



Valkyrie: The Women of the Viking World, Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir (London, 2020)

Source: Midlands Historical Review, Book Review

Published: 14/07/2021

URL:

<http://www.midlandshistoricalreview.com/valkyrie-the-women-of-the-viking-world/>

Book Review: Valkyrie: The Women of the Viking World, Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir (London, 2020)

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Biography

Sian Webb recently submitted her PhD thesis, 'A Land of Five Languages: Material Culture, Communities and Identity in Northumbria, 600-867', that was joint supervised by Chris Loveluck in Archaeology and Peter Darby in History. She focuses on early medieval cultural history, material culture and medieval studies.

The year is 1014 and The Battle of Clontarf rages in Dublin. It is a setting which in many cases immediately sparks images of men fighting and dying for their male lords, kings, plunder and the glory of battle. As this is happening, a man in Caithness far away on the north-eastern coast of Scotland spied twelve figures entering a weaving shed. These women were the Valkyries. As the Irish and Norse fought in Dublin, they wove a tapestry with a thread of human entrails and loom-weights of skulls. This is how Friðriksdóttir opens her exploration of women living in the Viking world. Whilst warfare, and medieval battle in particular, is often envisioned as a strictly masculine affair in modern popular consciousness, this vignette from the thirteenth-century *Njáls saga* reintroduces a feminine aspect.

Valkyrie: The Women of the Viking World is a rich cultural history of the lives of Viking Age women, constituting a worthy addition to the existing scholarship on this topic. In this endeavour, the setting is apt. Women from goddesses such as Freyja and Valkyries like Sigrún, to extraordinary, albeit human, women accounted for in Icelandic sagas, such as the Viking Guðriðr Þorbjarnardóttir, are shown to be deeply complex individuals. They all are shown to have a rich mixture of virtues and vices with the capacity to display the full range of emotions.¹ They could be honourable, brave and wise whilst also able to make mistakes and be ruthless in their anger. These women did not appear as static images nor as moral lessons set in black and white. As Friðriksdóttir brings together the threads of her study it is evident, as she states in her introduction, that these are reflections of real people and emerge from a society wherein women were essential for their work and the wisdom they possessed.

Friðriksdóttir's monograph emerges from a shift in the scholarly appreciation of the complexity of the culture and identities of the people, both men and women, of the Viking Age (ca. 790-1066 CE). Her study is largely confined to Viking

¹ J. K. Friðriksdóttir. *Valkyrie: The Women of the Viking World*. (London, 2020). Pp. 10-11.

settlements in Northern Europe and the British Isles, though she does at times bring in evidence from the Baltic region. In this monograph, she provides an overview of the evidence at hand bringing together shared attributes shaping the lives and identities of women throughout the regions of Viking settlement. This widening appreciation of Viking culture and society began in the 1970s with the seminal work *The Viking Achievement: The Society and Culture of Early Medieval Scandinavia* by Peter Foote and David Wilson, in which the authors devoted very little space to the discussion of raiding and violence, delving instead into the rich culture and artistically constructive activities of the period.² Two decades later, Judith Jesch opened the discussion of the place of women in Viking society.³ This monograph brought together a wide variety of material sources and toponymy to bring gender studies into a scholarly tradition that had long ignored the presence and involvement of women in all aspects of life. The study of Viking women and their potential for active involvement in raiding and warfare culture was reinvigorated in 2017 by Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson, et al. with their paper 'A Female Viking Warrior Confirmed by Genomics'. The team used genome-wide sequence data to confirm the biological sex of a Viking individual in a well-furnished grave and disprove previous assumptions that the individual must have been male based on the weaponry and material culture with which it was buried. The team concluded by cautioning against basing our understanding of the past and potential of the people who lived then on generalised assumptions of cultural norms and stereotypes.

As Friðriksdóttir states, the term 'Viking' does not only refer to those who were chiefly interested in violence, pillaging and raiding, though these encounters did occur particularly in the earlier period of their activity. 'Viking identities', according to her, also encompass the mobility of the people in question. Those were groups of people actively involved in trade routes that stretched from Asia to the western fringes of Europe, in travel and in the settlement of short- and long-term

² P. Foote and D. Wilson. *The Viking Achievement: The Society and Culture of Early Medieval Scandinavia*. (London, 1970).

³ J. Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*. (Woodbridge, 1991).

colonies.⁴ In these endeavours, women were more than able to take an important role, whether or not they were actively involved in raiding and warfare. As seen in the opening vignette, women were inextricably linked with spinning and weaving. Textile production opened a considerable path to social mobility, as Viking mobility relied on ships and their sails. These objects, along with the production of clothing suitable for long sea voyages in arctic seas, required years of effort that would largely be the work of professional women.⁵ This mobility and the opportunity for women to engage in high-level political activity is reflected both in sagas and in presence of high-status female graves at the sites of important Viking Age power centres.⁶

In order to provide an accurate and fully developed image of Viking women, Friðriksdóttir brings together a wide variety of sources both material and textual, including runic inscriptions, the text and imagery carved on runestones, toponymy, picture stones, Viking Age art and archaeological sources alongside textual evidence provided by the sagas and from annals and other historical texts produced in Ireland and other European areas. This approach requires a synthesis of materials from a wide variety of academic fields spanning Viking and Medieval studies and the growing appreciation of material culture in history that began in the 1990s with scholars such as Judith Jesch, and continued to gain strength through the early 2000s, with works such as the collected volumes *Land, Sea and Home: Proceedings of a Conference on Viking Period Settlement*, (Cardiff, July 2001) and *Cædmon's Hymn and Material Culture in the World of Bede: Six Essays*.⁷ This approach continues to prove fruitful, attracting a growing number of scholars focusing on a range of topics on which textual sources are less forthcoming.⁸

⁴ Friðriksdóttir. *Valkyrie*. Pp. 12.

⁵ Friðriksdóttir. *Valkyrie*. Pp. 85.

⁶ Friðriksdóttir. *Valkyrie*. Pp. 107-108.

⁷ J. Hines, A. Lane and M. Rednap (eds). *Land, Sea and Home: Proceedings of a Conference on Viking Period Settlement, Cardiff, July 2001* (Abingdon, 2004); A. J. Frantzen and J. Hines (eds). *Cædmon's Hymn and Material Culture in the World of Bede: Six Essays*. (Morgantown, 2007);

⁸ For Viking studies, material culture is invaluable. See: N. L. Wicker, 'Christianization, Female Infanticide, and the Abundance of Female Burials at Viking Age Birka in Sweden', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 21 (2) (May 2012), pp. 245-262; M. Hayeur Smith, *The Valkyries' Loom: The Archaeology of Cloth Production and Female Power in the North Atlantic*. (Florida, 2020); M. L. S. Sørensen, 'Gender, Material Culture, and Identity in the

Each individual type of source, from material culture and archaeology to textual vignettes, offers its own window into the study of the cultures and communities of the past. Without a wide source base, information from different fields of knowledge loses some key contextual elements, skewing our understanding of past societies and the identities that grew within them. By bringing a wider base of sources together to form an integrated approach, it is possible to work towards an understanding of how all pieces fit together. Insights gleaned from different sources can provide context and balance out the weaknesses and biases present in each individual type of source. This balance of sources is adeptly managed by Friðriksdóttir, leading to the wonderfully complex and richly layered depiction of the lives and opportunities of Viking women shown in *Valkryje*.

Friðriksdóttir draws the reader in by the textual vignettes provided by the sagas. These texts draw readers into a portrayal of the world as seen by the saga authors and their audience, bringing a vibrancy of colour and life to the discussion of the past. It is balanced by the evidence provided by the wide variety of complementary sources discussed above. A wide range of women from the sagas help to provide evidence for the shape of life for women from varied backgrounds, from wealthy and influential women who controlled the lives of their families to young women who become trapped in awful cycles of poverty and abuse. The depiction of Valkyries and deities from the sagas provide further insights into cultural understandings of the nature of women and their ability to be brave and strong or cowardly and deceitful. Whilst Friðriksdóttir shows a careful and studied handling of the sagas, the book could benefit from a deeper discussion of the difficulties presented by these sources for the benefit of the reader. These

Viking Diaspora', *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia*, 5 (2009), pp. 253-269. This process can be seen throughout medieval studies. See: E. Cambridge and J. Hawkes (eds), *Crossing Boundaries: Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Art, Material Culture, Language and Literature of the Early Medieval World*, (Philadelphia, 2017); S. Jones. *The Archaeology of Ethnicity: Constructing Identities in the Past and Present* (London, 1997); M. C. Hyer and G. R. Owen-Crocker. *The Material Culture of Daily Living in the Anglo-Saxon World* (Exeter, 2011); R. Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture: The Archaeology of Religious Women*. (New York, 1994); R. Gilchrist, *Medieval Life: Archaeology and the Life Course* (Woodbridge, 2012).

difficulties include the mixing of Christian and traditional belief systems for the saga authors and how this may tinge the text. Another difficulty that could have been discussed is the chronological diversity of the sources. The saga authors often wrote about things that happened centuries before their own time. Ideology and cultures evolved and adapted to the new problems and opportunities presented by different times. This introduced further potential for incidental misrepresentation of what would now have been a different culture from the saga author's own contemporary reality.

The book is structured around a life cycle, delicately following the trails of women's lives in the lands touched by Viking culture from birth through to death. Along the way, Friðriksdóttir examines how age, marital status and social rank affected their identities through material culture, burial and osteological archaeology, and sagas. She considers infancy and childhood for female offspring, discussing infanticide and the argument that female infants may have been more likely to be left to die from exposure in times of hardship, offering a balanced view on all sides of this argument. In this, she sets runic evidence that suggests a population balance skewed in favour of men alongside burial evidence and law codes that indicate the depth of love that Viking families could show for their daughters and the protections granted to children and pregnant women regardless of the infant's sex.⁹

Chapter 2 focuses on the social world of teenage girls, discussing the cultural beliefs and family honour that shaped their lives and potentially restrained their opportunities. Yet, this period of youth and young adulthood also brought with it the potential for women to take a role in craft and trade work, to act as poets (*skáldmæð*) or a more physically active role in violence and warfare.¹⁰ The following chapter turns to adulthood, the lives and status of married women, and female agency and divorce. In it, the author discusses personal adornment, women's

⁹ Friðriksdóttir. *Valkyrie*. Pp. 24-25, 35.

¹⁰ Friðriksdóttir. *Valkyrie*. Pp. 52, 54-55, 58-59.

involvement in craft-working and trade, and opportunities for travel and leadership roles. Women were valued for their intelligence and abilities, personal attributes that could prove to be attractive qualities in a partner. Even after marriage, however, women were able to initiate a divorce if marital relations broke down.

Much of the adult life of fertile women would be spent in a cycle of pregnancy and the nursing of young children, along with miscarriages, healing from childbirth and the potential of death associated with childbirth. These concerns and the importance of motherhood form the core of Chapter 4. The chapter brings these topics to life through evidence from sagas showing the bravery of pregnant women, as well as mothers who could be wise leaders of their communities, loving supporters of their families and ruthless in their attempts to secure the future wealth and social rank of their sons and daughters.¹¹

If women survived their childbearing years, they were statistically more likely to outlive their partners. Chapter 5 focuses on this shift in the life cycle with an examination of widowhood in Viking culture. In this endeavour, Friðriksdóttir looks at the actions of widows in sagas alongside the evidence of influential women available from runic inscriptions and grave goods. Widows were able to consolidate considerable wealth as businesswomen and remain active in their communities as commissioners for the construction and upkeep of bridges and roads.¹² The transition between older belief systems and the new Christian religion brought additional opportunities for widows who displayed their new faith by commissioning stone crosses blending Christian and traditional imagery with runic inscriptions.¹³

The monograph concludes with the experience of elderly Viking Age women and their treatment in death. Viking Age burials indicate that communities held older women in positions of considerable influence and dignity.¹⁴ Evidence found in

¹¹ Friðriksdóttir. *Valkyrie*. Pp. 118, 128-129, 142.

¹² Friðriksdóttir. *Valkyrie*. Pp. 162.

¹³ Friðriksdóttir. *Valkyrie*. Pp. 162-163.

¹⁴ Friðriksdóttir. *Valkyrie*. Pp. 173.

sagas, graves containing staffs, amulets and medicinal plants, and the iconography of women holding staffs and branches found on the Kirk Michael cross slab (123) on the Isle of Man suggest that older women could be valued as professional seeresses (*völva* or *seiðkona*) and for their role in traditional magic (*seiðr*).¹⁵

Overall, Friðriksdóttir builds a vivid image of the complex realities of life for women in Viking settlements. Women could be constrained by societal expectations, yet Viking Age culture allowed opportunities for both physical and social mobility. Women took positions of importance in their families and communities from their youth to the end of their lives. They could be ruthless and vengeful or wise and honourable, characterised by a mixture of virtues and vices. The balance of sources provides a detailed consideration of the realities of life for Viking Age women, and the textual vignettes drawn from sagas make the work endlessly engaging for both academic readers and non-specialists interested in Viking history.

¹⁵ Friðriksdóttir. *Valkyrie*. Pp. 179-180, 183.

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