

**‘The cruel queen her thrall let slip’: Boundaries of Female Agency in the *Ynglinga Saga***

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# **‘The cruel queen her thrall let slip’: Boundaries of Female Agency in the *Ynglinga Saga***

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## Introduction

The Old Norse sagas, written primarily in Iceland and Norway in the thirteenth century, represent a unique branch of Medieval European literature. They are distinct in that they are mostly written in the vernacular rather than Latin, but also for a variety of other reasons, including the fact that they contain a multitude of strong and independent female characters. This paper will examine the women of the *Ynglinga saga*. Based on the semi-legendary Scandinavian poem *Ynglingatal*, it makes up the first part of Snorri Sturluson’s *Heimskringla*, the most renowned of the Old Norse kings’ sagas. It primarily consists of a genealogical summary of the family known as the Ynglingar. As a narrative centred around kingship and war, and as part of a masculine, sometimes misogynistic genre, it unfortunately has few mentions of women. The women who are present, however, show a scope for agency that is far greater than might be expected at the time of writing, as many do not rely on men, but rather determine their own fates. What these women have in common are masculine behaviour and ideals, and this article will build on existing work on gender ambiguity in early Medieval Scandinavia to show how biological sex was overridden by fulfilling expectations of social behaviour. This stands in contrast to the late Medieval period and its considerably stricter and more misogynistic gender hierarchy, caused by the increasing influence of the Christian clergy.

Although there are clear methodological issues with attempting to use semi-fictional heroines to explain a society’s broader features, this approach does provide the opportunity to use the agency of individual characters to forge a more generalised understanding of what the role of many high-ranking women might have been, as well as to explore the attitudes of the writer himself. The two central arguments of this article are that, in contrast to the later sources, the *Ynglinga saga* suggests it was possible in early medieval Scandinavian society and ideology for women to possess considerable agency and power, and that the only boundary to actually wielding it was engagement in masculine behaviour.

## Mythological Beginnings

The beginning of the saga is essentially a rewriting of Norse mythology in Christian terms where the old gods are seen as powerful human progenitors of the royal dynasty rather than divine beings. In these mythological beginnings, women, for instance Frigga, Freyja and Skaði, are described in rather disparaging terms, without any form of agency whatsoever. However, one could argue that Snorri's treatment of women at the beginning of the saga is not primarily about misogyny, but due to his viewpoint as a Christian historian looking back on the pagan past. Such an argument is strengthened by the writer's similarly disparaging treatment of the men. This introduction to the old gods is an attempt to denounce paganism and prove that the aesir, the prime Norse deities, were not gods, but mortal men and women, just as significant or insignificant as those who came after them.

## Into the Line of Ynglingar

After the mythological roots of the saga, the tale proceeds into the line of the Ynglingar themselves, supposedly descended from Freyr, Freyja's brother. As the first few generations are primarily concerned with war and government, there are very few mentions of women. However, when we arrive at the reign of Freyr's supposed great-grandson Vanlandi, women are suddenly placed at the forefront. Vanlandi has apparently left just after making his young wife pregnant and has not returned after ten years. Driva, his wife, then opts to request the sorceress Huld to kill Vanlandi. Huld complies and soon the king lies dead. This story is virtually repeated in the next generation, when the sons of king Vísburr, himself the son of Vanlandi and Driva, asks Huld to use her magic to help them get rid of their father. Huld again agrees, but this time on a grave condition: that from here on, there will always be kinslaying among the Ynglingar.<sup>1</sup> The two brothers agree to this, and they burn their father inside a house, aided by Huld's sorcery. It is important to note that no woman is being blamed for the beginning of the Ynglingar's kinslaying; it is presented as the logical result of the two brothers' actions.

Further, one should note that Huld does not actually do anything. She agrees to kill two kings, but in the first instance there is no description of the king's death, and in the second, the ones who made the request also perform the murder themselves. There is, however, great respect for, and belief in, Huld's power. She is sought out by high-ranking people to do, or at least bless, their dirty work. In addition to that, the reader of this saga will notice that she faces no condemnation for her actions; the blame for the murder and the kinslaying to come is all on the two brothers.

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<sup>1</sup> *Heimskringla*, F. Jónsson (ed.) (København, 1911), pp. 11-12.

Although there is very little fantastical about the presentation of Huld, most women of the saga are presented more realistically. Unlike Huld, they are also all kings' wives, for the simple reason that queens would be the most important and visible female members of remembered history. The first of these is Skjálfr, wife of king Agni. She became the king's wife when Agni killed her father and seized her by force; not the beginning of a loving marriage. Just a year later, Skjálfr went on to orchestrate her husband's hanging.<sup>2</sup> There are many cases throughout the saga literature of women asking male confidantes to perform similar actions, but Skjálfr is remarkable in that she personally places the noose around Agni's neck. She is thus the main agent not just in the planning of her husband's murder, but also in the execution of it. Furthermore, she is not placed in a negative light at all, as her actions are apparently justified by the way in which Agni captured her.

A less violent case is provided by the mother and daughter Álof and Yrsa. Álof is known as *in ríka*, 'the mighty', implying she held a degree of power.<sup>3</sup> Yrsa is known from a multitude of semi-legendary sources including *Beowulf*, and her story focuses on her being stolen away from her husband Aðils by a king named Helgi, with whom she proceeds to have a son. Three years later her mother Álof arrives to tell her that Helgi is actually her father. Yrsa then leaves her son and returns home to Aðils, apparently living happily ever after. These women show little sign of agency *per se*, but it is important to note that again, Snorri does not judge them. Álof and Yrsa are consistently shown as faithful and loyal women without any malicious intent. In the *Saga of Hrolf Kraki*, on the other hand, Álof plants Yrsa with Helgi and deliberately avoids revealing their relation, which could be seen as a typically misogynistic characterisation of female cunning and deception.<sup>4</sup> It is also worth noting that while the *Saga of Hrolf Kraki* was written later than the *Ynglinga saga*, Snorri also bases his account on the earlier *Skjöldunga saga*, implying that misogynistic constructions were primarily imposed later in the Old Norse tradition.

However, there are certainly malicious women in Snorri's text as well. A particularly interesting case is provided by Ása, daughter of Ingjaldr Illrádi ("bad ruler"), who was responsible for the deaths of both her husband's brother and her husband. She was apparently given the epithet Illrádi, just like her father, and while she is the only woman of this saga who is advertised as thoroughly unpleasant without any form of justification, she is here just following in the footsteps of Ingjaldr.<sup>5</sup> Ása is presented as the female equivalent

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<sup>2</sup> *Heimskringla*, Jónsson, p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> *Heimskringla*, Jónsson, p. 22.

<sup>4</sup> *Hrolfs saga kraka*, F. Jónsson (ed.) (København, 1904), pp. 28-29.

<sup>5</sup> *Heimskringla*, Jónsson, p. 30.

and partner in crime of her father, and there is thus little separation in the personality and attributes of these two characters, regardless of their different sexes.

Finally, the last important woman of the *Ynglinga saga*, and arguably the most historical, is Ása Haraldsdottir, the mother of Halfdan the Black and thus grandmother of Haraldr Fairhair, the first king of Norway. Ása is the strongest example of female agency extending beyond normal boundaries in this saga. Just like Skjálf in the beginning, she had her husband Guðrøðr the Hunter murdered as vengeance for taking her against her will.<sup>6</sup> Then she travelled back to her father's kingdom in Agder with her young son, and became queen regnant.<sup>7</sup> There are also theories which identify her as the woman buried with a ship in the exceptionally rich Oseberg burial in Vestfold in southern Norway.<sup>8</sup>

There is also an interesting point to be made about condemnation in regards to Ása. In the skaldic poem about Guðrøðr's death in the 1844 translation, the line about Ása sending her slave to kill Guðrøðr has been translated as "the cruel queen her thrall let slip."<sup>9</sup> This obviously implies textual denunciation of Ása, but in reality there is no equivalent to this quote in the original Old Norse text. It is simply a misogynist construction. This leads to the implication that beliefs and theories about the role of women in the Viking world have been shaped by modern misogyny. In their social reality, women may very well have had fewer boundaries, and faced significantly less societal judgment, than the modern perception of the era suggests.

## Conclusion

The women of the *Ynglinga saga* show a significant amount of agency in political and social contexts, even compared to the later sections of *Heimskringla*. The women mentioned in this article are themselves actors, whereas the later sagas focus on the so-called 'inciter', a woman who goads her male relatives into taking action. A woman like the infamous Gunhildr, wife of Eric Bloodaxe, shows considerable agency, but it lies primarily in influencing men, not in commanding or taking personal action. By contrast, women from the *Ynglinga saga*, like Skjolf and Ása Haraldsdottir, are themselves the masters of their own fate, and are not reliant on the aid of men to determine it. Often they are

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<sup>6</sup> *Heimskringla*, Jónsson, p. 34.

<sup>7</sup> *Heimskringla*, Jónsson, p. 36.

<sup>8</sup> For an assessment of this theory, see J. Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, (Woodbridge, 1991), p. 34; a more recent iteration can be found in P. Holck, 'The Oseberg Ship Burial, Norway: New Thoughts On the Skeletons From the Grave Mound', *European Journal of Archaeology*, 9 (2006), pp. 185-210.

<sup>9</sup> *The Heimskringla, or Chronicle of the Kings of Norway*, S. Laing (trans.) (London, 1844), p. 260.

subjugated and mistreated by men, but in those cases they take personal revenge, and are seen as justified in doing so.

The female agency of the *Ynglinga saga* is seemingly also a form of power neither receiving nor requiring any form of justification, thus suggesting that the saga refers to a time when women's agency was more widely framed than in later periods. Typically, power in the Middle Ages was primarily male, and female power and agency on the political level had to be justified in some manner. Examples of these justifications would be being the sole heir to a prestigious lineage or being the mother of a young male heir. There is no mention of either of these in the *Ynglinga saga*. It is also apparent that this period held considerably less opportunity for female regencies, or regencies in general, as early Scandinavia generally did not accept boy kings. One can see the development of this rising trend in the later Middle Ages, with queens such as Agnes and Margrethe of Denmark ruling kingdoms on behalf of their sons, but at the time of Snorri's writing there had been remarkably few regents. This suggests a change in female power, from a time when masculine women could wield real power in their own right, to one when they could only wield it on behalf of men.

It is clear, then, that if there was any hindrance barring women from political agency, it was the cultural construct of femininity. There was no rule or law barring women from acting on the political stage, but they had to employ masculine behaviour, they had to take what they wanted, and they had to show signs of masculine virtues such as courage, determination and ambition. An excellent theory regarding female power and agency was offered more than two decades ago by Carol Clover, who suggested a blurring of gender divisions in early Medieval Scandinavia.<sup>10</sup> In this society, according to Clover, the focus was not on whether one was a man or a woman, but whether one had masculine or feminine qualities, implying a gender binary system different from our own. The existing boundaries restricting women were thus placed on them as a result of femininity, not because they belonged to the female sex. This would be replaced by a more typical Medieval gender binary, and a clear division between men and women, in the late Medieval period, when the gradual Christian conversion of Scandinavia was brought to completion and the Church gained in power.

One could thus ask what Snorri's motives are for presenting women in the way that he does. In much medieval literature, powerful women in leading roles are placed there in order to be criticised and shown in a negative light, thus seemingly proving that women should not hold such positions. In the *Ynglinga saga*, however, there is no indication of such scrutinising. Snorri's description of the aforementioned women and their actions, are neutral at worst. On the other hand, one could theorise that Snorri was actually trying to paint a realistic picture without any judgment. To paraphrase Norwegian historian Sverre Bagge, Snorri's methods were relatively close to those of modern

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<sup>10</sup> C. Clover, 'Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe', *Speculum*, 68 (1993), pp. 363-87.

historians, and he most likely believed himself to be reconstructing history in a good way.<sup>11</sup> Following from this, one could argue that medieval Scandinavians believed the *Ynglinga saga* and the women in it to be representations of historical truth.

Modern scholarship has established that this particular saga is highly untrustworthy, and one should not take its word for any particular event or person. However, when Snorri shows these women as powerful characters with real agency, he implies there were few solid boundaries on female agency in early medieval Scandinavia, or at least that the boundaries were flexible, and the *Ynglinga saga* provides a small insight into an ideology of gender and power that investigation into the more trustworthy sagas will expand upon. Women in a society as heavily masculine as medieval Scandinavia were very much underprivileged in most social and political contexts when compared to men, and many other sources show distinctly misogynistic tendencies. However, textual evidence like this suggests that the potential for a woman to have the same amount of agency as a man, and for this to result in social acceptance, was indeed present.

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<sup>11</sup> S. Bagge, *Society and politics in Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla* (Berkeley, 1991), pp. 57-60.