literary artifacts, collectively inform our knowledge regarding the lives of women in the ancient world. According to Arlene Saxonhouse, "The process of organizing the experiences so as to be able to re-present them, though, entails working within particular perceptual frameworks."¹⁰ Essentially, all analysis of human creative activity entails interpretation; however, organizing and re-presenting ancient art requires the interpreter to piece together a patchwork of diverse evidence. Art and literature may be recontextualized using gender as a 'perceptual framework' to analyze history.

An understanding of the role of women in ancient societies is shaped on one hand by our perception and understanding of symbols and archetypes. These symbols arrive in many forms. Through a carefully selected survey of ancient sources and modern scholarship, we are able to unravel patterns of cultural and social behavior in Old Norse society. Ultimately, images of women in Old Norse culture and society fall into two categories: mythical women, and legendary or historic women. In this paper, mythical women encompass goddesses and valkyries, found in Norse mythology and referred to in Saga literature. Legendary or historic women include actual battle/shield maidens and heroic women, among others mentioned in the Sagas and in contemporary texts. Images of women are also found in visual artifacts whose origins date back to the Roman Expansion. Artifacts may evoke a wide range of representations. Not only do they speak about the culture and society during the time period of their construction, they also serve as symbols which guide our understanding of myth and history. Texts and visual artifacts together help to deconstruct categories of gender as it relates to Old Norse culture and society.

⁹ Sørensen, Gender Archeology, 81.

¹⁰ Arlene Saxonhouse, "Introduction- Public and Private", Stereotypes of Women in Power: Historical Perspectives and Revisionist Views, Barbara Garlick, Suzanne Dixon and Pauline Allen eds., (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), 6.

The unease felt by modern scholars in analyzing categories of gender is reflected in the comments of Joan Scott, "Like words themselves, subjective identities are processes of differentiation and distinction, requiring the suppression of ambiguities and opposite elements in order to assure (and create the illusion of) coherence and common understanding."¹¹ This statement reflects our reliance on a binary approach to gender. Unfortunately, our bias tends to dismiss other systems of gender qualification, and prevents us from understanding other cultural systems. In Pagan Scandinavia, for example, gender was culturally more flexible, and narrative images represented a continuum of gender identities.

Regarding Source Material

With few exceptions, the vast majority of literary and artistic documentation from Pre-Christian Scandinavia was created by men. According to Jenny Jochens, "In practically all cultures, men have appropriated formal and public speaking, leaving women to make silences expressive."¹² Furthermore, Jochens provides us with a historic example, "The passive role traditionally attributed to women in matrimonial arrangements convinced churchmen to accept a brides' silence as a positive answer."¹³ A comprehensive overview of Old Norse texts sends the clear message that women's words and expressions are hollow and perfidious. The didactic *Hávamál* (*The Sayings of Hár*) illustrated the Old Norse bias against women, characterizing their words in derogatory terms such as "a woman's bed-talk" and "the smooth words of a witch", warning the reader, "trusting be no one to trust in these."¹⁴ Elsewhere, the *Svarfdæla Saga* cautions, "Often much evil comes from a woman's speech"¹⁵ These quotations reflect the cynical spirit of men's relationships with women, and suggest women's inherent inconstancy and treachery. In addition, exclamations such as those illustrated in the *Hávamál* and *Svarfdæla Saga* undermine the role of women as public figures.

¹¹ Joan Scott, "Gender: a Useful Category of Historical Analysis", *The American Historical Review*, 91.5 (1986): 1063.

¹² Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 110-111.

¹³ Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 45.

¹⁴ *The Poetic Edda*, #86: 87.

¹⁵ Helga Kress, "Taming the Shrew: The Rise of Patriarchy and the Subordination of the Feminine in Old Norse Literature", *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 88.

In pursuing an accurate depiction of women in Old Norse society, it is important to question whether the available images were descriptive, or if in fact prescriptive. If we readily assume that these expressions are purely descriptive, we understand these images to reflect the collective condition of actual women. It is this writer's belief that it is naive to take such an objective approach when analyzing ancient sources. It is not unlikely that male authors would prescribe attributes to women, just as Christian authors would have imposed critical judgment and bias against Pagans at the time of conversion. Often, misogyny and religious discrimination mix together, and can be witnessed both in Old Norse literature and art.

Although sparse in visual art compared to Continental Europe, pre-Christian and early-medieval Scandinavia surpassed its neighbors in terms of the quantity and quality of literature produced. Research for this paper necessitated that I analyze literary materials alongside visual art, in order that they inform one another. In addition, this writer's research uncovered relatively few scholarly analyses of Old Norse visual art by modern art historians. The sparsity of scholarly analysis requires the further questioning of assumptions regarding women in Old Norse narrative art. Consequently, it was necessary to make a multi-genre comparative survey of Old Norse culture, as it relates to this topic.

Scandinavia's strong tradition of oral culture encompassed historical writing, fictional and mythical prose, poetry, verbal sparring, and *kenning*, a form of puns. All of these arenas were dominated by men. According to Jochens, "The absence of women from these verbal and imbibing competitions opens up the largely uncharted territory of the relationship between language and the acquisition of power."¹⁶

1. Sagas

Saga literature, written in prose form, was biographical in nature and moralist in tone. These texts provide varying degrees of historicity. In Old Norse, the word *saga* literally means to *tell*, suggesting the importance of oral and literary culture in Scandinavian history. While some of the works, including the Laxdæla Saga, were written during Pagan times, most Saga literature was composed in the early 1300s after Christianity had thoroughly infiltrated

¹⁶ Jochens, Women in Old Norse Society, 110.

Scandinavia. According to Brigit and Peter Sawyer, "Authors of the sagas were deliberately silent about some current practices and customs when they wrote about their own time but not when they wrote about the Pagan past. This double standard particularly affected their treatment of women."¹⁷ While the Sagas tell about historical people and events, they are inconsistent and didactic.

2. Eddic Poetry

Eddic poetry was born out of ancient oral tradition and mixes authentic Pagan beliefs and values with Christian teachings. Eddic poetry follows a unique rhythmic meter while it spins mythical tales. Snorri Sturlasson (1178-1241 C.E.), an Icelandic chieftain and *skald*, or writer of poetry, is credited with organizing and recording a vast quantity of Eddic poetry. Straubhaar notes that while men skalds were "credited in the sagas and in the Eddic lays with voluminous amounts of poetry, the saga-writers' female contemporaries were credited with comparatively little." As such, Eddic poetry also contains a strong gender-bias.

3. Contemporary Sources

Between the Roman Expansion and the Saga Age, contemporary writers recorded the cultural, societal, and political history of Scandinavia. While many of these writers were foreigners such as the Roman senator, Tacitus, the German cleric, Adam of Bremen, and the Arab envoy, Ibn Fadlan, natives to Scandinavia such as the Danish historian, Saxo Grammaticus also collected and recorded important data crucial to understanding early Scandinavian history. Sandra Straubhaar points out that "one immediately apparent drawback in the case of the Germanic and Celtic tribes is that accurate reporting of foreign cultures was rarely the primary concern of the classical historians who wrote about them."¹⁸ In addition, H. Mattingly, who translated Tacitus' The Agricola and The Germania, discredited the Roman historian's credibility as an objective historical source, commenting that Tacitus' writings are perhaps "more suitable to cheap journalism of any age than to a serious work of history."¹⁹ On one hand, foreign sources could observe Old Norse society objectively, and

¹⁷ Brigit and Peter Sawyer, Medieval Scandinavia (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 23.

¹⁸ Sandra Straubhaar, Critical Notes on the Old Icelandic 'Skaldkonor', Ph.D. Dissertation (Stanford University, 1982), 200.

¹⁹ H. Mattingly, "Introduction", The Agricola and The Germania, Tacitus (New York: Penguin, 1970), 11.

present aspects of the culture as an outsider might interpret them. On the other hand, these writers brought with them their own systems of cultural bias, along with political or personal agendas which more than likely affected a clear presentation of the people and events they witnessed.

4. Modern Scholarship

Much of the modern scholarship this writer encountered came in the form of journal articles, written to address specific topics regarding feminism, gender, and literary criticism in the context of Old Norse Society. Eva-Marie Göransson provided some useful information on art images of women and femininity in Old Norse society. Jenny Jochens, one of the premier scholars of women in Old Norse society, also proved an invaluable source of information in regards to the lives of actual women in Viking Age Scandinavia. When encountering foreign texts, the original is provided, along with this writer's translation for comparison. In addition, foreign words, names, and concepts are italicized throughout this paper and are translated and defined on page 30.

5. Visual Art and Artifacts

Compared with literary sources, artifacts can arguably serve as a more direct link to the cultures which produced them, and better represent the beliefs and values of Old Norse society. Artifacts are direct products of a culture, where as writing, whether historical, theoretical, or literary, is usually written after the fact, and is a reflection backwards. While much of Old Norse narrative art comes to us from the Gotlandic picture stones from the island of Gotland in the Baltic Sea off the coast of Sweden (See Maps, p. 31, 32.) , the art objects selected to illustrate this thesis encompasses a broad range of media.

Old Norse art contained foreign influences; of those, Roman motifs dominated. However, Old Norse artists adapted and transformed foreign motifs to better suit Scandinavian tastes. For example, David M. Wilson and Ole Klindt-Jensen identified one case in which a silver buckle was decorated with what appears to be a Roman acanthus leaf motif. According to Wilson and Klindt-Jensen, "Plant ornament, which is one of the few readily identifiable foreign motifs, was always alien to Scandinavian art....closer examination

reveals that the decoration is made up of small animal heads, not leaves. Animal art was the only art which really satisfied the Viking mind."²⁰ In keeping with this statement, Old Norse art developed and asserted its own indigenous style, and is therefore a credible gauge for deciphering the culture and values of Old Norse society.

Representations of Mythical Women

The influence of mythic artifacts and literary materials on the lives actual women in Old Norse society is an important topic which requires further inquiry. After all, deities and hero images often exhibit human tendencies and traits. According to Karen Swenson, "Both affinity and estrangement characterize the relationship between the ritually created community and the women of the larger society."²¹ Given the misogynist authorship of the majority of Old Norse texts, we understand that women were physically, emotionally, and psychically outside the speaker, thus 'estranged' and distrusted. However, if we interpret this literature in the spirit of symbolic, ritualized discourse, it is natural to conclude that mythological characters may indeed reflect sentiment and 'affinity' towards real women. For example, the mythological valkyrie and the heroic shield maiden were not only embodiments of male aspiration, they were also romantic fantasies concocted about their female companions. In addition, Jesch suggests that "To transvestize war and aggression may indeed have added titillation for male listeners and readers." Valkyries and shield maidens practiced activities traditionally associated with masculinity, including warring, avenging, and other forms of aggressive behavior. The blurring of gender lines demonstrated by valkyries and shield maidens created a category of otherness, and encapsulated both fiction and reality.

The mythological representation of the goddess is a liminal figure; the goddess is often the gatekeeper on the boundary between life and death and occupies the roles of

²⁰ David M. Wilson and Ole Klindt-Jensen, Viking Art (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1966), 83.

²¹ Karen Swenson, "Women Outside: Discourse of Community in *Hávamál*", Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology, Sarah M. Anderson, Karen Swenson, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 279.

both progenitor and destroyer. In Old Norse mythology, mythical women often serve as gatekeepers or hostesses, both in *Midgaard*, the mortal realm of middle earth, and at *Valhalla*, the hall of the slain in *Asgaard*, the realm of the gods. In Old Norse mythology, the goddess moves fluidly and frequently throughout the strata of Norse cosmology. In addition, goddess figures were not static entities, but had the ability to shape-shift, most often adopting animal form. Norse goddesses are often represented in groups of three or more, working together to accomplish their will upon the deities and mortals.

The most frequently mentioned goddess in Old Norse literature is *Freyja*. *Freyja* is the most influential deity in the oldest pantheon of Norse deities known as the *Vanir*. *Freyja*, who has often been dismissed as a one-dimensional fertility goddess, is indeed multifaceted: she is also a goddess of agriculture, passion, change, and war. According to Stephen McNallen, "Lest we fall into the snare of thinking of the Lady of Vanir in the somewhat predictable female role of sex goddess or promoter of the perpetual pregnancy, we must remember her fiercer side... When we recall that she chooses half the battle-slain, when we reflect on her links to the valkyries, when we consider her many parallels with Odin, we are led to conclude that *Freyja's* martial abilities must be formidable"²² An image of *Freyja* is depicted on a small silver brooch found in a Viking grave in Sweden (**Figure #5**). *Freyja*, depicted as pregnant, is identified by her elaborate necklace, a gift to her from the god *Loki*. Additionally, *Freyja* wears a richly ornamented headdress and layers of clothing, held together by a circular brooch, typical of those found in the graves of Old Norse women. In comparison with contemporary Viking Age metal work, the surface details of the brooch appear somewhat flat and inarticulate. This researcher suggests that the much of the original surface detailing may have perhaps been worn away through frequent rubbing, a common phenomena amongst religious amulets. The owner of such a brooch may have ritually rubbed the icon in order to stimulate the deity's powers. Among the Old Norse deities, *Freyja* maintained a devoted following equaled only by the cult of *Odin*, leader of the *Æsir*, the second pantheon of Norse deities. *Freyja* performed the work of a valkyrie, leading fallen warriors into *Valhalla*. In the didactic poem, *Grimnismál (The Lay of Grímnir)*,

²² Stephen McNallen, "How to Live", *The Runestone*, 50, (Winter 1984), 1.

Freyja exercises this role by claiming half of all the fallen warriors as her own,

"Folkvang²³ the ninth, where Freyja chooses
 seats shall have in her hall:
 half of the slain are hers each day
 and half are Odin's own."²⁴

An example of mythical female power is illustrated by the tale of Thora, the legendary daughter of King Heroth, a Swedish king. Thora is depicted on the lower half of the Smis III Stone (**Figure #6**) from the När Parish²⁵ in Sweden, and is shown holding two snakes. The stone, whose motif has been carved in shallow relief, is highly stylized and symmetrical. The imagery is flat and takes on a bold, graphic appearance. According to Saxo Grammaticus, Thora received two snakes as a gift from her royal father. Although she dutifully "brought herself to raise them with a maiden's hands"²⁶, they poisoned the entire countryside with their venomous breath. The Danish king Regner Lothbrog hunted and killed the snakes; for his reward, he married Thora and gained possession of Sweden. Lothbrog not only destroyed the snakes, but also destroyed Thora's right to royal inheritance.

The upper portion of the Smis III Stone shows a whirling knot of three snakes. Eva-Marie Göransson suggests that this image symbolizes the story in *Guta's Saga* of Vitstjärna, the first woman on the island of Gotland. The night of consummation of her marriage she dreams that three snakes escape from her breast. Upon waking from her symbolic dream, she relates it to her husband. He enthusiastically interprets its meaning, prophesizing that they have conceived three sons, who will eventually colonize all of Gotland. According to Göransson,

"drömmen visar på två skilda synsätt på kvinnans graviditet och förestående förlossning: hon full av skräck och bävan - han fylld av hopp och ärofulla manliga ättlingar och territoriell makt."

"the dream demonstrates the polarized opinions regarding Vitstjärna's pregnancy and impending childbirth: she is overcome with fear and dread - her spouse is full of hope for his glorious masculine

²³ "Folkvang" is a *kenning*, meaning "battlefield".

²⁴ The Poetic Edda, #14:56.

²⁵ Much of Scandinavian history and geography was organized after the conversion to Christianity. Local jurisdiction was structured and managed by church districts, or parishes, which were evenly distributed throughout Scandinavia. While the influence of the Christian church in modern Scandinavia is minute compared with its importance at the time of conversion, the parish system is still actively recognized and used, especially in regards to historical inquiry.

²⁶ Saxo Grammaticus, Gesta Danorum: The History of the Danes, Books I-IX, H.R. Ellis Davidson, ed., Peter Fisher, trans. (Suffolk, England: St. Edmundsbury Press, 1979), #9: 281.

descendants and territorial power."²⁷

The legendary stories of Thora and Vitstjärna are juxtaposed on the Smiss III Stone and speak to the polarity of male and female values regarding property and authority.

The stories of these women are linked to the mythological character of Freyja; the goddess represents the significant power manifested in the physical female body. H. R. Ellis Davidson notes, "Fertility of the land brings in an association with sovereignty and political power, while her close links with childbirth strengthen her role of arbiter of destiny."²⁸ Thora and Vitstjärna are burdened with the responsibility of fostering life, intuit the downfall of their power, and are vanquished by the male thirst for conquest.

Like the symbol of the snake, woman is an agent of both life and death; according to Joseph Campbell, "the serpent carries in itself the sense of both the fascination and terror of life."²⁹ The terror described by Campbell was felt by both Thora and Vitstjärna prior to their loss of power. With the advent of Christianity, the symbolic, archetypal connection between woman and snake prescribed attributes of dangerous sexuality and witchcraft to all women. Ultimately, this unsavory relationship undermined society's respect for inherent female power. Reproduction was no longer an active and venerated emblem of female powers; Christian doctrine shunned the physical female body and represented women as empty vessel through which male descendants are born and break free.

Thanks to operatic compositions such as Richard Wagner's "The Ring of the Nibelungs", the mythological valkyrie has been colorfully dramatized and brought to the popular attention of modern audiences. Valkyries are perhaps the most commonly represented mythological female figure in Old Norse art. Not only are these images prevalent on narrative Gotlandic picture stones, they also take the form of personal charms and protective amulets (**Figure #7**). These small, silver amulets, found in Sweden, are highly stylized and simply decorated. The amulets echo the traditional pose taken by women in Old Norse narrative art, a stance of self-containment, focus, and apparent reserve.

²⁷ Eva-Marie Göransson, Bilder av kvinnor och kvinnlighet: Genus och kroppsspråk under övergången till kristendomen (Stockholm, Sweden: Stockholms Universitet, 1999), 228-229.

²⁸ H.R. Ellis Davidson, Roles of the Northern Goddess (New York: Routledge, 1998), 184.

²⁹ Joseph Campbell, The Power of Myth, with Bill Moyers, Betty Sue Flowers, ed. (New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1988), 53.

Occasionally, Old Norse art depicts women engaged in physical activities such as flying, walking, or carrying various symbolic objects; the valkyrie amulet on the far right carries a drinking horn, for example. Stylistically the female torso appears to arch forward, an active gesture which suggests women's influence on their surroundings. Amulets such as these have been found in Viking burials throughout Scandinavia, which reflects the broad popularity and importance of mythical women in Old Norse culture.

In Old Norse mythology, the valkyrie was a personification of battle. According to Judith Jesch, "It is characteristic of military societies to personify the martial spirit as a female, removing the responsibility of war from the warriors themselves. Such projection is needed to persuade warriors to carry on fighting."³⁰ Quite often, valkyries were depicted as wild maidens who urged warriors into battle, aided them in conflict, and led fallen soldiers into Valhalla. As such, valkyries formed a link between the human and divine worlds. Norse mythology paints dramatic images of these women, lodging them into our imagination. Valkyries are seen both as protectors and as hostile figures. In *Helgakvida Hundingsbana I* (*The First Lay of Helgi the Hunding-Slayer*), there are two colorful passages which describe valkyries.

"lightning flashed:
(saw the matchless hero the maidens riding)
high and helmeted, on Himin Meadows.
Were their byrnies blood bespattered,
from their spear points bright sparks flew north."³¹

"Thou wast, witch-hag, a valkyrie fierce
in Alfather's hall, hateful and grim:
all Valholl's warriors had well-nigh battled,
willful woman, to win thy hand.
On Saga Ness full nine wolves we
had together- I gat them all."³²

In the Hunninge I Stone from the Klinte Parish in Sweden, valkyries perform several important functions (**Figure #8**). Stylistically, the Hunninge I Stone is carved in shallow relief and incorporates elements of decorative art, such as the knotted border and woven sailcloth. In addition, the image is divided into three parts. The top third represents Valhalla.

³⁰ Judith Jesch, Women in the Viking Age (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 1991), 127.

³¹ The Poetic Edda, #15:183.

³² The Poetic Edda, #39:186.

The middle third represents Midgaard, through which mortal warriors travel the sea in a traditional Viking-style boat. Beneath the waves we encounter *Niflheim*, the ice-filled world of the dead, nine days' journey northwards and downwards beneath Midgaard. In Niflheim is *Hel*, the realm of the dead, which is ruled by a goddess of the same name. Niflheim's dead are guided by female *volvur*, or sibyls, depicted as snake handlers on the Hunninge I Stone. Just as snakes are the archetypal guardians of wisdom, the valkyries on the Hunninge I Stone are the guardians of snakes. This symbiotic relationship demonstrates women's ritualistic role as the gatekeepers of wisdom, and establishes the religious significance of women in Old Norse society. In the upper portion of the stone, a valkyrie brings a horn of mead to several warriors on horseback in a gesture of welcome to Valhalla; this motif is echoed on numerous Gotlandic picture stones.

In the Lillbärs III Stone (Figure #9), female protagonists dominate the narrative. In the top portion of the stone, a valkyrie greets a warrior on horseback to Valhalla and offers him a horn of mead, reminiscent of the Hunninge I Stone. According to Davidson, the symbol of a woman offering a horn of mead, found on twelve different stones, "was linked with the possession of sovereignty".³³ Mead's inherent symbolism as an agent of sovereignty is related to political power and destiny. Mead, an alcoholic beverage brewed from grain, fruit, and honey, may have represented the fertility of the land and prosperity of the country. These attributes were magically acquired via consumption of a valkyrie's mead. In the poem, *Sigrdrífumál (The Lay of Sigrdrífa)*, a valkyrie named Sigrdrífa says to the warrior Sigurth,

"Ale I bring thee,	tough oak of battle,
with strength i-blent	and brightest honor;
'tis mixed with magic	and mighty songs,
with goodly spells,	wish- speeding runes." ³⁴

The poem illustrates the traditional and magical significance of mead.

In the bottom half of the Lillbärs III Stone, Göransson has identified the two figures as

³³ Davidson, Roles of the Northern Goddess, 175.

³⁴ The Poetic Edda, #6: 235.

"seglande kvinna med manliga drag"³⁵ or, "women in manly costume, sailing." In Old Norse society, gender was not determined solely by sex, but could also be specified via an individual's public activities. According to Straubhaar, "Gender was determined by actions and could, possibly be independent of sex."³⁶ In terms of the Lillbärs III Stone, the two Viking women are not only participating in the male activity of sailing a ship, but are also dressed in male warrior garb. Saxo Grammaticus, a contemporary Roman historian, commented on transgender activities like those found on the Lillbärs III Stone, "There were once women in Denmark who dressed themselves to look like men and spent almost every minute cultivating soldier's skills...They courted military celebrity so earnestly that you would have guessed they had unsexed themselves."³⁷ In these examples, gender can be used as an analytic category in deconstructing issues of power and sex in Old Norse culture and society. Transgender images like those found on the Lillbärs III Stone communicate the Old Norse attitude of flexibility and acceptance towards both male and female contributions to society. Furthermore, there may have been political motivations for women to dress as men. Jesch suggests that "Women occasionally dressed in male garb to make the group appear larger and thus deceive the enemy, but they did so only on men's orders."³⁸

Evidence for this can be found in Laxdæla Saga:

"The women here in the shielding must now put on men's clothing at once and get to the horses that are near the shielding and ride off as fast as they can home to the farm. It could be that the people who are lurking nearby will be unable to tell whether the riders are men or women."³⁹

It is therefore not illogical to assume that the strong protagonist females found in Scandinavian mythology, legend, and art may have held positive implications for contemporary Old Norse women.

Finally, the Tjängvide Stone from the island of Gotland is another example of imagery containing mythic women (**Figure #10**). In the top portion of the stone, there are two

³⁵ Göransson, Bilder av kvinnor och kvinnlighet: Genus och kroppsspråk under övergången till kristendomen, 62.

³⁶ Sandra Straubhaar, "Ambiguously Gendered: The Skalds- Jorunn, Audr, & Steinunn", Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology, Sarah M. Anderson, Karen Swenson, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 261.

³⁷ Grammaticus, Gesta Danorum: The History of the Danes, Books I-IX, 212.

³⁸ Jochens, Old Norse Images of Women (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 110.

³⁹ Laxdæla Saga, #63: 205.

valkyries: the first is flying above the head of the warrior on horseback, presumably leading him into Valhalla; the second greets him on foot, holding a small sickle in one hand and set of keys in the other. This valkyrie arches forward as she approaches the rider, wears a flowing dress and long hair, knotted at the nape. The keys indicate the mythical valkyrie's liminal role as gatekeeper, and are a heroic symbol of female power. Historically, women in Old Norse society controlled the keys to the farm or estate. For much of the year, most Old Norse men traveled abroad, either on trading missions, or for war. In Norwegian, a *vik* is a bay or harbor; coastal Norway consists of thousands of viks, some of which flow inland in the form of fjords. In almost every vik are settlements whose economic stability is sustained through trade and fishing. Therefore, while men were *a-viking* at sea, traveling from harbor to harbor, women were stable fixtures upon the land and controlled business on the farm. The Tjängvide Stone illustrates not only the mythological role of women as the gatekeepers of Valhalla, but also reflects women's protective control over the economic domain of the farm. In connection, the women of the Oseberg ship burial were each found with sets of keys attached to their persons- a symbol of the power they maintained during their lifetimes.

The Tjängvide Stone, carved in shallow relief, exhibits many of the motifs indicative of Old Norse pictorial art. The stone is outlined in complex knotwork which forms an abstract interplay between contour and negative space. Upon closer inspection, the viewer recognizes that these abstract knots are actually made up of gripping animal forms. The image of the Viking Ship in the lower half of the stone is present on nearly all of the Gotlandic picture stones, not surprising for an island culture. And most important for this study of women in Old Norse society and culture, the presence and symbolic significance of female imagery represents the importance of women in the mythological and historical continuum within Old Norse culture and society.

Representations of Old Norse Women

"It stands on record that armies already wavering and on the point of collapse have been rallied by the women, pleading heroically with their men, thrusting forward their bared bosoms..."

-Tacitus^o

Written 98 CE, the Roman historian Tacitus' dramatic image of women as instigators of battle stands perhaps somewhere in between fact and fiction. Tacitus wrote Germania based on the writings of Pliny the Elder, who was positioned in Northern Europe during the Roman expansion. While Pliny's original texts are now lost, Tacitus reported on his findings regarding the political environment, cultural landscape, and peoples in Scandinavia. What is clear from Germania is that women held significant importance in Old Norse society.

According to Ing-Marie Back Danielsson, "sometimes competing and opposing stories...played important roles for the shaping of the social as well as individual sphere."⁴¹ As has already been alluded to, images of women, both real and imagined, represented not clear identities, but rather a continuum of fiction and reality. Piecing together diverse information regarding women begins to paint a picture of the lives of actual women during the Viking Age. In relation, Jesch points out that "while the valkyries' military functions may not have reflected anything in the lives of human women, there is no doubt that their role as servers of food and drink show exactly what their human counterparts had to do."⁴² Tacitus affirms Jesch's assumptions regarding the domesticity of Old Norse women, and furthermore, he relates, "she enters her husbands' home to be the partner of his toils and perils, that both in peace and in war she is to share his suffering and adventures."⁴³

It is important to analyze mythic and heroic tales of valkyries and battle maidens and assumptions about the participation of real women in martial roles. According to sparse archeological and literary evidence, it is clear that Viking women only occasionally participated in armed conflict. Recently, German archeologists discovered burial sites from the fourth and fifth centuries in which wounded male and female soldiers, both clad in battle

^o Tacitus, The Agricola and The Germania, #8: 108.

⁴¹ Ing-Marie Back Daneilsson, "Unmasking Gender- Gold Foil Disembodiments in Late Iron Age Scandinavia", Thinking Through the Body: Archaeologies of Corporeality, Yannis Hamilakis, Mark Pluciennik, Sarah Tarlow, eds. (New York: Plenum Publishers, 2002), 179.

⁴² Jesch, Women in the Viking Age, 127.

⁴³ Tacitus, The Agricola and The Germania, #18: 117.

dress, were buried alongside one another.⁴⁴ However, literary evidence suggests that fighting against women was unacceptable and contemptible in Viking culture. Even in myth, it was disgraceful to fight against women. In *Hárbarzljód* (*The Lay of Hárbarth*), a ferryman scolds the god *Thor*, "Twas unworthy of thee to war on women."⁴⁵

Martial activities were not limited to actual armed conflict. Many sources mention women as instigators, rallying the warrior into battle. The *lhre Stone* (**Figure #11**) from Hellvi Parish in Sweden depicts the symbolic relationship between woman and warrior. The activity of goading men into revenge and conflict is also known as *whetting*. In *Old Norse Images of Women*, Jochens remarks, "The whetter...may be seen as an alibi for the masculine political failure to maintain peace at home."⁴⁶ Domestic feuding is the central plot in countless sagas. Male authors may have wished to blame the inherent instability of Old Norse politics on women, regardless of if they were directly involved in such conflicts or not. In *Egil's Saga*, written about 1230 CE, king Eirik of Norway exclaims, "More than any other person, Gunnild, you try to goad me into behaving like a savage..."⁴⁷

Women served as a symbol of men's heroic virtue. As such, "Women become a part of men's stories because....men do not exist as heroes without women."⁴⁸ While the symbolic role of women influenced men's imaginations and inspired them into action, it is not unlikely that real women's promptings did in fact affect real action. It is not known how women themselves perceived this symbolic role. The *lhre Stone* depicts a woman walking away from two soldiers, poised for battle. The position occupied by the woman sets up a tense competition between the two men, a competition which is inherently sexual. In the background, two swords are crossed above the head of the woman, a direct symbol indicating the impending violence.

Besides their role in Old Norse military culture, Old Norse women were also recognized for their religious powers. Tacitus remarks, "there resides in women an element of holiness and a gift of prophecy; and so they [men] do not scorn to ask their advice, or lightly

⁴⁴ Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 108.

⁴⁵ *The Poetic Edda*, #38: 80.

⁴⁶ Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 88.

⁴⁷ *Egil's Saga*, Herman Palsson, Paul Edwards, eds. (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 112.

⁴⁸ Saxonhouse, "Introduction- Public and Private", 2.

disregard their replies." ⁴⁹ Women's active involvement in religious activities is well documented. *Sejd* is an Old Norse term which encapsulates the shamanic activities of prophecy-making and shape shifting. Norse mythology contains many references to the shamanic practices of women. In Norse mythology, Freyja exhibits shamanic behavior. In chapter four of *Ynlingasaga*, Freyja teaches the knowledge of *sejd* to the Æsir. According to Danielsson, "Both men and women were able to perform *sejd*, although it was considered inappropriate for a man to make a prophecy."⁵⁰

Women were reputed as healers and spiritual guides. In addition to their liminal role as gatekeepers and shamans, their ability to prophesize was sometimes manifested through a well-documented history of human sacrifice in Old Norse society. Evidence of human sacrifice can be found in archeological evidence, mythic literature, and historical records. Funerary culture in Pagan Scandinavia was based on and supported by Norse myth. In eddic poetry, the god Odin sacrifices his life for the pursuit of knowledge. "Odin said, I hung from that windswept tree, hung there for nine long nights; I was pierced with a spear; I was an offering to Odin, myself to myself."⁵¹ Kevin Crossley-Holland's interpretation reveals that Odin sacrificed his physical body for wisdom by subjugating himself to a ritual death via hanging and stabbing. Upon rebirth, the secrets of poetry and wisdom are revealed to him. From historical sources and material evidence, we also know that women served as human sacrifice in this manner. The Bote Stone from Garda Parish in Sweden (**Figure #12**) depicts a row of seven hanging women, presumably involved in ritual sacrifice. The female figures are distinguished from men via the stylized female form and clearly articulated dress and hair. Archeological evidence proves that women were the victims of ritual sacrifice. The skull of a woman found in a viking grave at Ballateare on the Isle of Man reveals a violent, ritualized death (**Figure #13**). Furthermore, it is believed that the second woman in the Oseberg burial is Queen Åsa's female attendant, sacrificed in order to serve and accompany the queen in her death. However, it is difficult to prove this assumption. According to Jesch, "Even if we assume that one was a queen and the other her servant, we do not know which was which

⁴⁹ Tacitus, *The Agricola and The Germania*, #8: 108.

⁵⁰ Danielsson, "Unmasking Gender- Gold Foil Disembodiments in Late Iron Age Scandinavia", 184.

⁵¹ Kevin Crossley-Holland, *The Norse Myths* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 15.

nor can we be sure if they died at the same time or if one was possibly sacrificed to accompany the other."⁵²

Historical writing also provides evidence that the Bote Stone presents a realistic picture of ritual sacrifice. In 922 C.E., an Arab envoy stationed on the Volga River by the name of Ibn Fadlan attended a Viking funeral. The Vikings regularly conducted trade eastward and southward along the Volga, whose waters eventually find their way into the Baltic Sea via Lake Ladoga in Karelia and the Gulf of Finland (See Map, p. 32.). At the funeral, Fadlan, who was critical of the Viking lifestyle, reported that a female servant was ritually strangled and stabbed, reminiscent of Odin's sacrifice. Fadlan believed that the woman volunteered freely into ritual death in order to accompany her dead chieftain into the afterlife, a gesture which suggested that she would serve as his wife into eternity. According to Fadlan, "the woman was treated with great courtesy while the burial was being prepared."⁵³

We know some details about the rights and responsibilities of average women in Old Norse society. Generally, their rights were miniscule when compared with the rights and freedoms exercised by women in modern democracies. Although the sagas offer mixed messages about the contributions of women to Old Norse society, one means of measuring women's level of freedom is to consider their ability or inability to control property. While it is acknowledged that not all Old Norse women participated in land ownership, the right to control property positively affected women's stature in society. From various source materials we discover that a few women were especially influential. In Laxdœla Saga, Unn the Deep-Minded is portrayed as a powerful woman of wealth and status, and is described as 'tall' and 'stately'. Unn's activities included ordering the construction of a ship, commanding a retinue of men and slaves, directing and overseeing employees, dividing and distributing her property, freeing slaves, and making land grants. These actions signaled some of the freedoms exercised by Old Norse women: the liberty to conduct business, including property ownership, allocation, and administration. After an elaborate funeral

⁵² Jesch, Women in the Viking Age, 34.

⁵³ Roesdahl, The Vikings, 157.

celebration which she planned for herself, Unn was buried inside a large ship, accompanied by rich treasures, reminiscent of Queen Ása's grave in Vestfold.⁵⁴ However, it must be mentioned that Unn's heightened status was recognized as an anomaly even by her contemporaries. The unknown author of Laxdœla Saga explained, "it is generally thought that it would be hard to find another example of a woman escaping from such hazards with so much wealth and such a large retinue. From this it can be seen what a paragon amongst women she was."⁵⁵

There are few images of realistic role modeling for women in Old Norse art. Historically, women's lives have been lived privately, while men's actions have occurred in the public sphere. When women are depicted in the public sphere, their activities been interpreted and presented as anomalies, or as didactic examples of how women should or should not act. Traditionally, there was a hierarchy of value which placed women's historical contributions to culture and society significantly lower than the contributions made by men. According to Straubhaar, "the real historical women of the Saga Age were far less likely to have been recorded as producing lengthy monuments of poetry than the shadowy figures of prehistory and folklore - trollwomen, valkyrie, prophetesses, and priestesses."⁵⁶ Male authorship preferred to manipulate the mythological symbols of women according to their whims, rather than having to recognize the real contributions of real women to Old Norse society.

It has been confirmed that women controlled the property within marriage. According to Roesdahl, "the woman normally brought a dowry and the man contributed a certain sum and both were the personal property of the woman in the marriage."⁵⁷ Indeed, numerous viking graves reveal that women kept the keys to the farmstead. In addition to controlling property, women were also granted certain legal advantages. According to Adam of Bremen, while women were sold into slavery for committing adultery, men were put to death for both adultery and rape.⁵⁸ Clearly, the disparity between men's

⁵⁴ Laxdœla Saga, Magnus Magnusson, Herman Palsson, eds. (New York: Penguin Books, 1969), 57.

⁵⁵ Laxdœla Saga, 52.

⁵⁶ Straubhaar, Critical Notes on the Old Icelandic 'Skaldkonor', 210.

⁵⁷ Roesdahl, The Vikings, 60.

⁵⁸ Roesdahl, The Vikings, 61.

and women's rights occasionally favored women over men.

Little is known about the private lives of women. Literary and artistic examples provide sparse information regarding the nature of women's relationships with one another. According to Saxonhouse, "Women neither perform great deeds on the battlefield nor give great speeches in the assemblies of men; they cannot become the objects of song and story."⁵⁹ **Figure #14** shows a small gold foil amulet, discovered in Botkyrka Parish in Sweden, which depicts an intimate moment between two women. There may indeed be several interpretations of the imagery featured on the Botkyrka amulet. The amulet shows two women facing one another and embracing. The artisan was clearly interested in the symmetry of the composition and in stylized representation. The curving lines produced by the shallow relief reflects a lighthearted playfulness and rhythm and are contained within the amulet's outside border. The amulet may reflect the friendship and companionship of women in Old Norse society. Another possible interpretation may illuminate the theme of introspection. It is possible that the two figures depict two images of the same woman, or represent the transition from maiden to matron. It is not known how Old Norse women perceived themselves or their place in society. However, it is tempting to believe that the Botkyrka Amulet evokes its owner's conscience.

While the sagas present us with a few images of women's relationships, the conversations which do exist are presented as gossip, slander, or as tempestuous speech. In Gisli Saga, we catch a glimpse of two ordinary women seen alone together, sewing and gossiping. However, the male author of the saga presents women wary of their own verbal integrity. An Icelandic woman by the name of Aud says to her friend and neighbor Asgerd, "Trouble often comes from women's talk, and perhaps the trouble from ours will be the worst kind."⁶⁰ Again, in Njals Saga, women's conversations incite feuding and malice. A group of beggar women seeking compensation approach Bergthora, and relate slanderous gossip against her husband, Njal, and his companions. Upon listening to the women's gossip, Bergthora commands her menfolk to take revenge. Skarphedin, Njal's right-hand man,

⁵⁹ Saxonhouse, "Introduction- Public and Private", 2.

⁶⁰ Gisli Saga, George Johnston, trans. (New York: MacMillan Publishing, 1978), #9: 11.

brushes off her demand, saying, "We're not like women, that we become furious over everything." However, Bergthora's influence over Skarphedin is evident. Despite his verbal assault on the female gender, Skarphedin's physical reaction betrays his words, "sweat formed on his brow and red spots on his cheeks, which was unusual for him".⁶¹ Her whetting words had power. These quotes hint at the relationships and camaraderie which certainly existed between women, and echoes the bonding of male warriors.

It has been suggested by Carol Clover that Old Norse society was not so much ruled by a male/ female binary code, but rather was polarized by a male warrior class which included a few outstanding women. The other group included the rest of society: most women, the elderly and disabled, slaves, children, and disenfranchised men.⁶²

Continuity in Contemporary Myth and Symbol

Five hundred years after the time of the Vikings, a period of Nordic Romanticism began with the arrival of Lutheranism in 1517. Whereas Roman Catholicism positioned classical ideals squarely with Greek and Roman cultural history, Protestant scholars sought to reclaim their own classical past, and naturally turned to the massive body of perfectly preserved Old Norse skaldic writings. These scholars wrote methodical histories of Scandinavia, glorifying the Viking Age and its protagonists. In addition, many Old Norse sagas and poems were translated from Old Norse into the contemporary Scandinavian languages of Swedish, Norwegian, and Danish, as well as into French and German. According to Carin Orrling, "The original purpose for these works was to heighten the status of Scandinavia within Europe, not to foster nationalism within these countries".⁶³ However, the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars in 1814 reasserted a strong sense nationalism in many of the regions affected by those wars, including Scandinavia. In response, visual, literary, musical, and theatrical artists produced works of art which dramatized Old Norse history and mythology. German composer, Richard Wagner (1813-1883) produced an opera based on

⁶¹ Nial's Saga, #44:52.

⁶² Jochens, Women in Old Norse Society, 162.

⁶³ Carin Orrling, "The Old Norse Dream", Vikings: The North Atlantic Saga, William W. Fitzhugh and Elisabeth I. Ward, eds. (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), 356.

Germanic and Scandinavian mythology, called "The Ring of the Nibelungs" (1852-74). The central image from this opera was a valkyrie named Brünnhilde, the legendary daughter of Wotan⁴⁴. Norwegian soprano, Kirsten Flagstad, played this role between 1935 and 1952 (**Figure #15**). Flagstad is pictured as a spear-wielding shield maiden in full battle gear. In addition to the creative endeavors of Northern artists, social organizations which glorified Scandinavia's past also sprang up in the early 1800s, including the "Götiska Förbundet" (The Gothic Society), a Swedish cultural organization which concluded each meeting with the drinking of mead from a horn. The Götiska Förbundet also encouraged patriotism and archeological research.⁴⁵

Nordic Romanticism and nationalism were knit together even more tightly in the early 1900s, as political unions dissolved: Norway gained independence from Sweden in 1905, Finland from Russia in 1917, and Iceland from Denmark in 1944. In addition, major archeological discoveries, such as that of the Oseberg Ship in 1903, advanced the perception of Scandinavia on the world stage and instilled nationalist pride.

The elevation of Nordic Romanticism in the 1800s and 1900s provided fertile justification for the fascist NSDAP party in Germany, commonly known as the Nazi party. Additionally, the Nazi party's preoccupation with social darwinism concluded that indigenous Germanic culture was superior to decadent modern values. The shared linguistic and historical Indo-European heritage of Germany and Scandinavia allowed Adolf Hitler, along with Goebbels, his propaganda minister, to appropriate Viking myths and symbols into Nazi culture. In fact, the swastika is an ancient Indo-European symbol for the sun wheel, and was appropriated directly from Old Norse decorative art. In Sanskrit, another Indo-European language, the word "swastika" meant "so be it" or "well it is."⁴⁶ A brass and enamel handle mount found on a bucket from the Oseberg burial illustrates the continuity of Indo-European symbols in Old Norse art (**Figure #16**). Commonly used throughout Old Norse art, the symbol of the swastika is associated with the movement of the sun and moon around the seasons,

⁴⁴ Wotan is the Germanic name for Odin.

⁴⁵ Orrling, "The Old Norse Dream", 358.

⁴⁶ Layne Redmond, When the Drummers Were Women: A Spiritual History of Rhythm (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1997), 70.

and with the power of fate. In the *Hávamál*, the 'whirling wheel' by which women's hearts are shaped (p. 1), also illustrates the swastika's presence in Old Norse literature. Additionally, Hitler encouraged archeological research and excavations of Viking settlements to further his racist obsession with Aryan essentialism. According to Orrling, "The close identification between the ideal of the pure German and the Vikings, which had been fueled by romantic antiquarianism, found its most extreme expression in the militant nationalism of the Third Reich, which sought to bring within its power and borders all those lands sharing a perceived Germanic Past".⁶⁷ This dangerous manifestation of neo-gothic nationalism has had a negative influence on the study and interest in Old Norse history and mythology. In an interview with Margot Adler in *Drawing Down the Moon*, Alice Roades noted, "There's a general assumption that the Norse religion is connected with the Nazis because the Nazis used Norse symbols...How are we ever to reclaim the swastika- symbol of both Thor's hammer and the wheel of the sun (and dating back thousands of years before Hitler's perversion of it)."⁶⁸

Today, identifiable symbols of Viking society have manifested themselves in mainstream pop culture. However, time alters the accuracy of representation. For example, Viking helmets are commonly pictured with horns, as evidenced by the purple and gold Minnesota Viking football team's helmet. The cover photo of this paper also shows a modern version of a shield maiden's *hjäl*⁶⁹. Ironically, there is absolutely no evidence- archeological, literary, or artistic- that Viking helmets actually sported horns.

Viking society and culture are also brought to life at several open-air historical museums. At the L'Anse Aux Meadows Viking site on the northeast coast of Newfoundland, Canada, reenactors (**Figure #17**) attempt to reconstruct and depict what life may have been like for women during the Viking Age. The Viking settlement of L'Anse occurred between 980 and 1020 C.E.; recent excavations have uncovered household articles which prove the presence of women at the settlement. These articles include a spindle whorl and

⁶⁷ Orrling, "The Old Norse Dream", 363.

⁶⁸ Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today* (New York: Penguin/Arkana, 1986), 274.

⁶⁹ "Hjäl" is Swedish for "helmet".

needles used for a type of knitting known as *nålebinding*.⁷⁰

Another modern manifestation of Old Norse values is *Asatru*, or Norse Paganism, which is practiced not only in Scandinavia but around the world, as well as here in the United States. Margot Adler notes, "public Pagan worship was outlawed in Iceland over nine hundred years ago, but the ancient restrictions were repealed in 1874. In 1972, Nordic Paganism was officially recognized as a legitimate and legal religion."⁷¹ In Old Norse, "Asatru" literally translates as "belief in the the gods", or more specifically, "belief in the Æsir". As previously mentioned, the Æsir and the Vanir comprise the two groups of gods and goddesses in Norse mythology. Asatruists celebrate festivals, participate in ritual, organize into guilds, and exercise traditional Norse activities, such as the *sumbel*, the ritual of passing around a drinking horn filled with mead. This is the same practice as illustrated in the Gotland picture stones, and is an example of the continuity of myth and tradition via the ceremonial used of mead. Each person who drinks from the horn recites a poem, or sings a song; having traveled widely in Scandinavia, this writer recognizes that the tradition is widely practiced throughout Scandinavia today. While Asatru has been labeled conservative and patriarchal when compared against other Pagan religions, Asatru feminists defend their beliefs by pointing to powerful goddesses and traits of women in Old Norse society. Alice Rhoades notes, "Remember that in ancient Norse culture, women had much more freedom than in Greece or Rome. Women could own property, divorce their husbands, and take back their dowry." It is true, however, that Asatru, like other religions, has seen its fair share of radical extremists. Some Neo-Nazi's are lured by Asatru's pan-Germanic symbols, and attempt to use religious dogma to justify dangerous social and political views.

⁷⁰ Birgitta Linderöth Wallace, "The Viking Settlement at L'Anse Aux Meadows", *Vikings: The North Atlantic Saga*, William W. Fitzhugh and Elisabeth I. Ward, eds. (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), 213.

⁷¹ Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today* (New York: Penguin Arcana, 1986), 274.

Conclusions

"A past-in-itself to which all historians (or prehistorians) address themselves, but by virtue of its being in fact the past, they can never attain. What they perceive and construct is a past-as-known within the limitation of the evidence available, and their own capabilities, inadequacies, and background. What, however, can be constructed is that very dangerous thing, a past-as-wished-for in which a convenient selection of evidence is fitted into a predetermined intellectual or emotional pattern."

-Stuart Piggott²

Piggott's assertion cautions historians against the temptation to create meaning based on one's own values or preconceived ideas. Considering the grossly irresponsible Nazi glorification of a perceived pan-Nordic-Germanic history, it is the responsibility of modern historians and art historians to consider the wide spectrum of interpretations regarding ancient artifacts and texts, for it is widely accepted that history is both living and malleable. This paper examined the position of women in Old Norse society from mythological and historical perspectives; the aim of this writer was to demonstrate the historical continuity of women's roles and stereotypes.

The extravagant wealth of the Oseberg women was neither experienced by the majority of Old Norse women, nor by most women in the modern world. Old Norse values, personified via visual and verbal images such as valkyries, goddesses, battle maidens, and sacrificial victims, represent only a fraction of the ritually created roles held by women. However, these images collectively provide examples of the relationship between image and gender. Women in Old Norse culture and society were many things: temporal, cerebral, symbolic, legendary, violent, and nurturing. These are characteristics which may be found in all of humankind, not only in prehistory; indeed, they inhabit small parts of ourselves.

Such ideas are especially relevant when examining the role of women in the ancient world, as women were often without a voice in contemporary culture and society.

According to Gisela Bock, "Men and their activities had been seen as culture and of cultural value, whereas women and their activities had been seen as natural, outside of history and society, always the same and therefore not worthy of scholarly, political, or theoretical interest or inquiry."⁷³ The historical neglect of women's inclusion into cultural, societal and

political discourse is evidenced by the sparse information available about Queen Åsa and

² Stuart Piggott, The Druids (New York: Praeger, 1975), 11.

⁷³ Gisela Bock, "Challenging Dichotomies: Perspectives on Women's History", Writing Women's History, K. Offen, ed. (Indiana University Press, 1986), 2.

her role in shaping Norwegian history. In addition, Sørensen notes that material evidence "did not simply reflect gender differences but were also discursively involved in the creation and (re)interpretation of difference."⁷⁴ We may conclude that women's history was traditionally quantified and qualified as something separate from men's history. Because the majority of Old Norse history and literature was authored by male writers, our understanding of cultural and societal values reflects a male-biased hierarchy of values.

My interest in Scandinavian mythology and history stems from an inheritance of Nordic roots on my mother's side of the family. As a second generation Scandinavian-American, I have followed the path of many other second generation Americans. While my immigrant grandparents sought to hide their cultural and linguistic origins, their children and grandchildren have actively sought to reclaim ethnic traditions. While attending a family reunion in May of 2003, I visited the Hjemkomst Museum in Fargo, North Dakota with my mother and grandmother. In 1980, Robert Asp, a school guidance counselor from Hawley, Minnesota and a first generation Norwegian-American completed construction on an exact replica of the Viking ship recovered at Gokstad, Norway. The Gokstad Ship is housed alongside the Oseberg Ship in the Viking Ship Museum at Vestfold in Norway. In Norwegian, "hjemkomst" means "homecoming". In 1982, the Hjemkomst sailed from Duluth, Minnesota to Bergen, Norway, and complemented the wave of Scandinavian immigration to Minnesota which took place at the turn of the last century. My grandmother, Thora Rom, was part of that wave, and is the inspiration which feeds my interest in Scandinavian Studies, feminism, and women's history. It is to her that this paper is dedicated.

Attempts to normalize patriarchal hierarchies by historians, politicians, scientists, and artists are negated by the voices of powerful and outspoken women throughout history. The term "hjemkomst" also symbolizes the reconstruction of women's history, and to this writer, a return to an ancestral past-in-itself.

⁷⁴Sørensen, *Gender Archeology*, 82.

Vocabulary:

valkyrie- A mythical Norse battle maiden.

Old Norse- Describing the early language, society, and cultures of Scandinavia.

kenning- A metaphorical name.

Æsir- The younger category of sky gods and goddesses within the Norse pantheon.

Vanir- The older category of earth gods and goddesses within the Norse pantheon.

sejd- Describing a shamanic shape shifter, or the practice of shape-shifting.

skald- A poet in Old Norse literary tradition.

hjälrm- A Swedish term, meaning "helmet".

saga- An early-medieval, Scandinavian style of prose, which encompassed storytelling, history, and genealogy. The word "saga" in Old Norse means "to tell".

edda/ eddic poetry- A form of mythological poetry. Much of the remaining eddic poetry is attributed to Snorri Sturlason including two collections, The Poetic Edda (c. 1200 C.E.), and The Prose Edda (c. 1230 CE).

Vikings- Scandinavia seafarers and adventurers whose explorations occurred between the eighth and eleventh centuries C.E..

mál- An Old Norse term, meaning a "speech" or "story".

Odin- The Norse god of thunder, dominion, and philosophy; a member of the *Æsir*.

Freyja- The Norse goddess of fertility and battle; a member of the *Vanir*.

Gotland- An island in the Baltic Sea, off the coast of Sweden. Significant for its proliferation of Old Norse picture stones.

vik- An Scandinavian term meaning "bay" or "harbor".

whetting- The practice of inciting or goading.

Thor- The Norse god of war, thunder, and agriculture; a member of the *Æsir*.

Midgaard- In Norse mythology, the mortal realm of Middle Earth.

Asgaard- In Norse mythology, the heavenly realm of gods and goddesses.

Valhalla- In Norse mythology, the hall of the slain within *Asgaard*.

Loki- The Norse god of mischief and travel; a member of the *Æsir*.

volvur- In Norse mythology, sibyls which accompany the dead into *Niflheim*.

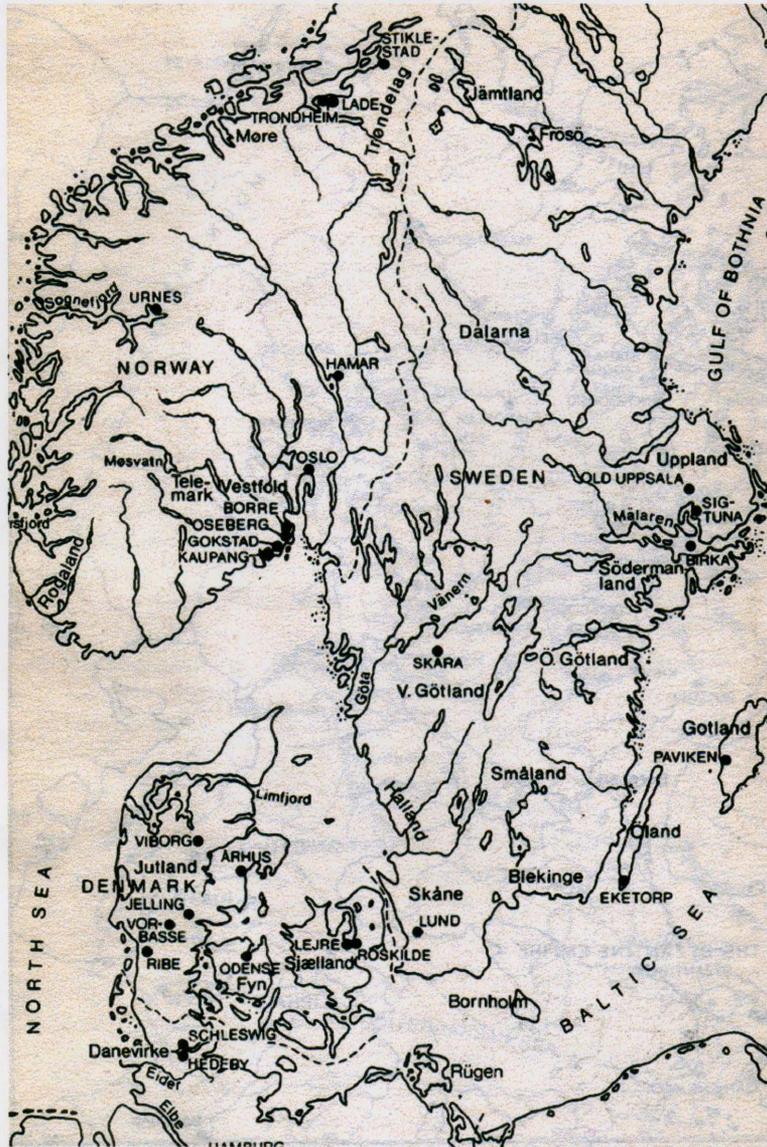
Niflheim- In Norse mythology, the ice-filled world of the dead.

Hel- In Norse mythology, the realm of the dead, within *Niflheim*.

Asatru- A contemporary form of Nordic Paganism.

sumbel- An Old Norse ritual in which a horn of mead is passed from person to person. Upon receiving the horn, each participant recites a poem, song, or speech.

nålebinding- A type of needlework practiced since the Viking Age.



Southern Scandinavia



North Eastern Europe

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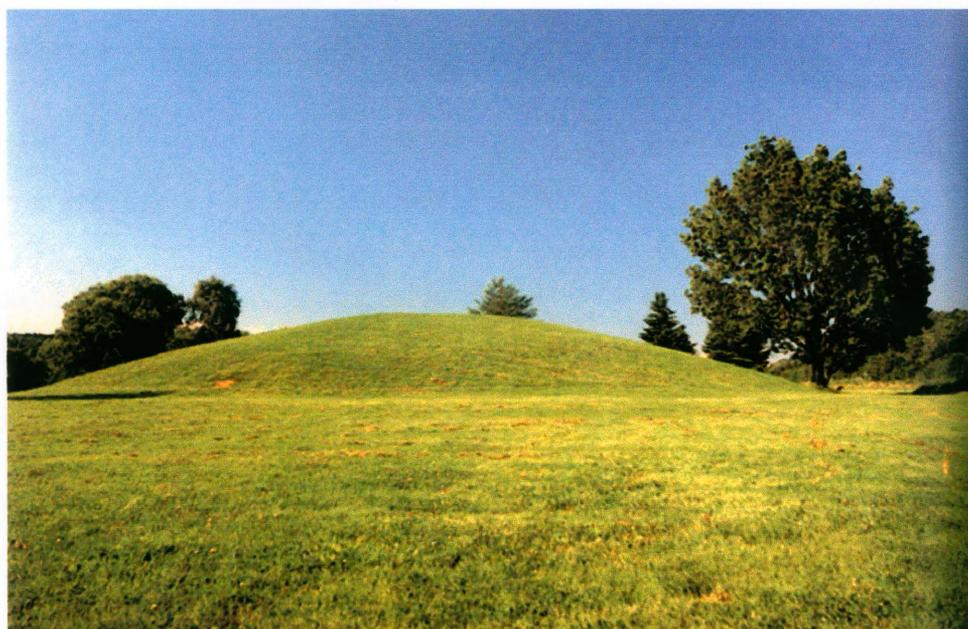


Figure #1
Oseberg Burial Mound
Vestfold, Norway

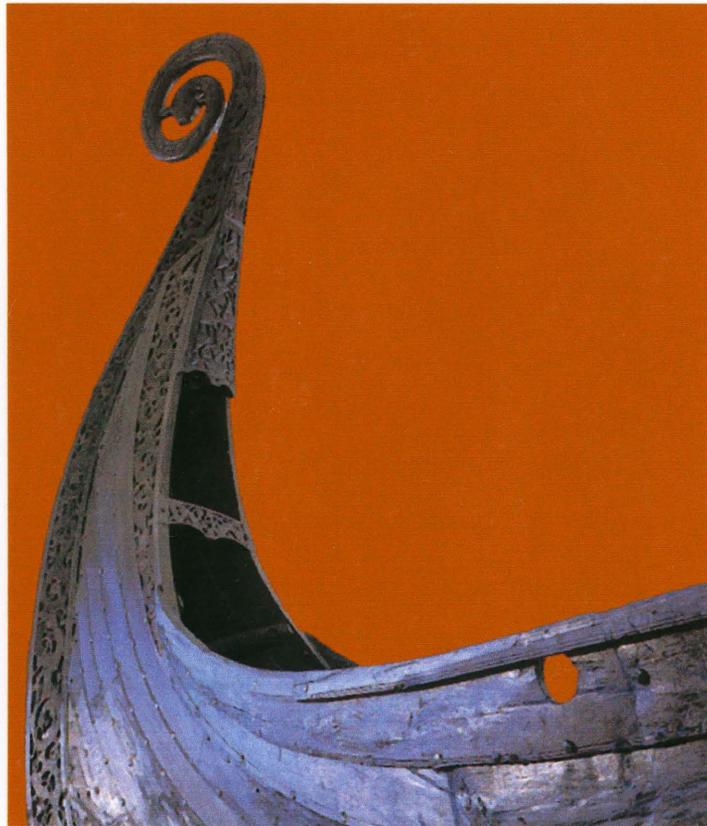


Figure #2
Oseberg Ship
Norway

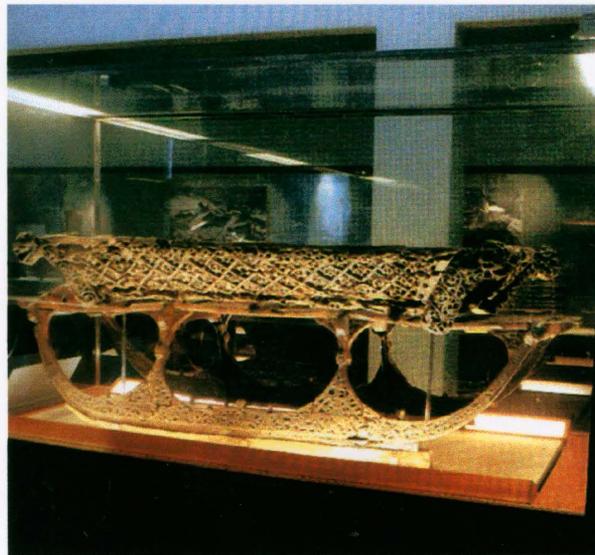


Figure #3
Oseberg Cart
Norway

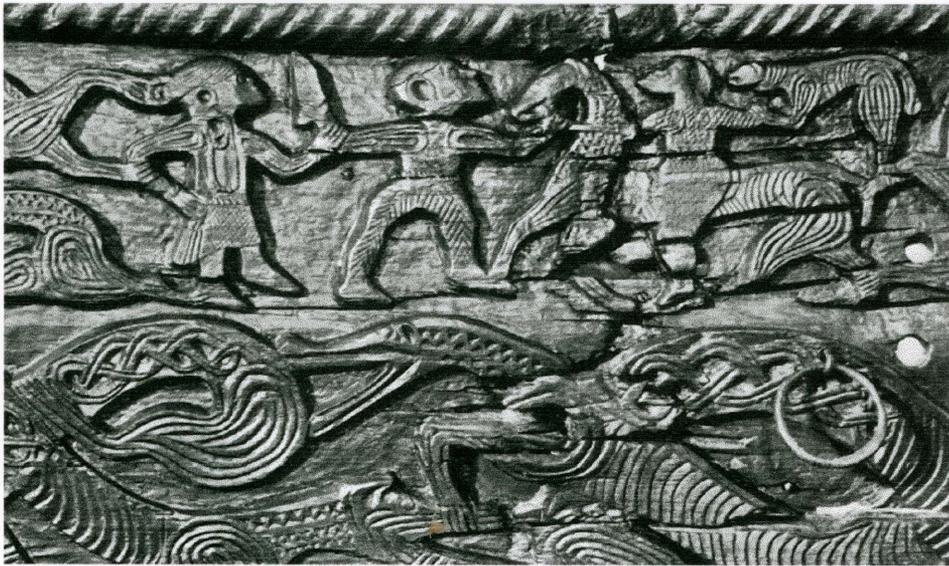


Figure #4
Detail of Cart, Oseberg Ship Burial
Norway

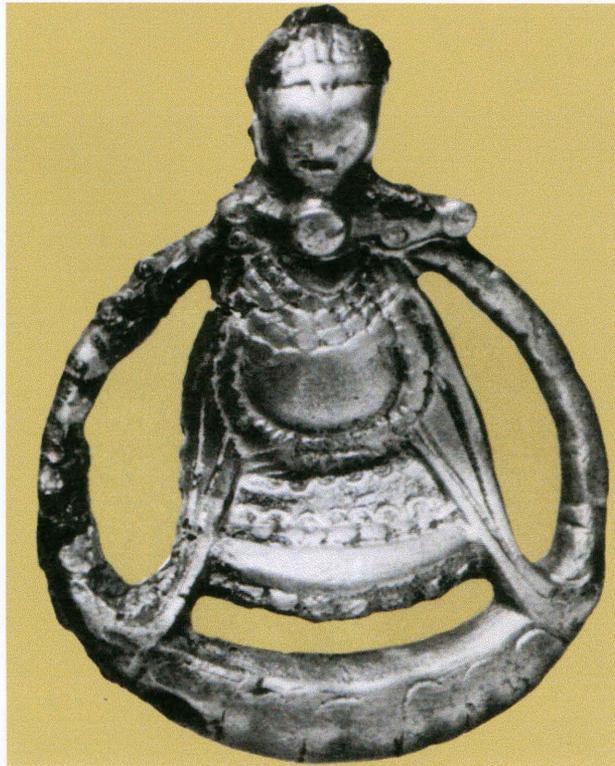


Figure #5
Freyja Brooch
Sweden



Figure #6
Smiss III Stone
När Parish, Sweden



Figure #7
Silver Valkyries
Sweden

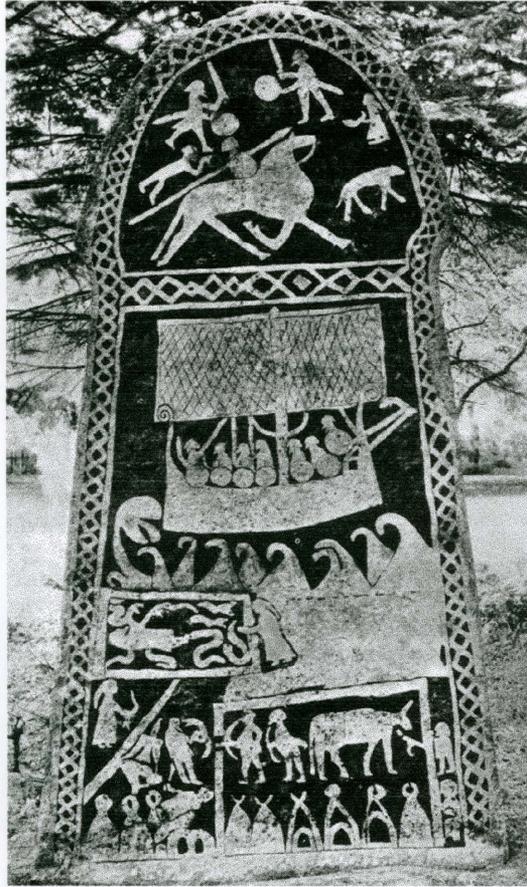


Figure #8
Hunninge I Stone
Klinte Parish, Sweden

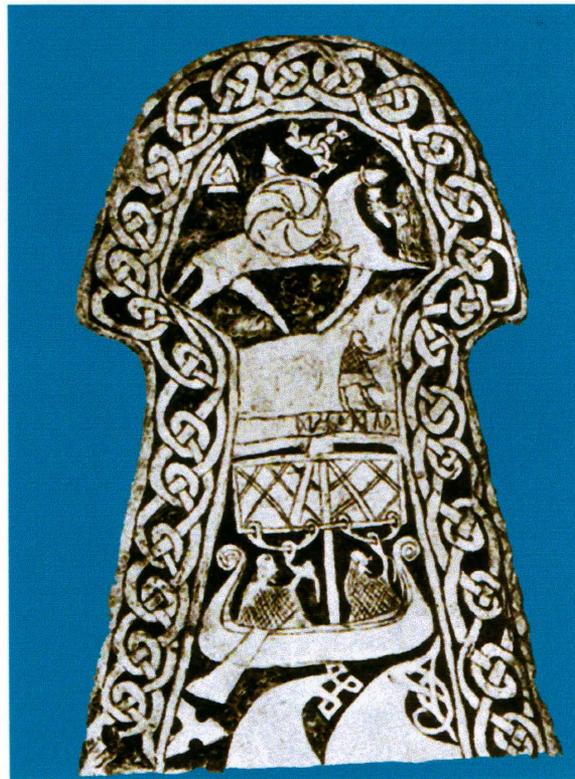


Figure #9
Lillbärs Stone
Stenkyrka Parish, Sweden

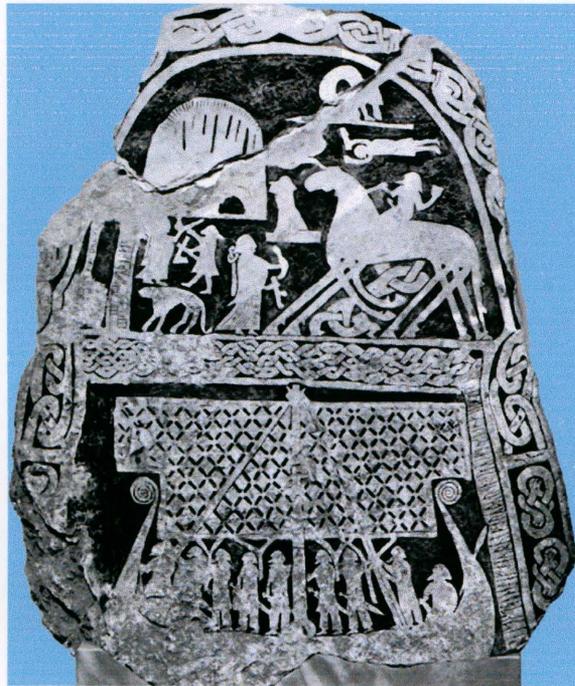


Figure #10
Tjängvide Stone
Gotland Sweden



Figure #11
Ihre Stone
Hellvi Parish, Sweden

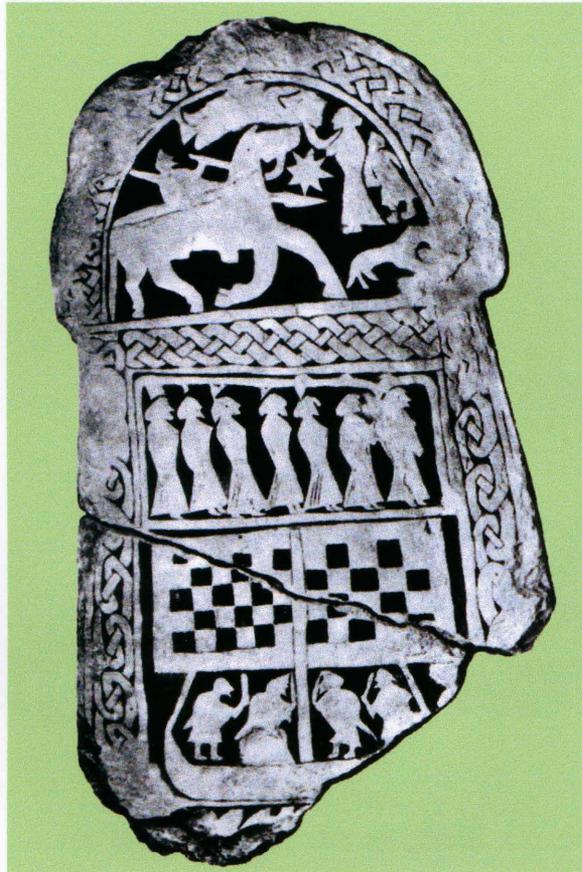


Figure #12
Bote Stone
Garda Parish, Sweden



Figure #13
Female Skull
Ballateare, Isle of Man



Figure #14
Gold Foil Amulet
Botkyrka Parish, Sweden



Figure #15
Kirsten Flagstad as "Brunnhilde"
"The Ring of the Nibelungs", 1935-1952



Figure #16
Handle Mount, Oseberg Ship Burial
Norway



Figure #17
Viking Reenactors
L'Anse Aux Meadows, Canada