

Women of Fate in the Viking Age:
Völur, Valkyries, and the Angel of Death



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Abstract

Old Norse religion is a subject of great curiosity and fantasy, and images such as the scene described in Ahmed Ibn Fadlan's account of the Rús burial lend to humanity's almost obsessive fascination with what comes after life. It is a subject of ongoing debate not only regarding the people of the Viking Age, but anyone in space and time. Its intangible existence makes it all the more difficult to process, and it is an occurrence surrounded by a high level of action which cannot always be detected. While we can discover some of the material remnants of an action or series of actions, we inevitably miss out on the entire picture, such as *who* carried out the action. We only have the results of the action that was taken.

This is the case regarding the so-called "Angel of Death" in Ibn Fadlan's account that took place in the 10th century along the Volga River. Such a figure is only described in this single account. Sagas and Eddas are very vague on ritual proceedings for funerals, weddings, and other potentially significant events that required ritual practices to be carried out. These tales also largely consist of mythologies and oral stories that were designed for a particular audience and a particular purpose, which was not to teach Scandinavian culture to outsiders. These anecdotes were to entertain people within the society, and to promote ideal behaviors and concepts. Religious practitioners are mentioned in the sagas, although mostly in brief accounts, and consist of both men and women. However, it is evident that these actors were regarded differently as individuals based on their social credentials, or gender as will be addressed in this thesis.

In this paper, I seek to examine the religious roles of the Viking Age, most specifically within the 10th century, and what it entailed regarding gender roles, and what possible roles women could have filled within the religion and why, including Ibn Fadlan's "Angel of Death." Using primary sources and secondary literature comparison, as well as archaeological examples, I will argue that her role could have been more than a unique case, and that she fits in with possible Old Norse religious themes and guidelines. While I fully acknowledge that it is impossible to prove, I think that there is enough evidence to suggest that it is a possibility, perhaps even a likelihood. To do this requires a survey of Old Norse religious beliefs and practices, and the female figures involved.

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Dedicated to my father, who sails in Ægir's hall.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In this thesis, I will examine the core research question of to what extent we can surmise female ritual specialists. In order to do so, I will investigate who or what the *Angel of Death*¹ figure could have been, and if it was possible for her occupation to have existed within Scandinavia. I will consider previous scholarship on the various aspects that support such a theory, and I will use saga examples and archaeology to answer questions regarding these themes. Furthermore, I will look for patterns or similarities between female ritual specialists in an attempt to establish an overall understanding of priorities and habits within the Scandinavian culture of the Viking Age.

1.1 Gender Narratives

Theories considering what caused the Viking Age in Scandinavia vary, and include the acquirement of resources, sail technology, and access to women, among other things. Sail technology is a favorite impetus within public history settings, but it often goes unsaid that it would have been the women creating the precious sails, spending years of their lives spinning, weaving, and sewing the cloth.² Other theories surround the possibility that access to women was reserved for the wealthiest men, going as far as suggesting that female infanticide was practiced in order to maintain such control over the female commodity.³ Even if that was not the case, and it is highly debated, sagas allude to the necessity of a man having enough wealth or renown to win over the minds of their marriage partners and their fathers. In order to do this, men would have to participate in battles or raids. Regardless, women play a part and act as a catalyst in more than one of these theories.⁴

No one disputes that the culture of Viking Age Scandinavia was androcentric by modern standards. However, given the possible causes this may have been more of a side effect rather than by specific design. Reality is more often a matter of cause and effect rather than a wholesale decision that establishes a framework from the beginning. The culture before the Viking Age may have been similar, but different in at least the finer details. In the modern era, we tend to

¹ Ibn-Faḍlān, Ahmed. *Ibn Fadlān and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the Far North*, Translated by Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone. (London: Penguin Books, 2012); James E. Montgomery, "Ibn Fadlan and the Rusiyyah," *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 3, (2000): 1-25. Cambridge.

² Anders Winroth. *Age of the Vikings* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014), 166.

³ Judith Jesch. *Women in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1991), 152.

⁴ Kirsten Wolf. *Viking Age: Everyday Life during the Extraordinary Era of the Norsemen*. (New York: Sterling, 2013), 23.

⁴ Marianne Moen. "The Gendered Landscape: A discussion on gender, status and power expressed in the Viking Age mortuary landscape." (M.A. diss., University of Oslo, 2010, 249-252; Ben Raffield, Neil Price, and Mark Collard. "Male-Biased Operational Sex Ratios and the Viking Phenomenon: an Evolutionary Anthropological Perspective on Late Iron Age Scandinavian Raiding." *Evolution and Human Behavior* 38, no. 3 (2017): 315–24.

focus on the “viking” aspect of the time, rather than the more common farming lifestyle, as it is more dramatic and appeals to our curiosity of an existence we do not experience ourselves. Most of us cook and clean, do chores, and other necessary tasks that may be very monotonous, so we ignore the domestic parts of Viking Age life in favor of the parts we cannot ourselves touch. This may be why chieftains and warriors are so highly revered even today, especially when they are exceptional.

In the 1990s, a wave of scholarship regarding female roles in the Viking Age came into the public eye with the monographs of Judith Jesch and Jenny Jochens, and much of the evidence for these works comes from literary sources. One could argue that this was the first seriously accepted expression of the female experience in the Viking Age. Despite these studies, scholarship continues to focus on topics such as war, law, linguistics, and mythology with little consideration for gendered involvement, although these areas all invite discussion of the role that gender played in those topics. The announcement in 2017 that the elite warrior grave Bj.581 in Birka, Sweden erroneously assumed to be a male instigated another wave of interest in women’s roles.⁵ The Bj.581 revelation and the various responses to the news exemplifies some of the underlying habits that occur when defaulting the narrative to a male experience, and our discomfort with anomalies. Regardless, it is still the chieftains and warriors, male or female, that continually grab our attention. However, there are other remarkable positions of power that too often get overlooked, and some of this is found within the realm of religion.

1.2 Religion and Death

War and religion are easily entwined in the Viking Age, as they are in many civilizations. The mythology of Iron Age Scandinavians, as well as their neighbors, allude to their ideas about the relationship between life, war, death, and the afterlife. Their cosmology and the workings of the world are illustrated in the myths, and these myths often reflect mortal life, or vice versa. Themes of survival, namely fertility and warfare, are linked elements central to the mythology and sagas. On the surface we easily see the direct actors of warfare (the warriors themselves), but looking deeper we find the instigators, intermediaries, and psychopomps. Aside from Óðinn himself, they are the *normir*, *völur*, *valkyrjur*, and the “angel of death,” all female figures presiding over fate and death.

It is apparent that throughout the native literature, women dealing with magic, prophesy, death, or religion had a presence of otherness and often lead a somewhat liminal lifestyle. This

⁵ Price, Neil, Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson, Torun Zachrisson, Anna Kjellström, Jan Storå, Maja Krzewińska, Torsten Günther, Verónica Sobrado, Mattias Jakobsson, and Anders Götherström. "Viking Warrior Women? Reassessing Birka Chamber Grave Bj.581." *Antiquity* 93, no. 367 (2019), 181-198.

occupation wasn't restricted to women or Scandinavians, but also included outsiders like the Sámi or Finns who may have been similar, yet different enough to achieve an otherworldly connection. Within the sagas, male sorcerers do appear, but they also have an otherness, and are generally not as well received as their female counterparts. This theme of "otherness" is reoccurring, and will be used to support much of the discussion in this paper, especially as "otherness" comes with a sense of uncertainty which goes hand in hand with the mysteries of spirituality.¹

Religious rites are detected both in archaeological evidence and in the written account, although the details are either limited or pieced together. Regardless, ritual requires action, and action is difficult to assess without eye-witness accounts, of which we have very few. Sagas give suggestions of ritual, mainly the occurrence of feasting during weddings and funerals (even occurring back-to-back if the need arises, as it does in *Laxdæla saga*).⁶ There are tales such as *Völsa þátr*, *Heimskringla (Haakon the Good's saga)*, and *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* that suggest the importance of horses, and possible equine-related rituals. Many elite burials throughout Scandinavia also include apparent horse sacrifices.⁷ Animal sacrifice is just one of the pan-Scandinavian ritual traditions, and there are a few other common elements, but it is important to acknowledge that there was not a standard across the region, and that ritual customs varied.

The notion of customized ceremonies based on regional traditions, social class, gender, profession, etcetera is one to keep in mind especially when it comes to the discussion about Ibn Fadlan's *Angel of Death* character. But also important to remember is that there are more general themes common among Scandinavians, and even their neighbors. Since we have little native literary support for burial customs, we have to predominantly rely on archaeology to tell us what burial procedures were carried out: carefully peeling back layers to not only prevent damage to the artifacts or the meaning of their placement within the grave, but also to determine the sequence in which they were placed. The sequence can then give us insight into what actions were carried out during the funeral. It is these detectable actions which can illuminate what kind of actors may have been present, and what they may have believed or experienced.

In tandem with archaeology, we have one contemporary account of an elite burial, although not one composed by a native. The aforementioned account of Ahmed Ibn Fadlan and

⁶ Jane Smiley and Robert L. Kellogg, eds. *The Sagas of Icelanders: A Selection*. Deluxe ed. World of the Sagas. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2001. pp.281-282; Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Laxdæla saga. Halldórs Þættir Snorrasonar. Stúfs Þátr.* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1934): 11-15.

⁷ Hedeager, Lotte. *Iron Age Myth and Materiality: An Archaeology of Scandinavia, AD 400-1000*. (London ; New York: Routledge, 2011), 108-109.

his excursion among the Rús and other groups living within that region of the world paints a scene that shows elements of Scandinavian tradition, but also may have influences from others in the area who contributed to the identity of the Rús.

1.3 Scandinavians and others

Many people tend to think of Scandinavians, and Rús by association, as one unified collective, but what defines a culture can be relatively general. A common linguistic foundation, shared religious philosophy and structure, or trends expressed in material and artistic goods are what typically define a culture that receives a general label such as “Scandinavian,” “Viking,” “Norse,” etcetera.⁸ However, regional and local identities become distinctive offshoots of the parent culture. These subcultures tell us about the unique beliefs and experiences of the people participating.

Icelandic texts are a valuable source often used to cite evidence in support of various subjects and theories, and they do reflect many common Scandinavian elements, but they also reveal regional characteristics unique to the island. Although it is a single element, the political organization of Iceland is such a significant distinction from the other regions that we must take care to consider it when attempting to apply the Icelandic version of Viking Age culture to the subcultures in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. Icelandic culture is reminiscent of the mainland structure, but it lacks the kingship the others had, and replaces it with democracy, putting the power largely into the hands of many chieftains and several *goðar*. It also received the Christian faith early and with little resistance, compared to other parts of Scandinavia that experienced more turmoil, resistance, or a later acceptance. Such occurrences were relevant to the leadership and the wants and needs of the people.⁹

Sweden was the latest in reception of the new faith, with earlier attempts being rejected.¹⁰ Other Scandinavian trends, such as the erecting of commemorative runestones, were also popular at a later date than in western Scandinavia.¹¹ Sweden is also rich in material culture, but poor in early literary matter, and this is likely relative to the longer lasting pagan traditions and the late-coming book culture of Christianity.¹² It seems that the settlements in Sweden, especially in the Mälären area, not only had their own regional preferences, but also a different

⁸ Frederik Barth, “Introduction, in *Ethnic groups and boundaries: the social organization of cultural difference*, ed. Federick Barth (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1969), 9-38.

⁹ Orri Vésteinsson, *The Christianization of Iceland: Priests, Power, and Social Change 1000-13000* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

¹⁰ Birgit and Peter Sawyer. *Medieval Scandinavia: From Conversion to Reformation circa 800-1500* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 101.

¹¹ Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, 42-74.

¹² Winroth, *Age of the Vikings*, 105.

progression or response. It is curious that although Norway has the highest incidence of seiðr staffs, thus suggesting a higher number of vödur, the burial ground in Birka hosts the most concentrated number. Four vödur graves have been uncovered at Birka, while the Norwegian [as well as Danish and other] examples are scattered. They occur near trade cities or larger settlements where more clientele may be found, but it is Birka that has a consistent finding, and all within the same century.¹³ Such a presence may be indicative of a phenomenon within the Swedish subculture.

Certainly, as we move closer to other cultures or into different environments, we see the modifications made to the parent culture that make the subculture more distinct. In the case of Sweden and its closer proximity to the Finns and Balts, or the eastern areas of northern Europe in general, we would understandably see artifacts and actions that may have been influenced or provided by nearby cultures. This is also very likely the situation with the Rús. Culture does not exist in a vacuum, and no culture is impervious to the influences of others they come into contact with, and in many cases, this provides an opportunity for elites to acquire support, show off wealth and power, or otherwise distinguish themselves from the rest of the populous (such a concept is evidenced by prestige goods and imported items)¹⁴. Swedish Scandinavians and Rús may have been culturally or spiritually supplemented by their “otherworldly” Finnic and Baltic neighbors, thus augmenting their own religious practices.

It is traditionally accepted that the Rús were Swedish Scandinavians living in modern-day Russia along the Volga River trading and intermingling with, or even ruling the locals.¹⁵ The Rús would therefore reasonably have a hybrid culture with a Scandinavian foundation influenced by Slavic and Finnic elements, and guided by the specific needs of their environment.¹⁶ A subculture based on commerce would likely have some differences than one based predominantly on war booty. How much of which cultures Ibn Fadlan’s account reflects is a discussion among many scholars, and is essential to the examination of the *Angel of Death* character.

The trouble with Ibn Fadlan’s account is that not only does it describe a Rús pagan custom filtered through the mind of an Islamic Arab traveler, but it has been filtered back again

¹³ Neil Price, *The Viking Way* (Oxford; Oxbow Books, 2019), 148-149, 164, 166.

¹⁴ Zanette Tsigaridas Glørstad. “Sign of the Times? The Transfer and Transformation of Penannular Brooches in Viking-Age Norway.” *Norwegian Archaeological Review* 45, no. 1 (2012): 36-37.

¹⁵ Wladslaw Duckzo, *Viking Rus: Studies on the Presence of Scandinavians in Easter Europe* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2004), 49-50; Thorir Jonsson Hraundal, “New Perspectives on Eastern Vikings/Rus in Arabic Sources,” in *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 10, edited by Russell Poole, John Hines, Carolyne Larrington, and Judy Quinn (Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2014), 65-98; Montgomery, “Ibn Fadlan and the Rusiyyah,” 3-4, 23-24.

¹⁶ William H. Sewell, Jr. “The Concept(s) of Culture” in *Practicing History: New Directions in Historical Writing after the Linguistic Turn*, edited by Gabrielle M Spiegel (New York: Routledge, 2005), 35-61.

into a Germanic-related context and language. Furthermore, what Ibn Fadlan reported on was not entirely a personally witnessed account. Scholars believe he arrived at the funeral after preparations had begun, and although he seemed to have witnessed the final ceremony firsthand, there were elements that were out of his view (what occurred in tents), or that had to be explained to him.¹⁷ He then had to put it to writing from memory, sometimes placing it into a context he or his readers would be more familiar with. Still, Ibn Fadlan's account is essential, and the only extant record of a specific ritual specialist who leads the funeral, and even more specifically one who is female. In fact, the specific roles of women in the account are in and of themselves quite telling of the mutual participation between the sexes regarding religious and death rituals. There is a symbiosis to the actions between men and women as both hold positions of power and risk within the ceremony.ⁱⁱ

1.4 Female ritual specialists – the recognized and the theoretical

Female ritual specialists are somewhat of an overlooked feature of Viking Age society. It is typically an area that gets little or no mention in mainstream books and media, but is instead entrusted to the discussions between those specializing in that area of concentration. For instance, the monographs of Neil Price and Leszek Gardela further enhance our understanding of Old Norse religion and the roles women played within it. Yet more needs to be done towards establishing these specialists in the narrative, and their possibility or even likelihood of being female, as the tendency is to default to male power in these areas. At the very least, we should get into the habit of assuming neutrality when it comes to areas of lesser certainty.

Most of the scholarship about female ritual specialists are about *seiðr* and the *völur*. The *völur* are the most obvious individuals that represent female religious practitioners as they are evidenced in both literature and archaeology. Having evidence to work with offers an enticing and feasible chance to explore pagan religious practices and possible political relationships and changes. Unfortunately, this is not the case when it comes to the *Angel of Death* who appears solely in Ibn Fadlan's account. But his record begs the question as to who this figure was, what or where she came from, and if there may have been other women like her. Her presence in history adds to the list of potential female religious specialists that we may have otherwise not been aware of if not for Ibn Fadlan. Her specific presence may not have been detectable in the archaeology. If we had found an example of the same ritual, but as an excavatable inhumation instead, we might have known that someone had made the clothes for the chieftain, someone had placed the bedding, and someone had killed the slave girl. However, we would not have

¹⁷ Montgomery, "Ibn Fadlan and the Rusiyyah," 20.

known that this was all done by the same person, or what their sex was, or what other responsibilities she or others like her may have had in life. In short, Ibn Fadlan's report tells us that we may be overlooking the presence of others like the *Angel of Death* within the Scandinavian culture or its diaspora.

Chapter 2: Methodology

2.1 Research Questions

In order to answer the core research question as outlined above, several other questions must first be considered. It is possible that this figure is a unique case existing only among that particular Rús settlement, but considering the importance of funerary rituals and death within the pan-Scandinavian culture, it is difficult to imagine that such an important aspect of existence and spiritual transition, especially associated with prestige and memory, would have gone without some leadership. It is entirely possible to carry out burials without a director, but for a culture so focused on power and reputation, it is difficult to believe that the elite burials would not have some sort of overseer, for symbolism if not practicality.

Additional questions to inquire after are how prevalent this position could have been and if it could have been a profession for individuals living and serving a large community such as one that would be found in trade towns and cities. Furthermore, does the woman known as the *Angel of Death* have any possible connections to other female ritual specialists?

The answers to these questions would also shed light on any symptoms of a problematic narrative, either funerary specialists are missing from the record, or they are overlooked and hidden between the lines. We would also learn what kind of attitudes people, authors, and historians have and/or had about ritual specialists. This would allude to a discrepancy in the material presented, and possibly a need to reconsider the common narrative.

2.2 Research Problems

The sources do present some significant challenges, however, the major issue being that there is only one primary source that mentions an "Angel of Death," or funeral director. There is no other mention of her in the literature, nor of a male version. Because data on this subject is limited, and evidence of religious practices is often inconclusive, a theoretical approach and a literature comparison is perhaps the only method currently available for this topic. And because information and understanding are limited and subjective, we cannot reasonably expect a decisive answer. The best that can be achieved at this point in time is a hypothesis that opens up the subject for further consideration, especially concerning common narratives.

Additionally, there is no known definitive burial or stray evidence of a person who may have been a ritual specialist outside of sorceresses and sorcerers. Even those graves are looked at without certainty. If archaeology does yield an *Angel of Death*, she could potentially appear to be a sorceress or similar elite burial. We would need definitive artifacts to suggest her position as different from other ritual practitioners, elites, or even commoners. Given Ibn Fadlan's account, the *Angel of Death* was not identifiable by anything other than her presence and the actions she carried out. Her physical description did not distinguish her in a way that archaeology could detect.

Saga evidence is the closest to contemporary native literature we have to assess, but it is problematic. Aside from it concerning the events in Iceland, a remote island far from the Rús, it was also politically and religiously different enough from other parts of Scandinavia. Granted, similarities existed as the Icelandic settlers were Scandinavians, many from Norway supposedly escaping Harald Harfagre's growing power and subjugation.¹⁸ Still, it takes time for a culture to change and there are likely to be similarities that remain due to trade and tradition.

2.3 Available Methods

With the problems outlined above, each aspect to be examined will need to be approached differently. First, a literature comparison will be conducted to compare what other scholars have found concerning similar subject matters, and consider how they address the available evidence and material. Primary source material from sagas and eddas will also be reviewed looking for relevant evidence or patterns. Archaeology will be difficult to use for much of the research, but in regard to assumed *völur* and their presence, it will be quite relevant. In addition to Scandinavian material, it will be important to address other cultures local to or in contact with Scandinavians, especially near the Rús settlement. Although the Rús are at least in part culturally Scandinavian, they may have very well adopted traits, traditions, and beliefs from the people that surround them. People like the Finns, Sámi, Slavs and other Baltic peoples may have contributed towards the ritual habits of the Rús along the Volga River.

2.4 Gaps in the Literature

As far as is known, few if any have dealt specifically with the *Angel of Death* figure. She is mentioned alongside the elite Rús burial, but not in her own spotlight. Furthermore, female ritual specialists are not equally addressed with men in common and mainstream narratives, and it is often assumed that men take on any role of authority if the position is not outright assigned

¹⁸ Smiley and Kellogg, eds. *The Sagas of Icelanders*, 277; Sveinsson, *Laxdæla saga*, 4-5.

to a male or female. It is mainly scholars who specialize in gender roles or seiðr that bring female ritual specialists to light, more so in the past decade or so than ever before.

On that line of thought, professions in general are rarely established. We often hear about farmers, nobility, hersirs, and slaves, but those are strongly related to class and general function. In order to have trade, there had to have been craftspeople, merchants, and others, especially in trade towns, yet they are also often left out. A civilization requires a working society with assigned roles in order to grow and support itself beyond the needs of a family farm. Certainly, in towns there were people to supply and produce materials and products to sustain the population, visitors, and their demands.¹⁹

Gender is an area that has historically held a gap in the public narrative, although growing in popularity with ongoing and new waves of feminist and gender movements in the modern world. Like ritual specialists and professions, it is often a side note compared to the ever-popular image of Viking warriors. Although treated by some scholars in various ways, the absence is indicative of a larger trend of downplaying important players and experiences because they are average, or ignoring additional aspects of the culture, acknowledging it only as dramatic prompts in a story. People other than the Viking warrior can often be disregarded in media, yet they can be just as exciting and fantastical.

A final absence in the evidence has to do with regional accounts. As stated, most of the written accounts come from Iceland and have to do with life there or interactions with Norway. Sweden's most prominent mention is in the Poetic Edda regarding the magical creation of Zealand by Gefjon (Freyja) with land from Sweden,²⁰ interestingly the Mälaren region where the Birka settlement existed. Snorri states that the gods are from Asia, but also alludes to a Swedish base once they had entered Scandinavia.²¹

2.5 Hypotheses

By looking at the extant primary and secondary literature, I expect to see related patterns and themes between the different forms of female ritual specialists, but how similar or different will be telling. I believe that it is possible that the *Angel of Death* could possibly have been some sort of völva, or at least a figure not simply a one-off in a single source. It is possible that she

¹⁹ Ann-Marie Hansson, et al., "Environmental changes and human impact as recorded in a sediment sequence offshore from a Viking Age town, Birka, southeastern Sweden," *The Holocene* 12, no. 4 (January 2002): 445-458.

²⁰ Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*. Translated by Anthony Faulks (London: Everyman, 1995), 30; Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. Anthony Faulkes (London: Oxford University Press, 2005): 29-30.

²¹ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla. Volume 1: The Beginnings to Óláfr Tryggvason / Snorri Sturluson*, Translated by Alison Finlay and Anthony Faulkes. (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, University College London, 2017), 6-9.

was an actor unique to her region, but given the thematic similarities between neighboring cultures it is just as possible her occupation was a widespread one shared with other women (or men) elsewhere in northern Europe.

Regardless of the gender, I speculate that Old Norse funerals, specifically the extravagant elite burials, would have likely been directed by an overseer. I am not going to argue that average or poor individuals, or people living outside of a larger settlement, would have employed such a figure. Instead, this could have understandably been carried out by the head of the household or another family member. However, I do believe there will be enough substantiation that the person in charge of a funeral could have just as likely been a female.

Furthermore, I do not anticipate any obvious or direct literary or material evidence for an *Angel of Death*. Since we only have the single account, which is not forthcoming in useful detail about material goods that might have identified such a person in archaeology, and the sagas do not discuss funerary rituals, it is entirely plausible that this figure could go undetected. Since we currently have only the one source, the answer cannot be definite, but I suspect evidence related to other ritual specialists and Old Norse religious habits will effectively establish her position as one that other women outside of the Rús territory could have performed.

2.6 Data Collection

In order to figure out who or what the *Angel of Death* figure is, or rather if she could have been a more common part of the spiritual aspects of Viking Age Scandinavia as a whole, I compared hints found in Ibn Fadlan's account with possible correlations to spiritual matters in the sagas and in archaeology. A comparative analysis on secondary literature was also made to find possible links or similarities within those studies. The method for this work is largely a textual survey given the difficulty in material interpretation, or lack thereof.

Qualitative data was collected from *Íslendingasögur* regarding women of a spiritual character or reputation, as well as any hints towards religious practices. Other sagas and the eddas were also referred to for comparison. The sagas tend to involve people within Iceland or Norway, but some mention eastern contact with the Sámi or Baltic people. Women in general were assessed to get a focused feel for how saga authors treated female characters. They were categorized by how much information was available, with women only mentioned in a genealogical sense being in category 1, women with a bit more information about their character or relations in category 2, women who played a more significant role in the saga were part of category 3, and category 4 consisted of women so formidable that they played a central role in their part of the saga. Of those in categories 2, 3, and 4 where more information was given, the

authors' commentary about the social worth of the individual based on physical, temperamental, or familial attributes was noted.

This information was also applied to a general regard for dedicated religious practitioners, and what kind of reception they received in the sagas, most of whom were in category 3. Outside of these few figures were others who have knowledge or experience with the magic arts, even though it was not their primary role. Consideration of the time in which the events took place or were recorded has to be made, as this can influence the narrative. Furthermore, the perspective of the writer must be carefully respected, especially in the case of Ibn Fadlan whose culture and religion varied even more greatly from the Rús than the Rús from Scandinavia proper.

As Old Norse religion is a popular subject, and scholars like Neil Price and Leszek Gardela have made it a significant part of their research focus, I also compared their findings as well as others to try to uncover any patterns, specifically in relation to location or century. Works by other scholars dealing with specific elements were also included.

It is possible that any "foreign" elements not found in Scandinavia could be inspired by the regional people in Rús territory. The possibility of independently formed traditions stemming separately from Scandinavia also has to be considered, and is not subject to changes based on relative necessity, such as geographical or climactic features. Simply put, a person who lives in the desert might not have a deity for snow or skiing, but once placed in a colder climate may adopt or invent one. How and where the Rús functioned may imply specific religious and cultural characteristics kept by them.

Since the report concerning the *Angel of Death* was from the east, it is fair to consider easterly or Baltic influences. It is also curious that evidence of pagan religion is strong in Sweden, specifically in the Malaren region, which also shows a potential for being somewhat cosmopolitan given some of the interesting burials of völur found in Birka. Since Birka resisted the new faith at first, and there is a higher number of female practitioners (and a female warrior as well as possibly other empowered women like merchants), this could suggest how pagan religion, and therefore death and burial, was addressed closer to the Rús area, or what allowances might have been possible or preferable compared to western regions.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

3.1 Women and Gender

Women in the Viking Age is a topic that has gained momentum in recent years. As mentioned, Jesch and Jochens both contributed to this a few decades ago, and authors such a

Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, Gro Steinsland, Hilda Ellis Davidson, and Marianne Moen have since followed. Still others have supplied valuable journal articles and theses towards specific topics related to the female experience.ⁱⁱⁱ

Like Jesch and Jochens, Friðriksdóttir addresses the lifestyle an average woman may have experienced in her book *Valkyrie*. She bases this largely on Icelandic texts, and provides a thorough and updated look on the various stages of female life. This is a refreshing source, and a good place to begin for those looking to understand a possible Viking Age woman's perspective.²²

The domestic sphere affected men and women alike, as both were expected to participate. We have to remember that the keeping of a farm and the survival of the family depended heavily on each gender doing their respective jobs. For the women, much of their time was spent on food production and child rearing, but also on textile production and the maintenance of wealth and reputation for themselves and their families.²³ The sagas provide a vast source of such incidences, and give examples of women accepting or rejecting their destinies or affecting those of others, either working within or outside of social norms.^{iv}

Aside from food production, the manufacture of cloth was essential to survival. Women were the ones to card, spin, and weave cloth, and construct the clothing that they and their families wore.²⁴ *Laxdæla saga* recounts various indications of clothing as relevant to a person's worth, or even their intent. This is exemplified in the stories surrounding Guðrið, Þord, and Breeches-Auð, as well as Ólaf Peacock. In these examples, construction of clothing can have serious implications that can affect one's social standing. The suggestion of cutting a man's shirt too short could condemn him to divorce, or other social implications.²⁵ There may also be an association of clothing color as having some special meaning.^v

Cloth and clothing were not only practical and social, but also acted as currency in a culture that did not mint coins until the late 10th century.²⁶ Michèle Hayeur Smith has addressed textile production and trade deeply, most specifically in regard to the Icelandic economy.²⁷ In summary, cloth was a highly regulated product produced in Iceland and shipped abroad. The

²² Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Valkyrie: The Women of the Viking World*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020.

²³ Winroth, *The Age of Vikings, 157-180*.

²⁴ Winroth, *The Age of Vikings, 168*.

²⁵ Smiley and Kellogg, eds. *The Sagas of Icelanders*, 332; Sveinsson, *Laxdæla saga*, 93-94.

²⁶ Svein H. Gullbekk, "Coinage and Monetary Economies," In *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink, (New York: Routledge, 2012.): 470-484; Winroth, *The Age of the Vikings*, 126-130.

²⁷ Michèle Hayeur Smith, Kevin P Smith, and Karin M. Frei.

"'Tangled up in Blue': The Death, Dress and Identity of an Early Viking-Age Female Settler from Ketilsstaðir, Iceland," *Medieval Archaeology* 63, no.1, (2019): 95-127. DOI: 10.1080/00766097.2019.1589816

Icelandic climate did not allow the same kind of industries that could be found on the mainland, but wool and cloth production was sufficient enough to become a type of currency.²⁸ This production was likely carried out by women mostly, due to textile production being an “indoor” task, and associations with women and weaving.²⁹ Another imperative detail that is often omitted in the public narrative is that women would have been the ones to make the all-important sail, or at least the cloth to construct it.³⁰ The sail was a technology that many scholars have considered a pivotal point of change in ancient Scandinavian culture, allowing the Viking Age to actually happen.³¹ The average woman would have likely had such a lifestyle as the one outlined above, but other more daring women may have experienced something a bit different, and gender may not have always been so clear cut as some representations indicate. The roles of men and women are often simplified into indoor/outdoor spheres, suggesting little deviance. However, saga and archaeology both indicate occasions where people stepped over their respective boundaries, sometimes challenging our understanding of gender in Viking Age society.

In Carol J. Clover’s 1993 article *Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe*, she presents the idea that one gender is really all that matters to the “Viking” mind, and everyone else is other or a sort of neuter. Women can be part of this single gender, although they are not expected to be. In short, it is boldness that defines the gender, not reproductive organs, and it is this boldness that is praised and preferable.³² In contrast, Kathleen M. Self recommends that figures such as shield maidens and valkyries authenticate an additional third gender, given their behavior and presentation of both male and female traits, at least as we see them.³³

As difficult as it can be for people to understand or accept Clover’s theory, I do find merit in it. A re-reading of the sagas and eddas with this in mind makes some of the ambiguity of gender limits clearer. Generally speaking, scholars dealing with Old Norse literature would have difficulty objecting to the idea that boldness was an ideal trait, even for women especially if it served the standards of society.

²⁸ Jesse L. Byock, *Viking Age Iceland* (London; New York: Penguin Books, 2000): 319; Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1995). 5.

²⁹ Jesch, *Women of the Viking Age*, 19; Winroth, *The Age of the Vikings*, 157-180.

³⁰ Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 142.

³¹ Barrett, James. “What caused the Viking Age?” *Antiquity* 8 (2008): 671-685; Irene Baug and Skre, D., Haldal, T. *et al.* The Beginning of the Viking Age in the West. *J Mari Arch* 14, (2019): 43–80

³² Carol J. Clover, “Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe.” *Representations*, no. 44 (1993): 1–28.

³³ Kathleen M. Self, “The Valkyrie’s Gender: Old Norse Shield-Maidens and Valkyries as Third Gender,” in *Feminist Formations*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Spring 2014), pp. 143-172.

In contrast, Kathleen M. Self's argument for a third gender presents an alternative outlook. Instead of a reduction in the number of genders, she argues for an additional one, suggesting that valkyrie and shieldmaiden characters represent a third gender.

Shield maidens and valkyries are perhaps the trendiest idea of strong "viking" females, being praised in pop culture at least since the 19th century.³⁴ However, images and ideas of these women are often exaggerated and portrayed in quite fantastical ways even beyond their already mythical quality. Self's article *The Valkyrie's Gender: Old Norse Shield Maidens and Valkyries as a Third Gender*, claims that shield maidens and valkyries are a third gender because they are women acting in a very male realm: war and aggression. She examines how they fit both the male and female genders, either at once or switching between, and therefore considers these women to be a sort of hybrid gender.³⁵

Self asserts that valkyries and shield maidens are admired, but not considered the ideal feminine.³⁶ Both figures dressed as females and chose male partners, and in these ways were female, but the carrying of arms or acting in battle allegedly distinguishes them as masculine in behavior, and thus crossing the gender boundary into the male sphere.³⁷ Self points out that it was more acceptable for a woman to cross into male territory, but damning for a male to cross into the female world. Furthermore, in regard to shield maidens, Self claims that the gender transgression is not reversible: once the woman had discarded her male role and taken on the fully female one, she does not return to the male behaviors.³⁸

Generally, I appreciate Self's train of thought, and find her third gender suggestion easier to follow, as it provides a more straightforward classification for those who were neither wholly male or wholly female, at least by the standards commonly accepted. However, I would like to point out her treatment of valkyries and shieldmaidens as one and the same, while I have found valkyries and shield maidens to be distinctive, as does Judith Jesch.³⁹ She treats the figures of Svava (and her incarnations) and Brynhildr as both valkyries and shield maidens.⁴⁰ However, I read them as valkyries exclusively.

³⁴ Andrew Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians: Inventing the old north in nineteenth-century Britain* (Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 2002): 30-35

³⁵ Self, "The Valkyrie's Gender," 147.

³⁶ Self, "The Valkyrie's Gender," 144.

³⁷ Self, "The Valkyrie's Gender," 145-147.

³⁸ Self, "The Valkyrie's Gender," 156.

³⁹ Judith Jesch, "Women, War, and Words: a Verbal Archaeology of Shieldmaidens," *Viking Wars* 84, no. 1 (November 2021): 127-142. Viking Arkeologisk Årbok 127-142.

⁴⁰ Self, "The Valkyrie's Gender," 149-159.

Valkyries, although possibly mortal or born of mortal fathers, are supernatural in character.⁴¹ They have connection to the divine, most specifically Óðinn, as they often do his bidding and serve in his hall. Their abilities are more than warriors. They are psychopomps and have influence over battle, even having the ability to defy Óðinn himself.⁴² By comparison, shield maidens are mortals without otherworldly powers or connections. They are, to my mind, human female warriors, not unlike the now famous Bj.581.

While the aforementioned scholars primarily use written texts for their arguments, Marianne Moen points out issues within the practices of archaeological assessment, which is essential towards accurate research. She explains that there is a lack of effectively assessing both gender and sex objectively enough to get the full picture of Viking Age society, and how too often graves are deemed male when they could be female, or vice versa. Furthermore, the understanding of gender standards of the past is often superimposed by those of the present, leaving an inaccurate assessment. Moen's works demonstrates the flaws in the way evidence can be evaluated, and calls for a more objective and logical procedure when studying the evidence.⁴³ I vastly agree with this observation, and hope to prove it further in this paper. It seems to be an issue particular to archaeology, especially when dealing with leadership, including religious rites since the sagas are relatively quiet about such customs.

3.2 Ritual and Religion in Death and Burial

Anders Andrén discusses various aspects of the pre-Christian faith in Scandinavia in his article *Behind Heathendom: Archaeological Studies of Old Norse Religion*, but it is his review on death and related rituals that I will concentrate on here. Many of the Old Norse rituals involve a transformation of some form as people experienced different life stages, such as changing from childhood to adulthood, singleness to marriage, and of course life to death.⁴⁴ Most relevant of these are the funeral rituals and customs which Andrén explains varied so widely that it is difficult to pin-point any specific Scandinavian custom within a single region, not to mention the whole of Scandinavia. People were inhumed or cremated, put in various grave containers or pits, alone or with others, with or without numerous grave goods; separated or treated differently

⁴¹ Jackson Crawford, ed. *The Poetic Edda: Stories of the Norse Gods and Heroes*. (Indianapolis; Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. 2015): 189; Rudolf Simek, and Angela Hall. *Dictionary of Northern Mythology* (Woodbridge; Rochester, NY: D. S. Brewer, 2007): 349.

⁴² Crawford, *The Poetic Edda*, 253.

⁴³ Moen, Marianne. "Challenging Gender: A reconsideration of gender in the Viking Age using the mortuary landscape," PhD diss., University of Oslo, 2019; Moen, Marianne. "The Gendered Landscape: A discussion on gender, status and power expressed in the Viking Age mortuary landscape." M.A. diss., University of Oslo, 2010.

⁴⁴ Anders Andrén, "Behind Heathendom: Archaeological Studies of Old Norse Religion," *Scottish Archaeological Journal* 27, no. 2 (October 2005): 113-115.

by sex, age, family or not differently at all.⁴⁵ Furthermore, Andrén tells us that it is likely that not everyone was interred, and some may have been left out, lost, or otherwise untreated.⁴⁶ Regardless of the details, the evidence left behind indicated intentional acts carried out by the society in order for the deceased to be properly prepared for entry into the next form of existence.⁴⁷

We can attempt to decipher what ritual customs chosen by the living for the dead might have meant or what intentions they had. Some of those choices could have been inspired by the manner in which the deceased had lived their lives or how they died, and Andrén covers the various spiritual realms where the dead may be received that could have reflected this notion. While most are overly familiar with Valhalla, Hel, and Folkvangr, less is mentioned about the sea realm of the giant-goddess Rán who takes in those that have drowned. He further mentions other domains for the dead to go, such as Glæsisvellir, Ódáinsakr, and Ymisland, and also reminds readers that some people may have become land spirits, ghosts, or were reborn. He states that the possibilities for the dead varied as much as the customs of burials.⁴⁸

Neil Price heavily focuses on the religion of the Old Norse world, and has written several monographs concerning this concept, with an entire book dedicated to seiðr and its relative topics. In his work, *Nine Paces from Hel*, Neil Price describes a general yet dramatic funerary scene one might expect to witness for an elite member of society. Here he uses the Ibn Fadlan account in a more general sense, as if describing a “typical” elite burial.⁴⁹ However, in reality this may or may not have been the case, and undoubtedly funeral rites varied between regions, centuries, or even persons. Overall, Price stresses the significance of the performance and actionable nature of these rituals.⁵⁰

In Price’s article *Passing into Poetry: Viking Age Mortuary Drama and the Origins of Norse Mythology*, he uses archaeological evidence from throughout Scandinavia, including the prominent Oseberg ship burial, as support for his arguments. In summary, Price paints a picture of mortuary activity comprised of lengthy funerals, bloody sacrifices, sex, drinking, and a slew of various ritual ideas that supposedly helped the deceased pass on into their next existence. The benefit of Price’s perspective is the specifics of funerary actions demonstrated by archaeology. The article is fascinating, and indeed there are many parallels throughout the Scandinavian

⁴⁵ Andrén, “Behind Heathendom,” 115.

⁴⁶ Andrén, “Behind Heathendom,” 115-116.

⁴⁷ Andrén, “Behind Heathendom,” 113-116.

⁴⁸ Andrén, “Behind Heathendom,” 116

⁴⁹ Neil Price, “Nine Paces from Hel,” *World Archaeology* 46, no. 2, (June 2014): 178-191. Taylor & Francis, Ltd. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26160171>.

⁵⁰ Price, “Nine Paces from Hel,” 184-186.

archaeological record, especially with ritual sacrifice, but what Price tends to do is compile multiple sources, in this case the Oseberg burial and Ibn Fadlan's account, into one massive summary. The reality may not be far from what he describes, but there is a danger in generalizing this way. Much of what he describes is an amalgamation of the Oseberg material record, and Ibn Fadlan's literary account. Since the sagas do not elaborate on funerals as efficiently as Ibn Fadlan, it is understandable to want to draw this account in to support the evidence found in burials. It is in this article that Price marks the "Angel of Death" in Ibn Fadlan's account as a "funeral director."⁵¹

3.3 Ritual Practitioners and Cult Specialists

Who or what the *Angel of Death* figure was is a bit of a mystery, but it seems clear that she was some kind of ritual or cult specialist that helped the living and the dead process the deceased's transformation into the afterlife. Rituals allowed for the transformation of people or objects into something different. Andrén uses examples of iron and cloth production as a practical and symbolic transformation process, the latter of which is associated with the *nornir* and fate.⁵² These rituals required actors to moderate or carry out the transformations as much as making practical use of the end product.

Andrén feels that there was no "professional priesthood" in Old Norse society before Christianity, but that there were ritual practitioners and specialists performing these duties, and they consisted of both men and women.⁵³ Price, however, suggests the possibility of ritual specialists having a hierarchy, which suggests a professional group. Other scholars have tended to dismiss this idea, but it may be justified depending on the specific definition or application of a "hierarchy." Again, this could vary by time and location as well.⁵⁴ Regardless, various people held specialist positions such as the law speakers or *góði*, chieftains, and others who worked in the more secular aspects of society, but whom inevitably had some connection to the religion given that state and faith were entwined.⁵⁵

Olof Sundqvist also addresses ritual workers and societal leaders performing community rituals. He differentiates between the two types, with the main distinction being a sense of professionalism for the latter. *Cultic leaders*, he convincingly claims, could have been political leaders with other social responsibilities who occasionally led rituals based around his or her

⁵¹ Price, "Passing into Poetry," 135

⁵² Andrén, "Behind Heathendom," 117

⁵³ Andrén, "Behind Heathendom," 117.

⁵⁴ Price, "Nine Paces from Hel," 179.

⁵⁵ Andrén, "Behind Heathendom," 117-118.

homestead. These could have been farmers, their wives, or a *goði*.⁵⁶ Conversely, Sundqvist says that religious specialists may have had a more dedicated role in rituals, and were not likely to be secular or political leaders. Among this type would be the *seiðr* practitioners, and possibly those presiding over funerals, as I will further argue later.⁵⁷

The basis for our knowledge regarding these individuals is founded on linguistic and literary evidence. In fact, it is the linguistic evidence in which the reasoning for a *goði* having, or continuing to have, a religious undertone despite most literature emphasizing his more secular activity.⁵⁸ Much of the evidence for *goði* comes from Icelandic literature, and within this society it was predominantly about power and landownership that inspired and enabled rich farmers, specifically chieftains, to acquire and perform the duties of a *goði*. *Goði*, in this context, has less to do with religion and more to do with law, and enough so where the position of *goði* continued on after the pagan age. Pre-Christian cultic buildings in Iceland, and perhaps Norway, seemed to have been largely managed by the chieftains who erected them. This tradition continued on, and even played an important role in the Christianization process. Temples were privately owned, instead of being founded and maintained by the larger community or the church itself. This also means that a priesthood or hierarchy may have been unlikely in the pagan application.⁵⁹

The discussion concerning the possibility of a professional priesthood, or a religious hierarchy continues. Scholars are generally undecided about this, citing earlier European traditions, and the customs of cultures neighboring Scandinavia in order to retrieve parallels.⁶⁰ It is important to point out that religious and social spheres were not separate in the ancient world; easily crossing over each other if not blatantly intertwined.⁶¹

While nearly all *goði* were male, female *gyðjur* seem to have been their counterpart when it came to presiding over *hof* buildings. Speculation among scholars as to what purpose the *gyðjur* had included associations with fertility and the god Freyr, but verification of this is unclear.⁶² The *Kristni saga* characters of Friðgerðr and Skeggi, her son, may suggest possibly religious rites preformed. Friðgerðr carries out sacrifices, while her son does divination. In this example, Friðgerðr is a *gyðja*.⁶³

⁵⁶ Olof Sundqvist, "Cultic Leaders and Religious Specialists," *The Pre-Christian Religions of the North: History and Structures* 11, (2020): 744-745.

⁵⁷ Sundqvist, "Cultic Leaders and Religious Specialists," 743.

⁵⁸ Sundqvist, "Cultic Leaders and Religious Specialists," 741, 743-745, 759-763.

⁵⁹ Sundqvist, "Cultic Leaders and Religious Specialists," 761-763.

⁶⁰ Sundqvist, "Cultic Leaders and Religious Specialists," 743-744.

⁶¹ Sundqvist, "Cultic Leaders and Religious Specialists," 741.

⁶² Sundqvist, "Cultic Leaders and Religious Specialists," 773.

⁶³ Sundqvist, "Cultic Leaders and Religious Specialists," 773-774.

Sundqvist also mentions specifically female cultic leaders, but with a focus on the continental Celts and Germanic tribes in an earlier part of the Iron Age. These women usually divined fate, often through gruesome acts. These Germanic oracles are named in a few sources and include Albruna, Ganna, Gambara, and the infamous Veleda whose own descriptions allude to a living human rather than merely a mythic or symbolic figure.⁶⁴ In agreement with Sundqvist, I believe that such women should perhaps fall within the second classification: that of a ritual specialist rather than a cultic leader, although it is clear that cultic activities depended on them, especially Veleda.⁶⁵ This is again a reminder of the interconnection between society and religion, perhaps especially strong in earlier centuries. These women are also of note due to other aspects of their tales. Aside from their abilities of divination which their societies apparently put great faith in, there are potential relationships to Old Norse concepts such as the significance of high places, the use of seiðr staffs, and the veneration of “Frea.”⁶⁶ Sundqvist also considers *lytir*, a specific kind of diviner within a Swedish context.⁶⁷

The author spends several pages on male figures, *þulr* being an addition to goði. This type of person was associated with oration, or the spoken word which had some spiritual significance. Again, there are parallels to other nearby cultures.⁶⁸ However, unlike seiðr workers, Sundqvist asserts that *þulr* had other responsibilities in society outside the magic realm, and therefore should be considered a cultic leader type instead.⁶⁹

3.4 Völur & Seiðr

Several authors specifically discuss the völur, or seers who practiced seiðr, physically identifiable by their ritual staffs. The Old Norse literature makes several mentions of these figures, and Andrén references older Germanic instances of female sorceresses carrying staffs.⁷⁰ While women dominate this service, there were also men who took part in the practice as well. According to Andrén’s examples, the men could interpret dreams or lots.⁷¹ Indeed the sagas mention some prominent men who could do this, such as Gest Oddleifsson,⁷² or Njal.⁷³ However, in this way they act more like sages than people tapping into the knowledge of the

⁶⁴ Sundqvist, “Cultic Leaders and Religious Specialists,” 746-747.

⁶⁵ Sundqvist, “Cultic Leaders and Religious Specialists,” 746-747.

⁶⁶ Sundqvist, “Cultic Leaders and Religious Specialists,” 746-747.

⁶⁷ Sundqvist, “Cultic Leaders and Religious Specialists,” 771.

⁶⁸ Sundqvist, “Cultic Leaders and Religious Specialists,” 755.

⁶⁹ Sundqvist, “Cultic Leaders and Religious Specialists,” 757.

⁷⁰ Andrén, “Behind Heathendom,” 119.

⁷¹ Andrén, “Behind Heathendom,” 118-119.

⁷² Smiley and Kellogg, eds. *The Sagas of Icelanders*, 328-330; Sveinsson, *Laxdæla saga*, 87-92.

⁷³ Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, eds. *Njal’s Saga*. Repr. Penguin Classics. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Book, 1983): 135-136; Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Brennu-Njáls saga*. (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2010): 139-40.

otherworld. They are interpreters rather than mediums. These men are also no longer young; they are experienced and notably elite. Sundqvist says that the vödur did not perform sacrifices according to their relative sources.⁷⁴ Regarding gender, Sundqvist states that although seiðr was considered a woman's art, many men also practiced it, endangering their manly reputations, as men who practiced magic might be considered effeminate.⁷⁵ Price's book also elaborates on this further.⁷⁶ This taboo could have largely been due to the relationship between the vödur and spinning. A seiðr practitioner could have been any age as well, and the practice was often a family matter between siblings, a parent and their child(ren), or the entire family.⁷⁷ Their practices often involved others as part of the ritual, for the purpose of singing or spell casting, and they were people who traveled from farm to farm offering their services, sometimes being followed by others. Furthermore, vödur were paid for their work, thus establishing them as professionals in their field. Despite this, the vödur seem to have not been "officially recognized" or part of the social behaviors of the elite, according to Sundqvist.⁷⁸ Other seiðr practices include song and chanting as mentioned, but also associations with horses, spears (in addition to staffs), platforms, doorframes, high seats, and weaving looms.⁷⁹ These all have mythological metaphors, many relating to Óðinn who is said to have mastered seiðr, or to the *nornir*.⁸⁰ Again, these are individuals who divine the future, and like in other rituals, their performances are done from platforms, high seats, or other elevated areas.⁸¹ In any case, it is apparent that different practitioners had varied specialties, that not every practitioner had or made use of every ability, and that no one oversaw every rite.⁸²

Scholars agree that the vödur apparently had relationships to Freya and Óðinn, with much of their symbolism surrounding those deities. Like Óðinn, they are somewhat on the periphery of the norm, receiving respect from their communities, but also a sense of fear.⁸³ Sundqvist also mentions the beating of drums as part of both Óðinn's and seiðr workers' practices, which also lends to possible relationships to Finns and Sámi, or shamanism in general. Some also come

⁷⁴ Sundqvist, "Cultic Leaders and Religious Specialists," 774.

⁷⁵ Sundqvist, "Cultic Leaders and Religious Specialists," 775.

⁷⁶ Price, *The Viking Way*, 172-173.

Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, 11.

⁷⁷ Sundqvist, "Cultic Leaders and Religious Specialists," 777.

⁷⁸ Sundqvist, "Cultic Leaders and Religious Specialists," 774-776.

⁷⁹ Leszek Gardela, "Into Viking Minds: Reinterpreting the Staffs of Sorcery and Unravelling 'Seiðr'" in *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia 2008*, Vol. 4 (2008): 58, 63, 66-67.

⁸⁰ Gardela, "Into Viking Minds," 53-67.

⁸¹ Sundqvist, "Cultic Leaders and Religious Specialists," 774.

⁸² Andréén, "Behind Heathendom," 120.

⁸³ Sundqvist, "Cultic Leaders and Religious Specialists," 774-775.

from the Hebrides.⁸⁴ Price also covers the conceivable *seiðhjallr* in Sweden, with two different sites showing evidence of ritual work and possible scaffolding for platforms used in seiðr rituals.⁸⁵ It is curious that these structures seem to be more obvious in Sweden, as are the concentrated number of vödur, which may speak to a different status or organization of seiðr practitioners than in the west.

One particularly interesting note is how Leszek Gardela links doorframes to weaving looms, which is something I also considered.⁸⁶ Relative to this is the connection to *valkyrjur*, specifically the twelve that were said to be weaving fate within a chapter *Njals saga*.⁸⁷ This then gives us a more direct link between *valkyrjur*, the *normir*, and *seiðr*.

Gardela's persistent interest in the seiðr staffs and other female aspect of Old Norse culture provides a succinct survey of the so-called vödur in his 2007 article *Into Viking Minds; the Staffs of Sorcery and Unraveling Seiðr*. While he mainly focusses on the seiðr staffs, he also attends other possible seiðr-related items such as keys and the domesticity of seiðr work.⁸⁸ Appropriately, he compares saga evidence with archaeology, finding cohesive relationships between the two. Gardela argues for the symbolic meaning of the seiðr staffs, and how their presence pulls together broad concepts of life, magic, and death, bringing mythology into the natural world. Seiðr itself is considered a shamanic type of art, which requires a knowledgeable worker who specializes in such activities. Like Sundqvist, Gardela also attests that the vödur led semi-nomadic lives, were held in high regard although treated with caution, and were supported or accompanied by other people. Furthermore, they were predominantly women, as others have stated, and this is where Gardela brings in the domestic connotations. Because seiðr-staffs resemble spinning distaffs, with weaving and spinning being a woman's domestic responsibility, the author affirms that the two are related. He goes on to remind us of the *normir* who weave threads of fate for the lives of humans, and claims that the word *seiðr* itself means "thread."⁸⁹

3.5 Influence from the East and Ibn Fadlan

Also of note is the somewhat widespread, yet general, common practices found elsewhere in Europe, and reasonably close to Scandinavia. Gardela often brings in Baltic sources for his arguments, and makes connections between habits in the Norse world to those along the southern and eastern border of the Baltic Sea. He stresses the similarities between seiðr and the

⁸⁴ Sundqvist, "Cultic Leaders and Religious Specialists," 775-776.

⁸⁵ Price, *The Viking Way*, 180-183.

⁸⁶ Gardela, "Into Viking Minds," 70.

⁸⁷ Gardela, "Into Viking Minds," 69.

⁸⁸ Gardela, "Into Viking Minds," 57-63

⁸⁹ Gardela, "Into Viking Minds," 45-51

practices among Slavic and Finno-Ugric groups, which lends towards a vague Indo-European common understanding of spiritual activity.⁹⁰

Hermann Pálsson directly discusses references to the Sámi and Finns and their associations with trolls and magic in Old Norse texts. Finns and Sámi, often seem to be interchangeable as the same or similar group of people inhabiting the far north of Scandinavia and eastern regions of the Baltic. In the texts they are people who the Norse do business with, but are decidedly outsiders regardless of any potential similarities or usefulness.⁹¹ This inferiority in the Old Norse mind and the exchange between Norse, Sámi, and Finns dominates the article and supports concepts of “otherness” in the Old Norse worldview.⁹² It is important to note that when Norse-Sámi marriages occurred, they were between Norse males and Sámi females, and not the other way around, and this will play into a later discussion.⁹³ Pálsson provides a glossary of terms used in the texts which allude to such associations and concepts, including a list of straightforward terms that are non-derogatory, a list of terms that speak of mixed heritage between Sámi/Finns and Norse, and a third and final list denoting associations with trolls and other mythical entities.⁹⁴ Andrén also talks about the similarities between Sámi shamanism, Baltic and Finnic culture,⁹⁵ and even suggests Celtic cultural influences.⁹⁶

Traveling to the eastern realms, we come to the Rús and Ibn Fadlan’s account of a chieftain’s burial, presided over by an “Angel of Death.” Regarding this figure, Price remarks how the *Angel of Death* is accompanied by her two daughters, and is assisted by others who have specific functions within the ritual. These actors carry out their pre-determined tasks, just as the *Angel of Death* undoubtedly does.⁹⁷ Perhaps the most valuable piece of information concerning the *Angel of Death* character is the question of her title. Price states that the original term *Malak al-Maut* in Islamic context is an “angel that separates the soul from the body at the time of death, and who is responsible for taking the dead at their fated time.⁹⁸” That job description is undeniably what this figure seems to fulfill in the ritual; she is the one not only orchestrating the death of the sacrificed slave girl, but also an active participant in the final violent moment that ceases life. In this way, the *Angel of Death* is very much like a valkyrie,

⁹⁰ Gardela, “Into Viking Minds,” 52.

⁹¹ Hermann Pálsson, “The Sami People in Old Norse Literature,” *Nordlit*, no. 5 (January 1, 1999): 29.

⁹² Pálsson, “The Sami People in Old Norse Literature,” 29.

⁹³ Pálsson, “The Sami People in Old Norse Literature,” 38-40.

⁹⁴ Pálsson, “The Sami People in Old Norse Literature,” 30-33.

⁹⁵ Andrén, “Behind Heathendom,” 121, 126.

⁹⁶ Andrén, “Behind Heathendom,” 126.

⁹⁷ Price, “Passing into Poetry,” 134-135.

⁹⁸ Price, “Passing into Poetry,” 133.

symbolically choosing the one to be slain by taking responsibility for the act.⁹⁹ While scholarship about the Rús and Ibn Fadlan's record exists, specific focus regarding the *Angel of Death* is relatively absent.

Chapter 4: Discussion of Gender and Religion

4.1 Introduction

Before getting into the more pressing aspects of this discussion, vital themes surrounding the Old Norse religion must be addressed in order to build the foundation for future arguments. While the religious and spiritual realm of the Viking Age is immense, I will only be covering the elements most relevant to female ritual specialists. Other themes will be left out or only mentioned briefly, because dedicated studies are already widely available, and the subject matter is too vast to include in this report.

The first essential theme is that of the link between fertility and death. Today we may not necessarily associate one with the other, but the world of “fertility” in ancient times encompasses more than just human reproduction. Fertility and abundance additionally included fertility of the animals and the crops humans depended on for life. Without this prosperity, there was death, and given this realization we can appreciate how something so vital might be assumed to be the domain of the same deity. A deity or spirit had the power to either bless humanity with life, or condemn them with death. In many European ethnic religions, this was the realm of female deities or spirits.¹⁰⁰

The most notable goddess in the Old Norse world that embodies this concept is Freyja, the Vanir goddess of fertility who accepts half of the slain warriors to her hall. She is associated with sex, beauty, gold and magic, having been the one to teach Óðinn, the chief god of the Æsir, the art of *seiðr*.¹⁰¹ Not only does she share half the slain with him, but the two also have similar associations, although from differing experiences. Both are associated with war and magic, but stories about Óðinn suggest he is the more active in those arenas.¹⁰² Though Óðinn, like the Greek god Zeus, is known for being a womanizer, Freyja perhaps gets more mental credit for love and sex in the minds of saga readers. This may be due to a gendering of such associations created during the time of writing or anytime thereafter, which placed Óðinn with the power, and Freyja with the “female” connotations of love and sex. Her magical abilities are downplayed

⁹⁹ Price, “Passing into Poetry,” 133.

¹⁰⁰ Hilda Roderick Ellis, *The Road to Hel: A Study of the Conception of the Dead in Old Norse Literature* (New York, NY: Greenwood Press, 1968): 180.

¹⁰¹ John Lindow. *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002): 126-128.

¹⁰² Lindow. *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs*, 126-128, 247-251.

by comparison, perhaps because Óðinn's obsessive pursuit of magic and knowledge does more for the plot than Freyja's already acquired ability does. Alternatively, it could also be a result from a shift in religious trends, as Britt-Mari Näsström feels that Óðinn's war and death associations overshadowed an older tendency to credit it to Freyja.¹⁰³ Freyja is also considered the ultimate *valkyrie*, women of war who chose or escort men from battle to the realm of the honored dead.¹⁰⁴

We of course also have the *nornir* who decide the fates of humans, as well as various spirits and other goddesses.¹⁰⁵ Freyja and Óðinn's wife Frigg often share similar traits, so much so that some believe them to be one and the same,¹⁰⁶ especially with the former's husband suspiciously being named Óð, a cognate of Óðinn.¹⁰⁷ I am inclined to believe that this may have been the case long ago as many Germanic and Celtic deities come in duplicated form, usually tripartite,¹⁰⁸ with the third in this case possibly being Gefjon¹⁰⁹ or Gullveig.¹¹⁰ Regardless, like Óðinn, Freyja is known by several names, depending on the context.¹¹¹ There is also Hel, the goddess of the underworld where assumedly the average person goes after death.¹¹²

Neighboring cultures also have female death goddesses who oversee the realms of the dead.¹¹³ The continental and insular Celts, as well as the Finnic tribes, have a plethora of deities and spirits for nearly every pertinent aspect of life: far too many to go into detail here. These cultures, some of which pre-date the Viking Age by a millennium or more or is contemporary with it, demonstrates a more distinctive balance between males and females when compared to the medieval Scandinavian mythology.^{vi} However, this balance may have existed earlier for the Scandinavians as it did for other Europeans, and it is perceivable through the aspects and responsibilities of Óðinn and Freyja.

Fertility and the rites to encourage it included sexual associations and rituals that made their way into funerary customs, understandably due to the connection between fertility and death explained above. Some customs included an outright orgy, rape, masturbation, symbolic marriage, or a combination there of. Scholars have gone as far as suggesting that the ritual

¹⁰³ Ellis, *The Road to Hel*, 176.

¹⁰⁴ Crawford, "The Poetic Edda," 63; Price, *The Viking Way*, 288; Simek, 90-91.

¹⁰⁵ Lindow. *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs*, 243.

¹⁰⁶ Lindow. *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs*, 128-129.

¹⁰⁷ Lindow. *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs*, 246-251.

¹⁰⁸ Hilda Ellis Davidson, *Roles of the Northern Goddess*. (London: Routledge, 1998): 79, 86.

¹⁰⁹ Simek et al., *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, 101-102.

¹¹⁰ Simek et al., *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, 123-124.

¹¹¹ Simek et al., *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, 90. Sturlusson, *Edda*, 157.

¹¹² Lindow. *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs*, 172; Simek et al., *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, 138.

¹¹³ Ellis, *The Road to Hel*, 178-179.

hangings of men from trees related to erotic asphyxiation¹¹⁴ and terminal erection,¹¹⁵ thus again joining sex and death. Still others suggest that the völva's staff could have been used for ritual masturbation, or that the völva herself took care of a preserved horse phallus as part of a cult.¹¹⁶

In relation to fertility are the pan-European concepts of *hieros gamos*, and the *sovereign woman* or goddess. *Hieros Gamos* is a model where a stable and superior male entity is in union with a wilder and subordinate female entity.¹¹⁷ This is best demonstrated in the Old Norse world by the marriage of the god Freyr to the Jötunn woman Gerðr.¹¹⁸ The pattern is much like the one previously discussed in Chapter 3 between Norse human males and Sámi or Finn females.

Symbolic unions between preternatural beings and mortals continues with the *sovereign woman* trope appearing in medieval mythologies. This works somewhat in reverse to the *hieros gamos* discussed above. Instead, a woman who is often a goddess or some other kind of mystical being validates the mortal hero or king by serving him drink, giving him a name, providing arms, or requiring tasks to prove his worth. Should the man be qualified, he gets the sovereign woman, kinship, or some other prize, and thus his own sovereignty and value is validated.¹¹⁹ For the Scandinavian corpus, this can be seen in myths involving valkyries. In *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*, the valkyrie Sváva is the one that gives the hero his name and his arms. She also marries him and protects him in battle. She has authenticated his value and ability by doing so. Mortal women in the sagas had the benefit of deciding who was served first in their household during a feast, and is reminiscent of the *sovereign woman* trope.¹²⁰

Although not a topic to be discussed in any detail here, it may be somewhat negligent to skip over possible incidents of *suttee*. This is a topic occasionally looked at, but not to such an extent that we seem to have come to any certain decisions regarding the Viking Age.¹²¹ Still, the presence of sacrificial victims accompanying the deceased, especially in the example of the Rús account, does pose the question as to whether or not a wife, legitimate or substitute, would have been killed to join the “husband” in the afterlife. Baldr's wife Nana throwing herself onto the

¹¹⁴ Lotte Hedeager, *Iron Age Myth and Materiality: An Archaeology of Scandinavia, AD 400-1000*. (London ; New York: Routledge, 2011): 108-109.

¹¹⁵ Todd, N. “Priapism in acute spinal cord injury.” *Spinal Cord* 49, 1033–1035 (2011). <https://doi.org/10.1038/sc.2011.57>; Helen Singer Kaplan; Melvin Horwith (1983). *The Evaluation of Sexual Disorders: Psychological and Medical Aspects*. United Kingdom: Brunner Routledge. P 167.

¹¹⁶ Hedeager, *Iron Age Myth and Materiality*, 107-108.

¹¹⁷ Hedeager, *Iron Age Myth and Materiality*, 110.

¹¹⁸ Crawford, 72-80.

¹¹⁹ Doan, James. “Sovereignty Aspects in the Roles of Women in Medieval Irish and Welsh Society.” *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 5 (1985): 87–102. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20557160>.

¹²⁰ Magnusson et al., *Njal's Saga* 35, 97-98; Michael J. Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup: Ritual, Prophecy, and Lordship in the European Warband from La Tène to the Viking Age*. (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996), 1-14; Sveinsson, *Brennu-Njáls saga*, 90-92.

¹²¹ Jesch, *Women of the Viking Age*, 119. Price, “Passing into Poetry,” 136.

pyre at his funeral may be an indication of this.¹²² How common this practice may have been, what regions it may have occurred in, or when the custom started is up for debate, if indeed it is a custom common enough to be called one. Such a practice is not unheard of in the ancient or modern world.¹²³ The take-away here is the link between life and death, and the continuance of “life” after death. Rich burials were stocked with many items necessary for life, and Óðinn himself states that the wealth a man buries will accompany him into the afterlife.¹²⁴ Perhaps this was the case with a wife as well.¹²⁵

In addition to sex and sacrifice, songs and chants are another element common in Scandinavian ritual. Rituals involving prophesy, magic, and death are often required by or enhance the ceremony, and preferably its successful outcome. This can be found in *Eiriks saga rauða* where the young Guðrið is asked to perform a traditional song to appease the spirits the visiting völva will be communicating with.¹²⁶ Several other sagas regarding sorcery, magic, or prophesy also include song or chanting, and the Rús funeral includes multiple instances of vocalization.¹²⁷ Such examples are likely part of apotropaic magic.¹²⁸

Magic and prophesy is a key feature in this work, so establishing frequent characteristics to this activity is useful. Song has already been mentioned, but performances or activities on high places such as scaffolding, seats, hills, or mounds¹²⁹ is also a theme, as is activity at liminal places such as borders, doorways, and waterbodies (these themes are also present in Celtic examples).^{vii} In short, many of the saga instances of sorcery occur from platforms, and as Neil Price has mentioned, there is some archaeological evidence for this in Sweden. The associations with doorways or door frames are a subtle theme that presents itself not only in the Rús burial account, but also with other burials.¹³⁰ They represent a portal or transition between worlds.¹³¹ The picture stones in Gotland also have a door-like appearance, or as Hedeager suggests, a phallic resemblance.¹³²

¹²² Sturlusson, *Edda*, 49.

¹²³ Kirsi Kanerva, “Female Suicide in Thirteenth-Century Iceland: The Case of Brynhildr in Völsunga Saga.” *Viator* 49, no. 3 (2018): 129–54. doi:10.1484/J.VIATOR.5.119576.

¹²⁴ Sturlusson, *Edda*, 11.

¹²⁵ Ellis, *The Road to Hel*, 50-56, 140, 149.

¹²⁶ Gwyn Jones, ed. *Eirik the Red and Other Icelandic Sagas*. (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008): 135-136.

¹²⁷ Price, “Nine Paces from Hel,” 179.

¹²⁸ Jan Bill. “Protecting Against the Dead? On the Possible Use of Apotropaic Magic in the Oseberg Burial.” *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 26, no. 1 (2016): 141–55.

¹²⁹ Ellis, “Road to Hel,” 106, 167.

¹³⁰ Price, “Nine Paces from Hel,” 180-183.

¹³¹ Eriksen, Marianne Hem. “Doors to the Dead. The Power of Doorways and Thresholds in Viking Age Scandinavia.” *Archaeological Dialogues* 20, no. 2 (2013): 187–214. doi:10.1017/S1380203813000238.

¹³² Hedeager, *Iron Age Myth and Materiality*, 112.

Concerning space and liminality, I would also like to point out a curious directional theme where magic and mystery has an easterly association. It is not necessarily a strong claim, but one that I believe merits further research. There are a few examples which suggest a possible significance. The *völva* that Óðinn disturbs in *Baldrs draumr* lies to the east of the gates of Hel.¹³³ Additionally, the gods came from the east¹³⁴ (as did the supernatural Tuatha de Danann of Irish mythology).¹³⁵ Since the Vanir were known have practiced magic as part of their ethnic practices, the Old Norse mythical world may have used this concept when presenting the mythology.¹³⁶ Sámi and Finns are found in the eastern region of the Nordic countries, with Birka, Sweden being the most eastern Scandinavian settlement, and was a site of international trade.¹³⁷ As we know, the Sámi and Finns were associated with magic, and as will be discussed later, the town of Birka had multiple *völur* graves. Furthermore, some of the artifacts in *völur* graves throughout Scandinavia have a connection to Sámi and Finnish territories.¹³⁸ Christianity also spread from west to east, with Sweden rejecting initial attempts at conversion.¹³⁹

A discussion about magic and death also requires an introduction to shamanism, shapeshifting, and basic concepts of the soul. Shamanism is a spiritual practice observed by several of the world's cultures, and involves a deep appreciation for and a connection with the natural world. Shamans are consulted by their communities to resolve medical or spiritual issues, often with the shaman going into a trance, leaving his or her physical body, and traveling to an otherworld to seek answers or to help resolve the conflict of the client. Shamanism also involves shape-shifting or calling on animal spirits for guidance.¹⁴⁰ In the Old Norse world, the concept of the soul generally involves three elements: the *hugr*, *himlingr*, and the *fyglia*. The *hugr* is a person's inner identity, and remains attached to the individual throughout their life. Some people can have a stronger *hugr* than others, which allows their *hugr* to project into further distances. The *hamingja* is more like the person's luck, and can be attached or put on loan to another. It represents the fate of the individual. Similarly, the *fyglja* concerns one's fate, and acts as a guardian spirit appearing in the form of an animal or a woman.¹⁴¹ This last aspect is particularly

¹³³ Crawford, *The Poetic Edda*, 142.

¹³⁴ Sturluson, *Edda*, 4; Sturluson, *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, 5.

¹³⁵ Bernard Maier, *The Celts: A History from Earliest Times to the Present*, 166.

¹³⁶ Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, 351.

¹³⁷ Torsten Edgren, "The Viking Age in Finland," In *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink, (New York: Routledge, 2012), 477.

¹³⁸ Price, *The Viking Way*, 110.

¹³⁹ Wolf, *Viking Age*, 197. Winroth *The Age of the Vikings*, 108-184, 198.

¹⁴⁰ Price, *The Viking Way*, 324.

¹⁴¹ Catharina Raudvere, "Popular religion in the Viking Age," In *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink (New York: Routledge, 2012): 239.

interesting, and puts a woman within the same category as animals, although noble ones at that, and lends to their association as potentially “other.”

Shamanism and shapeshifting are often put together, but when examining the concept of the Old Norse soul and examples found in saga, a person with a strong *hugr* was not required to be a shaman in order to shape-shift since the theory is that everyone possessed a *hugr*, and therefore this ability. However, people with a strong *hugr* were more likely to “travel” further than someone with a weak one.¹⁴² Óðinn was known for his shapeshifting, as was Freyja and Frigg with their ability to transform into birds, which is not uncommon for other medieval mythologies outside of Scandinavia.¹⁴³ There are several similarities between general shamanism and the shapeshifting mentioned in the sagas, but the purpose was not for contacting the dead or other soul work, but rather for fighting,¹⁴⁴ which ties into a primary “Viking” concern with Óðinn’s realm of war.

Óðinn’s supremacy in the sagas and eddas is evident, but archaeology also suggests his potency, with evidence for a cult of Óðinn or his reverence in funerary rituals, including the Rús burial. Strangulation or sacrifice by stabbing is associated with him,¹⁴⁵ as is the habit of throwing a spear into the grave of the deceased before it is covered with earth, according to Price.¹⁴⁶ Óðinn’s own instructions tell us that great warriors should have a mound erected over their remains,¹⁴⁷ with the burial mound acting as a sort of portal connecting the world of the dead with that of the living.¹⁴⁸

4.2 Germanic Roots

When dealing with the Viking Age, scholars are usually sure to establish that the written documentation is not without its flaws. The bulk of the material recordings dates to centuries after the events they discuss and after a significant cultural alteration caused by widespread religious change. Still, it is what we have to work with and in many cases has proven more useful than not. While the medieval reports date to the 13-14th centuries, anywhere from 200 to 400 years later, ancient Roman writers predate the Viking Age by several hundred years: nearly twice the amount of time as medieval sources. Roman sources are not commenting on the Scandinavians of the Viking Age, but instead commented on their predecessors. There is still value in the Roman texts because the commentary reflects an active pagan present; it tells us

¹⁴² Raudvere, “Popular religion in the Viking Age,” 239.

¹⁴³ Hedeager, *Iron Age Myth and Materiality*, 10.

¹⁴⁴ Ellis, *Road to Hel*, 126.

¹⁴⁵ Hedeager, *Iron Age Myth and Materiality*, 108-109.

¹⁴⁶ Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, 13. Price, *The Viking Way*, 95.

¹⁴⁷ Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, 11.

¹⁴⁸ Hedeager, *Iron Age Myth and Materiality*, 112.

what was occurring in parts of Scandinavia while still in its ethnic religion. Given how long it can take for old habits to change, with many of our modern-day traditions being hundreds or even thousands of years old, it is not unreasonable to look at Roman texts about earlier Iron Age Scandinavia and Germania that may have influenced customs in the later Iron Age.

Tacitus describes the ancient Germans as a people who greatly valued their women. In battle, women would be nearby enough to encourage the men's bravery, to support them with food, and to nurture their wounds.¹⁴⁹ He also reports that they worship Mercury (Óðinn), Hercules (Þórr), Mars (Týr), and some to Isis (likely Freyja, possibly Frigg). They offer sacrifices to Mercury, human or otherwise, but to Hercules and Mars they make less violent gifts. No mention is made how Isis was worshiped.¹⁵⁰

Ancient Germanic women, like their later Scandinavian counterparts, were responsible for household and land management. Old men and weaker members of society were also relegated to these responsibilities,¹⁵¹ and this nods to Clover's argument for a single gender status among the Old Norse. Tacitus also makes a curious statement about a nearby relative of the Suiones (Swedes) called the Sitones, who were ruled by women.¹⁵²

He further gives details regarding marriages, which were largely monogamous aside from occasional polygamous unions to strengthen alliances. Gift exchange was part of the process, and contributions were practical and symbolic, including the gift of weapons. Familial bonds are central, either through marriage or children, and a sister's sons were as equally cherished by their uncles. Inheritance is a conscious and clear aspect of these bonds, and the possessions of men and women are passed down to their most direct descendants.¹⁵³ Friendships and feuds are likewise passed down in families, and also similar to Scandinavian society was the fondness of feasting, drinking, and fighting games.¹⁵⁴

Elsewhere in the record, the author discusses certain religious rites and beliefs of specific tribes within the Germanic territories. Some of which worshiped idols in groves and sacrificed humans.¹⁵⁵ There is also mention that the deities valued by the Ligii (Luggi) tribe are attended to by "a priest in female attire."¹⁵⁶ Tacitus also discusses the use of divination through reading lots, through the patterns of birds, and omens from horses.¹⁵⁷

¹⁴⁹ Cornelius Tacitus, "Chapter 7," in *Germania*. Translated by Thomas Gordon. Project Gutenberg, 2013.

¹⁵⁰ Tacitus, *Germania*, chapter 9.

¹⁵¹ Tacitus, *Germania*, chapter 15.

¹⁵² Tacitus, *Germania*, chapter 45.

¹⁵³ Tacitus, *Germania*, chapter 18-20.

¹⁵⁴ Tacitus, *Germania*, chapter 21, 22, 24.

¹⁵⁵ Tacitus, *Germania*, chapter 39-40.

¹⁵⁶ Tacitus, *Germania*, chapter 43.

¹⁵⁷ Tacitus, *Germania*, chapter 10.

The purpose of surveying any relevance to Tacitus's *Germania* and other earlier similarities with what we know of Viking Age Scandinavia is twofold. One, to show that traditions can indeed last for many, many centuries, and older sources can therefore offer some insight (even if limited) to see how long traditions and technologies may have existed and how far they were spread. Secondly, to see what may have changed with time, especially regarding gender and religion.

4.3 Gender in Old Norse Society

As previously summarized, women's common roles within society were vital for the culture to endure, and these were practical matters. How women were perceived and treated in the sagas and eddas adds another aspect. However, these sources show a potential reality, although possibly exaggerated or idealized. Looking at the women of the family sagas with a focused lens, rather than experiencing them only as supporting characters to their more famous counterparts, gives the reader a different understanding of women's experiences, and ultimately more information about the male experience as well.

There are ways in which men and women are treated equally in the sagas. When they possess a prominent trait or come from a notable lineage, these details are mentioned for each sex. The prominent traits are dominantly positive and traits like attractiveness, intelligence, wealth, height, and ancestry. Negative traits were also acknowledged, such as ugliness, unfairness, and excessive hostility.

Commonly, most of the important details about a person were given up front when introducing the character for the first time in the story, but further details could be garnered from events told later on, and this is where much of the extra information can be found. For example, Kjartan Olafsson's wife Hrefna Asgeirsdóttir is introduced in the saga as a wise and fine woman, and due to her association with Kjartan we understand her to be a woman of quality. However, her interactions and reactions to events within the story, suggest a woman who is overly trusting or accommodating. She has a few interactions with an instigator, Guðrun Osvifsdóttir, and has little chance to defend herself, as it is Kjartan who quickly steps in on her behalf when Guðrun jealously harasses her.¹⁵⁸ In *Egils saga*, Egil's daughter Þórgerðr was described as fine, intelligent, and unyielding, and her later actions within the saga portray her personality as well as showing in what ways she lived up to these accolades.¹⁵⁹ This of course occurs with men also, but reading the saga without a conscious interest in Þórgerðr or other women fails to register

¹⁵⁸ Smiley et al., *The Sagas of Icelanders*, 45-47

¹⁵⁹ Smiley et al., *The Sagas of Icelanders*, 357-377; Sveinsson, *Laxdæla saga*, 128-161.

their full nature into the reader's mind, especially if they are not some sort of virago or whetting woman. Þórgerðr perhaps portrays some of the most admirable qualities a Viking Age woman could have, as did Auðr Ketilsdóttir. Auðr receives due respect in the sagas as does Þórgerðr, but attention tends to focus on Auðr, especially given her prominence as a founder in Iceland. Alternatively, focus is placed on dramatic characters like Hallgerðr Hoskuldóttir or Freydís Eiríksdóttir. While these women are all important and interesting, it shows the perpetuation of emphasizing the whetting woman stereotype. Þórgerðr herself certainly had her goading moments as well, but they did not overshadow her other admirable traits.¹⁶⁰

Looking specifically for women and their experience in the sagas also emphasizes the occurrences of seiðr practitioners. The family sagas are also laden with examples of male and female guided prophesy and witchcraft, typically in the form of weather magic or elemental control to assail their foe. Some of these accounts are negative, while others are favorable, which shows the mixed emotions people had about supernatural abilities. *Vatnsdæla saga's* Groa was a sorceress who received positive attention from the farmer Þórsteinn because of her skills, despite the objection of his wife. Other people within the community did not favor her, and went as far as driving away her sister Þórey as well. It is unknown if Þórey was also a sorceress, but it is plausible.¹⁶¹

As a plot feature, these characters are in a supporting role and help the story move along, however, some mentions serve little purpose outside of stating their existence.¹⁶² When examining them as a collective and how each was received by their communities or the saga's author, we see what scholarship has reported, but we also notice a different dynamic or understanding of these women as people, and as vital actors within the sagas. Although they often take on the role of a supporting character, looking at the proceedings from their point of view gives us a different understanding of their lives as individuals and as women within their society. We start to see them beyond their labels, and realize their greater value to their time and the story itself.

Overall, men and women are treated very similarly when it comes to ideal mental, physical, and social traits. The difference between men and women's descriptions is not a difference in qualities, but rather the elaboration of their attributes. Descriptions of men may be only a few lines or go on for a small paragraph. Women's descriptions rarely go beyond a few

¹⁶⁰ Smiley et al., *The Sagas of Icelanders*, 149-50, 321-324, 364-365, 375-377, 564-565; Sveinsson, *Laxdæla saga*, 80-83, 139-144, 158-159.

¹⁶¹ Smiley et al., *The Sagas of Icelanders*, 247-248; Sveinsson, *Laxdæla saga*, 102-108.

¹⁶² Smiley et al., *The Sagas of Icelanders*, 246-247; Sveinsson, *Laxdæla saga*, 100-102.

sentences, and are more matter of fact than some of the more promotional reports of men. It is clear that the storytellers wanted to emphasize the most admirable accomplishments, which were largely to do with wealth and reputation. Men were more likely to accomplish these things, but the women who also did so were so noted. This lends to Carol Clover's argument for a single gender, where gender was based more on boldness rather than biology.

This habit begs the question of *why* are men emphasized, and is there something more to it beyond androcentricity? It does not just occur in family sagas, but also in the eddas where Óðinn's association with magic gets more attention than Freyja's, despite her being the source of his seiðr knowledge. Freyja is given acknowledgement for her ability, but no specific instances are really given, and she occupies less of the narrative regardless of her importance and parallels to Óðinn. It may be more a matter of contemporary male ego; perhaps it also has something to do with modesty motivated by Christian ideals, or by some taboo of flattering women too much in poetry.¹⁶³

It is not surprising that most women were linked to a man or several within the sagas, often a father, brother, or husband, and this speaks to the importance of social capital. However, some women clearly stand on their own or even outshine their impressive male relations, and these are most often the whetting woman types, or some other virago.

4.4 Gender and Otherness

Women in general, regardless of any foreign identity or otherworldly skills, were to some degree treated in the sagas as "others" as opposed to men. While many of their traits and behaviors were expected to be similar to men (traits like intelligence and loyalty), they were not assumed to have the same nature or capabilities as men, as already stated. Many women are portrayed in the sagas as a goading type harassing men into violent action for the sake of honor, and thus the saga writers relieved the men of sole responsibility for their actions. One of the strongest cases of this is again Þorgerð Egilsdóttir. Þorgerð was the mother of the highly beloved Kjartan Ólafsson, who considered her son's death unavenged so long as his killer and foster-brother Bolli continued to live. Her sons, Kjartan's brothers, took no action on their own until heavily guilted by their mother.¹⁶⁴ There are, of course, other instances of this sort of behavior, and it is a topic much discussed when addressing women in the Viking Age. Þorgerð was a strong character not to be trifled with, and a favorite of her father Egil. She had a fair amount of influence due to her own mind and the choices she made in life. Although she worked entirely

¹⁶³ Winroth, *The Age of the Vikings*, 231-233.

¹⁶⁴ Smiley et al., *The Sagas of Icelanders*, 377; Sveinsson, *Laxdæla saga*, 161-163.

within social norms, she was somewhat of an exception compared to the most common portrayal of women in the family sagas.¹⁶⁵

The Christian values writers of the sagas had could have also influenced how saga characters were treated, and this is something we need to keep in mind. These writers were moreover male, and it is not unlikely that they projected their own priorities in perceived male spheres of interest when choosing what to record and how to narrate it, leaving them to make assumptions and stereotypes about women. This may have been further instigated by the following centuries as Christian standards and laws superseded older secular rules. That is not to say that Christian ideals are the instigators of the divide between men and women, but it undoubtedly effected gender differences, especially in later years.^{viii}

Still, gender differences are prevalent in the Old Norse texts, and women who act beyond normative social roles are a subject of fascination to ancient and modern audiences. Gender studies of the Viking Age is a growing topic, and is sometimes fueled by modern political movements involving identity. Modern scholarship has a tendency to place gender norms and indicators of our own time on that of the ancient world. I would argue that there are bound to be some features that we may see as "feminine" today that were otherwise not, or were neutral in the past. A simple example is that high heels were originally designed for men, not women,¹⁶⁶ or that Roman writers considered pants as odd or feminine.¹⁶⁷ Gender is so dependent on culture, time, and context that we need to take great care when assessing gender ideals on a past age. We cannot put our modern or local definitions on ancient people who lived different lifestyles and had different religious and cultural beliefs than many of us do today. We need to look at it as objectively as possible, notice the patterns that are there, and define it based on its own features. Cultural perceptions of gender are therefore a fluid and unstable state which can change over only a few generations.¹⁶⁸

Gender was also something of note in the ancient Scandinavian world, although differently, and perhaps less feverishly so. Instead of an organized, widespread movement, women like those mentioned above were likely acting in their own ways, responding to their own circumstances, often within the acceptable parameters of their society and locale. They

¹⁶⁵ Smiley et al., *The Sagas of Icelanders*, 129-158.

¹⁶⁶ Fernanda De Araújo Ferreira, "Unraveling the High Heel," (Masters dis., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2020).

¹⁶⁷ Diodorus Siculus. *Book V*, Chapter 30.

¹⁶⁸ Judith Butler. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519–31.

were focused on survival primarily, only filling power roles when the opportunity and desire was present.

Needless to say, the Viking Age, as with any age, was centered around control. Ruling factions always struggle with otherness: the wildcards, rebels, and/or people who wield a special power beyond the average person, elite or otherwise. Power and money can influence much in the realm of the living, but power that lies beyond the mortal world is generally out of reach to chieftains and kings directly. They require the services of specialists, *others* who work as a bridge between humans and the *other* worlds, as do average people. Religious specialists provide services, most often prophesying in the sagas, to guide the living towards hope or warning. They were feared for their abilities, but often respected all the same because of it.¹⁶⁹

Due to the agrarian nature of Old Norse society, concepts of gender, war (death), and fertility (life) were prominent in the mythological and social constructs. In both the human realm and the supernatural, *otherness* played a part in balancing out the world. *Otherness*, a state of being that was not the norm and was often uncontrollable yet necessary, is a common theme among the Norse. It appears in their mythology, in their dealings with the “Finns” or Sámi, and their understanding of natural elements and features.¹⁷⁰ Being *other* or dealing with *other* could be perilous, but apparently worth the risk if the benefits proved fruitful.

Ancient Norse people not only tried to find ways of coming to terms with the uncontrollable otherness, but also attempted to find ways to manage and overcome it. This is exemplified in mythology by the male gods, usually Æsir, marrying or coupling with female Jötunn, such as the case with Þórr and Jorð, or Freyr and Gerðr. The ideology of *hieros gamos*, a concept where a socially higher-level male is in union with a lower-level female, is common enough in Norse mythology. Indeed, the relationship between the Æsir and the Vanir or Jötunar is an archetype of this.¹⁷¹

Otherness was a fact of human life as well, especially in connection to the spiritual world. Snorri mentions Scandinavians acquiring spells from the Finns, or Sámi, who were associated with shamanism and magic.¹⁷² Harold himself married a Sámi “witch,” Snæfrithr Svásadottir, and had four children with her. After her death it was revealed that she was a sorceress, and Harold developed a hatred for sorcery, despite his love for her, and even to the extent of having

¹⁶⁹ Price, *The Viking Way*, 73.

¹⁷⁰ Hermann Pálsson, “The Sami People in Old Norse Literature”. *Nordlit*, no. 5 (January 1, 1999): 29–53.

¹⁷¹ Gro Steinsland, “Rulers as Offspring of Gods and Giantesses: On the Mythology of Pagan Norse Rulership,” in *The Viking World*, edited by Stefan Brink (New York: Routledge, 2012), 227-230.

¹⁷² Pálsson, “The Sami People in Old Norse Literature,” 44-45.

his own son Rognvaldr killed.¹⁷³ In another tale King Vanlandi marries a Sámi woman named Drífa, and promises to return to her in three years. When he fails to after ten, she hires the witch Hulð to magically draw him back, but his men have him resist the temptation and he dies, because he has been (spiritually) ridden to death by a mare.¹⁷⁴ Chapter 16 of Erybygga saga, also speaks of witch-rides and night mares.¹⁷⁵ Furthermore, women or people practicing magic also occasionally hailed from the Hebrides, another outlying territory of Scandinavian contact, as will be exemplified later.¹⁷⁶

In these examples, Norse men are drawn to and engage with agents of otherness, and doubly so. Not only are they women, but foreigners as well. We may have the preferred *stable* unit of a male Norseman trying to bind the *unstable* foreign women and bring them under the influence of acceptable Norse social standards, thus demonstrating a superiority of the Norse culture much in the way the Romans described their barbaric, but noble opposition. Whether or not Harald or other men consciously had the intent of taming these wilder women (and I do not believe they did, but were simply smitten with their partners) is irrelevant to the fact that saga writers thought it worth writing about. It exemplifies the dangers of becoming involved with agents of *otherness* which ends in peril, showing a power that cannot be subdued or controlled by a stable actor.

Chapter 5: Discussion of Female Ritual Specialists

5.1 *Veleda and other Germanic Sybils*

Ancient scholars like Tacitus, Strabo, and Dio Cassius have discussed in their works the various Germanic tribes, and the religious specialists among them. Of these we learn of characters like Veleda, who demonstrate a pre-Viking existence for female ritual specialists. I would like to reiterate the importance of what came before having an effect on what came after, and in this case the presence of female ritual specialists in the earlier part of the Iron Age suggests a possibility of a continuance of this theme. Much of what the ancient Roman scholars discuss in their works are reminiscent of things we are familiar with in the Viking age, as previously discussed, men valued the advice of women, believing women held a sacredness and ability of foresight. Tacitus cites the veneration of Veleda, Aurinia, and other women

¹⁷³ Sturluson. *Heimskringla*, 80-81.

¹⁷⁴ Snorri Sturluson. *Heimskringla*, 16-17.

¹⁷⁵ Vésteinn Ólason, ed. *Gisli Sursson's Saga: and The Saga of the People of Eyri*. Translated by Martin S. Regal and Judy Quinn. (London: Penguin, 2003), 89-91.

¹⁷⁶ Smiley et al., *The Sagas of Icelander*, 333; Vésteinn, *Gisli Sursson's Saga: and The Saga of the People of Eyri*, 165-167.

particularly adept at such knowledge.¹⁷⁷ However, I would also like to expand upon this with a focus on the female ritual specialists, and how they may have evolved into the *völur* of the Viking age.

A number of prophetesses are named living and serving among the ancient Germanic tribes: Albrunna, Veleda, Ganna, and Waluurg. Albrunna (or Aurinia) were also such women, with Veleda being the most well-known of the four. Albrunna and Veleda lived during the 1st century, and it seems that Albrunna predated Veleda. Both are claimed to be seers, and worshiped as goddesses by their followers.¹⁷⁸ Veleda even became famous to Romans, and interactions between her and her devotees were intermediated by one of Veleda's relatives. She also gave prophesies from a high tower.¹⁷⁹

Likewise, Ganna and Waluburg served the Semnoni tribe, the former after the latter during the late 1st to 2nd century, and they were attached to Germanic soldiers in the Roman military. Waluburg's name appears on a Roman payroll as well as a Greek pot found in Egypt. The names of these women suggest associations with their abilities, connection to otherworldly beings, and wands (seer's staffs).¹⁸⁰ A fifth possible Germanic seer is named Gamba, but her associations with magic or prophecy have only to do with her name, and there is no known information about her acting with this specific function. However, she was known to have influenced the victory of her people (the Langobards) by praying to Freyja.¹⁸¹

5.2 *Völur & Seiðr*

Figures like Veleda and her colleagues share similar traits to the *völur*, such as carrying a staff, expounding prophesies, witchcraft, and occupying high places to perform their work. These are all predominant themes when it comes to the *völur* of Old Norse religion. During the Viking Age, women who practiced prophecy and *seiðr*, a type of magic, were called *völur* (sing. *völva*), among other names such as *spókonur*, *sieðkonur*, and *galdrakonur*,¹⁸² and usually identified by the staffs they carry.¹⁸³ Their activities seem to be related despite the various names, and for that reason I will use the term "practitioner," "ritual specialist," or "völva" to describe an individual practicing divination or magic in the Old Norse pre-Christian religion.

¹⁷⁷ Tacitus, *Germania*, 8.

¹⁷⁸ Simek *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, 279-280.

¹⁷⁹ Simek *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, 356-357. Tacitus, *Germania*, chapter 8.

¹⁸⁰ Simek *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, 99, 370-371.

¹⁸¹ Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, 98-99.

¹⁸² Price, *The Viking Way*, 76.

¹⁸³ Leszek Gardela. "A Biography of the Seiðr-Staffs: Towards an Archaeology of Emotions," in *Between Paganism and Christianity in the North*, eds. Leszek Paweł Ślupecki ; Jakub Morawiec (Rzeszów : Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Rzeszowskiego, 2009), pp. 190-219.

The primary literary source for the *völva* is *Völuspá*¹⁸⁴ and *Bladrs draumr*. *Baldrs draumr* illustrates Óðinn's visit to Hel to wake the dead *völva* in order to receive prophecy about the end of the world. During this adventure he travels towards Hel, but the *völva*'s resting place is just outside of it, to the east of Hel's gates.¹⁸⁵ This speaks to the liminal existence of a *völva* even after death. Indeed, the *völva* burials in Birka also appear in liminal spaces along the rampart in the main burial ground. One of these burials, according to Price, predated the rampart itself.¹⁸⁶ Whether the rampart was built there because of this burial is uncertain, but it does suggest a convincing argument for the associations between *völva* and liminal spaces. Although Óðinn is the master of *seiðr*, he is in a constant search for wisdom, knowledge, and power. In the above mentioned eddas, Óðinn travels to a *völva*, and wakes her just like other literary characters do in order to learn knowledge or information from the dead or near dead.¹⁸⁷ In essence, the dead act as a sort of portal or access point between the living and the Otherworld. Living people can obtain knowledge about otherworldly information that effects the mortal realm. With this train of thought, I suggest that *völva* offered a live and interactive version of this link between worlds. That is not to say that all the dead were like the *völva*, but rather suggests a general concept of an access point or *keyhole* between the formerly living who are now in the in-between and transitioning over to the other worlds, while the *völva* is living, but during her trances or rituals she is in a liminal headspace between her waking life and the afterlife. Here we have a bit of a philosophical problem somewhat relative to the concept of a predestination paradox, however, the ancient Scandinavians were likely not thinking about time travel to the past, but rather considering how their actions influenced their future. An example of this can be found in *Njals saga*, where Njal predicts that Gunnar will face certain death unless he leaves his farm in Hlíðarend. Yet when the time comes, and Gunnar looks back towards his home, he cannot leave and returns. He is killed soon after, and the prediction is fulfilled.¹⁸⁸

There are several types of ritual practitioners or people practicing *seiðr*, depending on a person's skill, gender, or motivation. But there are also two types of *völur*: the mythical and the mortal. The mythical *völur* already had information to give to Óðinn once he begged of it, but the mortal *völur* had to practice prophecy in order to access information. I think the difference here is not necessarily because one is mythical and one is mortal, but rather one is dead, and one is alive. The dead already having access to information or acting as that portal between the living

¹⁸⁴ Crawford, *The Poetic Edda*, 2-16.

¹⁸⁵ Crawford, *The Poetic Edda*, 141-144.

¹⁸⁶ Price, *The Viking Way*, 88.

¹⁸⁷ Jones, ed. *Eirik the Red and Other Icelandic Sagas*, 142-143.

¹⁸⁸ Magnusson, et al, *Njal's Saga*, 165-171; Sveinsson, *Brennu-Njals saga*, 181-191.

and the otherworld adds an extra element to the mythical vödur. Similarly, other dead non- völvu mortals would be able to give information as well. But the living vödur, because of her alive status, did not automatically have that information “downloaded” into her memory banks: she had to access that record from the universe. We can perhaps liken this to the theories of Akashic records, made popular by Edgar Cayce in the early 20th century. This is a belief that everything that has or will happen in history is already written in some cosmic database, and is accessible by human mediums.¹⁸⁹ In summary, I believe that the practice of seiðr theoretically allows the individual to access the capabilities of the dead in this case.

In both myth and archaeology, seers are identified by their staffs, usually iron distaffs which relate to spinning and weaving. These domestic arts are part of a woman's realm, and like the practice of witchcraft, a man participating in weaving or spinning is generally thought to be *ergi* (unmanly).¹⁹⁰ These crafts also relate to the nornir who spin the threads of fate, as well as the goddesses. Freya and Frigg are both associated with magical arts of some kind. In *Lokesanna*, it is said that Frigg knows the fates of men, and she is associated with spinning.¹⁹¹ One can imagine the trance-like state that spinning thread creates as the craftswoman carefully focuses on her work. This could induce an almost meditative state which may have inspired the relationship between spinning and seeing fate specifically, not to mention that creating threads is creating the substance for the tapestry of life. Weaving is less so connected with the practices of mortal vödur, and there may be reason for this. It would be difficult to imagine a traveling völvu carrying with her some kind of loom as a symbol of her position, so it is very logical to have the distaff be the preferred symbolic item. It is the nornir that weave the tapestry, and also in one instance a group of valkyries which will be discussed later.¹⁹²

Traveling was all part of the job of a völvu. It may have been that she was stationed or had a home somewhere specific, but in order to carry out her duties she would travel to different farms and work her magic and visions. This is understandable given the widespread distance between settlements and farmsteads, and the practical nature of having one or a few people travel to the location, receive a feast, gifts, and honor rather than have an entire household and its supporters travel to the vödur. This may be simply a matter of practicality and logistics, and it is reminiscent of kings and other honored guests visiting settlements and receiving feasts.¹⁹³ In

¹⁸⁹ “Akashic Records: The Book of Life: Edgar Cayce Readings: Edgar Cayce's A.R.E.” Edgar Cayce's Association for Research and Enlightenment. <https://www.edgarcayce.org/the-readings/akashic-records/>

¹⁹⁰ Price, *The Viking Way*, 173-175.

¹⁹¹ Crawford, *The Poetic Edda*, 106.

¹⁹² Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, 236-237.

¹⁹³ Anders Winroth, *The Conversion of Scandinavia: Vikings, Merchants, and Missionaries in the Remaking of Northern Europe*. (Yale University Press, 2012): 50.

larger settlements such as Birka, a vödur may not have needed to travel in order to carry out her work. However, she could also have been based out of these larger settlements and still have traveled beyond them, as cities would have also attracted people to the lands outside their borders. Again, this is a matter of practicality.

In the sagas, spiritual skill or ritual practice ran in families, specifically for those practicing seiðr. Groups of women, men, or both who were part of the same family participated in witchcraft. *Eirik the Red's saga* introduces Þorbjorg lítilvölva who had nine sisters in all, although she herself was the only surviving one. The account of Þorbjorg's visit to Þorkel's farm to determine if the famine would soon subside is one of the most elaborate depictions of a seer's appearance and accoutrement.¹⁹⁴ The description is somewhat faithful to what has been found in Viking Age archaeology, but this depends on interpretation. Vödur graves identified by knobbed iron staffs also include evidence of embellished garments of blue, and pouches with magic items, such as the woman of the Fyrkat 4 burial.¹⁹⁵

A family from the Hebrides that came to Iceland consisted of Kotkel, his wife Grima, and their two sons. They were all ascribed to witchcraft and magic, and ultimately killed for their deeds, with the exception of one son who escaped capture. The other son was taken to sea and drowned, while the parents were stoned to death and buried under a stone cairn.¹⁹⁶ A third example is found in Rognvald Haraldsson, who practiced witchcraft with other men, and whose mother was a Sámi sorceress, as already mentioned.¹⁹⁷

Other sorceresses in the sagas are associated with a closeness to their family members, specifically sisters or their sons; although the sons themselves do not practice witchcraft, but may benefit from it. Of these are Þorana of *Egils saga*,¹⁹⁸ Ljot and her son Hrolleif of *Vatnsdæla saga*,¹⁹⁹ and Katla and Geirriðr or *Eyrbyggja saga*.²⁰⁰ It is not unusual for family sagas to suggest a trait, be it physical or functional, to be passed down or associated with the next generation of one's family. Traits such as having a temper or being ugly, both demonstrated in *Egil saga* about Egil and his own ancestry, are also shared with kin.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁴ Jones, *Eirik the Red and Other Icelandic Saga*. 134-135; Smiley et al., *The Sagas of Icelanders: A Selection*, 658-659.

¹⁹⁵ Price, *The Viking Way*, 105-113.

¹⁹⁶ Smiley et al., *The Sagas of Icelanders*, 338-342; Sveinsson, *Laxdæla saga*, 102-108.

¹⁹⁷ Sturluson. *Heimskringla*, 80-81.

¹⁹⁸ Smiley et al., *The Sagas of Icelanders*: 40.

¹⁹⁹ Smiley et al., *The Sagas of Icelanders*, 216-27-230.

²⁰⁰ Ólason, *Gisli Sursson's Saga: and The Saga of the People of Eyri*, 88-91, 103-106.

²⁰¹ Smiley et al., *The Sagas of Icelanders*, 51.

5.3 Valkyries

Although valkyries are more commonly associated with shield maidens and the realm of war, their associations with death and other elements closely link them to the topics discussed in this work. Ultimately, the result of this research has led me to believe that not only are shieldmaidens and valkyries different, but also that valkyries may belong more to the realm of magic and ritual than they are commonly associated to be.

Pre-Viking age accounts of valkyrie figures, called *walcurge*, appear in Old English sources a couple hundred years before the Viking Age. In these accounts they were more demon-like according to some scholars, and acted as spirits of war. This association with war and battle has much to do with the connection with shieldmaidens, which causes many to consider shieldmaidens and valkyries as one and the same, or interchangeable. However, my reading of this is that they were different entities, and shared some similarities and traits between various female religious entities. For the most part, shieldmaidens seem to be mortal human women who fight in mortal battles, whereas the valkyries have a supernatural existence and appear in mythology. The valkyries we are most familiar with are women who choose those to be slain on the battlefield, then escort them to Valhalla where they will serve libations to these dead warriors, the *einherjar*.²⁰² The valkyries do Óðinn's bidding, though they are apparently able to act independently and disobey his orders. The primary example of this is found in *Sigrdrífumál* where the valkyrie Brunhildr has been punished by Óðinn for disobeying his instructions. Óðinn only has the ability to punish the valkyrie; he cannot correct or change what she has done.²⁰³ The valkyries abilities to act out their own choices may harken back to their original existence as war demons, not necessarily serving a specific entity.

Valkyries occasionally become wives of heroes, such as in the story given above, but also in each of the three stories regarding Helgi Hundingsbane. In this particular case we see an example of a sovereign woman type in Sváva providing a hero with not only his name and arms, but also her love. This is reminiscent of earlier Germanic marriage customs, and Celtic myths.²⁰⁴ The act of the cup-bearing valkyries serving the *einherjar* in Valhalla nods to the warriors' worthiness of their position in Valhalla. The serving of beer or mead is certainly an act of hospitality, especially on the part of the female head of the house, but I believe that the valkyries serving the *einherjar* are more than that. Here we see the potential relationship between not only valkyrie and warrior, but woman and man as domestic partners, and a validation of their status.

²⁰² Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, 349.

²⁰³ Crawford, *The Poetic Edda*, 253.

²⁰⁴ James, "Sovereignty Aspects in the Roles of Women in Medieval Irish and Welsh Society," 87–102.

This brings in two more domestic connotations, and it has been suggested that perhaps there may have been a tradition unknown to us where women could enter Valhalla with their men were they to suffer a violent death such as sacrifice.²⁰⁵ This may be the reason for human sacrifices found in both literary and archaeological evidence, and the alleged willingness for participation could also be explained by this.^{ix}

The valkyries have further domestic associations, and although the incidence is not common, it is worth noting. In *Njals saga*, we have an instance of twelve valkyries in the *Darraðarljóð* poem being seen at a gruesome loom weaving the fates of men. The scene is rather descriptive, and it is interesting that it is *valkyries* doing the weaving specifically.²⁰⁶ This ties into the nornir weaving the threads of fate and valkyries' relationships to nornir, death, and magic. Here they are acting like nornir.²⁰⁷ Freya was also a goddess associated with these things as discussed earlier, and *Grimnismal* portrays her as a valkyrie through the term *chooser of the slain*: a recognition of her acquiring half the fallen warriors, but perhaps a bit more that may now be lost.²⁰⁸ Valkyries are also associated with swans, and both have the ability of flight. Freyja can also transform into a bird with her falcon cloak.²⁰⁹

Valkyries have a curious similarity to sorceresses not just through connections with Freya and Óðinn, but also with some of their names that suggest staff bearing, or an association with stormy weather.²¹⁰ Kennings about valkyries in battle suggest foul weather coming over the scene,²¹¹ and here we must consider the sound being the inspiration for this as the sounds of battle and the sounds of the storm would be quite clamorous. Inspiration could also come from weather being so vital to life and death as it had the ability to destroy or provide for the health of crops, and thus the survival of people. Regardless, we may see another associative theme between these supernatural beings of fate, and the seiðr practitioners who practiced weather magic. However, often times with sorcery, weather magic has more to do with defense or offense in battle with one's enemy than the outcome of crops. Instead, sorcery and prophecy has been used to decide the outcome of famine (*Eiriks saga*), but we do not know if any magic was done to help this.

Finally, we have the Valeda-like character of Þorgerðr Hölgabrúðr in *Jómsvíkiga saga* 73. In this saga Jarl Hákon prays to Þorgerðr who was supposedly a patron deity of his. In this

²⁰⁵ Jesch, *Women of the Viking Age*, 119.

²⁰⁶ Magnusson et al., *Njal's Saga*, 349-51; Sveinsson, *Brennu-Njáls saga*, 448-460.

²⁰⁷ Sturluson, *Edda*, 18; ; Sturluson, *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, 17-19.

²⁰⁸ Crawford, *The Poetic Edda*, 63.

²⁰⁹ Crawford, *The Poetic Edda*, 115.

²¹⁰ Price, *The Viking Way*, 62-68.

²¹¹ Price, *The Viking Way*, 284.

story he invokes Þorgerðr and begs for help in battle, even offering sacrifices including his own young son. Þorgerðr eventually agrees to intervene, and she and her sister Irpa use weather magic to personally participate in the war proceedings. We have multiple sorceresses for this event who can only be seen by a man with second-sight, otherwise they are invisible to their opponents. The women are referred to as both trolls and giants, and Þorgerðr as a goddess to Jarl Hákon.²¹² Snorri suggests that they had a divine presence, and were only venerated locally in Norway where they had a temple with idols and images.²¹³ However, *Harðar saga Grímskelssonar* locates the temple in Iceland, where Þorgerðr provides prophecies.²¹⁴ This is similar to Germanic sources with other sybils as mentioned above, and we can see a relationship between them, the vödur, and valkyrjur, and a nearly goddess-like reverence.

5.4 *The Angel of Death*

A mysterious female figure is referred to as the *Angel of Death*, in Ahmed Ibn Fadlan's report about a Rús chieftain's burial. A general translation of the Arabic word closely translates to a *chooser of the slain*.²¹⁵ The name itself suggests a valkyrie-like figure in this mortal woman who leads the funeral proceedings and dispatches a slave girl. How this character is, and if she resembles any of the aforementioned ritual specialists is something to be examined further.

Ibn Fadlan's account regarding the *Angel of Death* is minimal, but offers just enough to speculate about or connect some similarities to Norse religious practices, perhaps as well as the traditions of others that influenced the Rús. While there are many valuable clues to overall religious beliefs, there are four themes I would like to focus on regarding the *Angel of Death* figure and how she related to established Norse religious beliefs, and her possible connection to other types of female religious practitioners. These are the domestic duties she carries out, the presence and participation of her own family members in the proceedings, her payment of gold bracelets for services rendered, and the items used during the ritual. Additionally, Ibn Fadlan's outright statement of her status as a "witch" in some translations brings another element, although this is debatable.

Firstly, among the Angel of Death's responsibilities is the preparation of funeral clothes for the deceased.²¹⁶ The production of clothing in the Old Norse world was the responsibility of women, most often the wives or lovers making clothes for their husbands and children, and why

²¹² Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, 126.

²¹³ Magnusson et al., *Njal's saga*, p 188; Sveinsson, *Brennu-Njáls saga*, 214-220.

²¹⁴ Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, 126.

²¹⁵ Price, *Passing into Poetry*, 133.

²¹⁶ Montgomery, *Ibn Fadlan and the Rusiyah*, 15; Ibn-Faḍlān, Ahmed. *Ibn Fadlān and the Land of Darkness*, 50-51.

the *Angel of Death* was responsible for this is unknown.²¹⁷ Perhaps she was substituting for a wife that the chieftain did not have, with the slave girl fulfilling the sexual duties.

What other responsibilities the *Angel of Death* may have had we can only speculate. Pagan rituals were heavily community based and therefore required many people doing many jobs. Neil Price's classification as the *Angel of Death* being a "funeral director" suggests that she had a sort of management position, making sure all the parts worked together. Some of this is evident in the final performance, but what goes on behind the scenes is unknown. It is possible that the various actors were well versed enough to know their parts and carry them out without serious direction. There may have been an established standard for who pulls ashore the ship, prepares the feast, and slaughters the animals: details Ibn Fadlan did not include, and we do not know. Scandinavian literature does not divulge much information about funerals outside casual mentions with small, random details.^x It goes to show that the audience whom the sagas were written for were already well familiar with these proceedings, and familiar enough not to need direction or the assignment of tasks. People knew their place, and it was obvious that certain groups were responsible for certain tasks throughout life and death.

As with practitioners of seiðr and early Germanic sybils, the *Angel of Death* was also accompanied and assisted by family members, specifically two daughters. Perhaps the daughters would someday take her place, or maybe were in training for their own positions should their services be required elsewhere. Possibly the family bond was thought to strengthen the power. One could also speculate that the value placed on relationships strengthening social position had something to do with it. If the younger girls had not been her daughters, could that have produced competition or feud as two or three factions vie for power? Working with family members provided the utmost amount of trust, and was the foundation of Viking Age society. Where power meant a great deal during this age, it is vital to have insurance, and that came in the form of familial relationships.²¹⁸

The tangible items used by the *Angel of Death* should be addressed, although we are not left with much certain meaning. These items are the bracelets given to her by the slave girl, the cup or cups used to serve the slave girl, and the knife and the garrote used to kill her.²¹⁹ The action of the slave girl giving her bracelets to the Angel of Death, and her anklets to the daughters, suggests a form of payment or gratitude. Gift-giving was a sign of respect, and it

²¹⁷ Jesse Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*. (London; New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 319.

²¹⁸ Helgi Þorláksson, "Chapter 8, Historical Background: Iceland 870-1400," in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2011), pp. 136-154, 144.

²¹⁹ Montgomery, *Ibn Fadlan and the Rusiyyah*, 15.

could also be argued that this was the intent.²²⁰ Still, the exchange undoubtedly had some meaning. That the jewelry was gold may also be of significance, as gold is associated with the gods and is the most prestigious metal.^{xi}

Throughout the ten days, the slave girl was served *nabidh*, an intoxicating beverage. On the final day just before her sacrifice, she is served a final cup before the sacrifice. At this point the girl is well inebriated, and different interpretations exist concerning the moments afterwards. After taking the drink, the girl is led into the chamber aboard the ship by the *Angel of Death* where the deceased chieftain has been placed. The account states “She wanted to enter the pavilion, but she put her head between it and the boat. Then the old woman seized her head, made her enter the pavilion and went in with her.”²²¹ Some read this hesitation by the girl as a panic moment, but it could also be read as simply confused due to her drunken state.²²² However, it is likely that a degree of both were at play.

Returning to the cup that the beverage was served in, no detail is given. We do not know if this was a special cup used for ritual or something more mundane. Ibn Fadlan does not heavily describe any of the objects independently, only their presence, as his account is more centered on actions and actors. The best assumption is that the cup was not special, at least not special towards this individual burial, and without more information, we cannot go much further. Cups and vessels appear in many pagan burials, as do other objects that could have been personal items for daily use.²²³ Furthermore, cups also represented important social functions of serving during feasts.²²⁴ I would like to note that *servicing* drinks to the one to be killed, may also be an acknowledgement of the slave girl as “chosen” for a special purpose, similar to how a *sovereign woman* recognizes a special warrior. However, this may be coincidental.

The two objects used to contribute to the slave girl’s death were the cord she was choked with, and the knife she was stabbed with. Again, these items are not described in much detail other than the action they were used for. The cord must have been strong enough to do the job, but was apparently of no great significance in appearance to capture Ibn Fadlan’s attention, nor was the knife that was used. The *Angel of Death* was the one to arrange the cord, placing it

²²⁰ Sigurðsson, Jón Viðar. “Ch. 1: Friendship: The Most Important Social Bond in Iceland in the Free State Period” in *Viking Friendship: The Social Bond in Iceland and Norway, c. 900-1300*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 2017), 19-22

²²¹ Ibn-Faḍlān, *Ibn Faḍlān and the Land of Darkness*, 53.

²²² Montgomery, *Ibn Fadlan and the Rusiyyah*, 18.

²²³ Ellis, *Road to Hel*, 9.

²²⁴ Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup*, 1-14.

around the girl's neck and crossing the ends over. She then handed the ends off to two men, one on either side, who committed the final action.²²⁵

While we must refrain from making too many umbrella statements or assumptions regarding past cultures, it is still interesting that many of these elements are similar to the bog bodies found elsewhere in northern Europe as far back as 2,000 BCE, and into the common era as well. Some of the bog bodies have stomach contents that suggests an intoxication occurred before their sacrifice. Feeding the victim hallucinogens either in the form of herbs, fungus, or alcohol could be assumed to make them compliant, or enhance the mystical context as the victim travels to another world first in mind, and then eventually in spirit.²²⁶ Either of these or both would have likely been the case for the slave girl in Ibn Fadlan's account.

The bog bodies represent a collection of ritual human sacrifices, many of whom who had sustained multiple forms of injury leading up to or during their deaths. Several have been choked or hung in addition to having some kind of body trauma at the time of death, usually to the head or abdomen.²²⁷ The meaning or purpose of choking *and* stabbing an individual during a ritual sacrifice is unknown. Like some of the bog bodies, the slave girl was strangled with a cord and injured. She was stabbed multiple times through the ribs simultaneously.²²⁸ If the purpose of this stabbing was only to kill her, multiple violent blows would not have been necessary. She could have been stabbed once in the heart or through other vital points on the body with less violence or chaos. But it was the chaos that was apparently desired, with options chosen over more practical actions. All this adds to the performance and the meaning behind the ritual. The extremely violent actions may have been conducted to give power to the ritual, and this suggestion could be supported by the significant amount of blood and killing demonstrated in burials such as that of the Rús chieftain, and other burials with a massive amount of violence. Every one of the senses would have been stimulated, making the ordeal memorable and quite loud: enough to be heard by the gods. Sounds of animals being exhausted and slaughtered, the slave girl chanting and screaming, the beating of shields, and other various noises would have been present. Blood would have been everywhere as neither the human nor animal sacrifices were gently dispatched.

What ultimately happened to the tangible items discussed above is unknown. Likely, the bangles would have gone home with the *Angel of Death* and her daughters. The cups may have

²²⁵ Montgomery, *Ibn Fadlan and the Rusiyyah*, 19.

²²⁶ Hedeager, *Iron Age Myth and Materiality*, 100, 108.

²²⁷ Hedeager, Lotte. *Iron Age Myth and Materiality: An Archaeology of Scandinavia, AD 400-1000*, 100, 108.

²²⁸ Montgomery, *Ibn Fadlan and the Rusiyyah*, 19.

been reused, returned to their original owner, or deposited among the goods in the chieftain's burial. The cord would probably have disintegrated with time. The knife, however, is something of more interest to discuss, although briefly.

The *Angel of Death* dispatches the slave girl with a broad-bladed knife, although the length is unknown, stabbing her repeatedly through the chest. Logically, one would assume that the knife be something more like a seax, possessing a longer blade, but for all we know it could have been an eastern or Rús style. One is tempted to look for evidence of a broad-bladed knife, or any special knife, in the archaeology in order to solidify an identity associated with an *Angel of Death* figure. However, this is somewhat futile. While it is worth looking into, three points of caution need to be made. First, is the commonness of knives in everyday life of the time, and the commonness of knives within graves of any demographic. A knife was an everyday item, much like a comb, that everyone made use of for eating or working.²²⁹ It may be difficult to determine whether the knife was ritual or utilitarian. What is more is the fact that knives are not a tool relegated to a specific demographic. Even children's graves have been found with knives.²³⁰ Granted, different knives serve different purposes, and this is why further investigation of knives found in graves might be fruitful. But common knives likely performed multiple duties in order to carry out daily needs. The second point is the frequency of a ritual specialist using such a knife while acting as a funeral director. Not every death was an elite one, and not every person had a human or animal sacrifice accompany them to the afterlife. Nevertheless, sacrifice was common enough throughout Scandinavia that it is valid to question whether there were ritual knives used in these ceremonies.

It may be difficult to imagine a pagan people with all their associations with ritual (words, actions, and objects) as not having a dedicated item such as a knife reserved for ceremonial killings, but we need to consider how much of that impression is due to later religious activities and stereotypes not necessarily applicable to the pagan religion being practiced among Ibn Fadlan's Rús. Much of what we associate with witchcraft today comes from a more Christian period post-dating the Viking Age when ecclesiastical interests in the arcane flourished.²³¹ However, objects, such as the seer's staff, have been identified as ritual tools by several modern

²²⁹ Moen, Marianne. "Challenging Gender: A reconsideration of gender in the Viking Age using the mortuary landscape," (PhD diss., University of Oslo, 2019), 131.

²³⁰ Henriette, Lyngstrøm, and Lone G. Thomsen. *Vikingetid i Danmark: tekster skrevet til Jørgen Poulsen i anledning af den eksperimentelle og formidlende arkæologi, som Vikingelandsbyen i Albertslund har praktiseret og udviklet fra 1992 til 2012*. 1. opl. (København: Det Humanistiske Fakultet, Københavns Universitet, 2013).

²³¹ Stephen A. Mitchell, *Witchcraft and Magic in the Nordic Middle Ages*. (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 35-36, 45-49.

scholars, even if simply symbolic rather than functional items.²³² So, it is not a stretch to assume that an object such as a knife, or even the cup or cords used on the slave girl, *could* have been special. Yet the knife, cup, and cording are somewhat mundane or everyday items rather than prestige goods or symbols of authority, so stating that the knife *must have* been ritually special is faulty.

The third and final point is who the knife would have belonged to. It would be understandable for the practitioner to be the owner of the knife, but perhaps not. It may have been that this object was committed to the grave with the deceased rather than used again, or it was possible that a knife of some familial or personal significance was used. The speculation is vast, and as of this date I do not know of any patterns that may point to supporting any of these hypotheses. Since we do not know who the knife belonged to, it would be difficult to detect it. If the knife belonged to the chieftain, archaeologists might assume it was strictly a weapon for warfare. If it belonged to the *Angel of Death*, she may have been assigned as something other than a ritual worker depending on her other grave goods. It is possible that if such a grave had been found that she may not have been designated as female either, given the tendency to assign gender by grave goods rather than by DNA or osteology.²³³ If such a person was discovered, would we even think to identify them as an *Angel of Death*?

Finally, and perhaps most tellingly is Ibn Fadlan's statement that the *Angel of Death* is a "witch." Both these labels, "Angel of Death" and "witch," have to be looked at from at least two potential perspectives. The first being from Ibn Fadlan's. Are these labels coming from his own cultural associations, and what *he* would consider a witch or Angel of Death, or are they labels he is being told by the interpreter?

The text states that the "Angel of Death" is what the Rús call her, that much is known. But what word was actually used could be very telling. As pagan people, whether or not they had a word for "angel" or what their concept of such an entity was would be informative. It seems that the term "angel" could very well have been Ibn Fadlan's equivalent of what the translator described. The term "witch" is a bit more straightforward or convertible to Old Norse concepts and practices, but what Ibn Fadlan considers to be a witch may still differ. This part of the commentary was just that- a description of what he saw: "*I saw that she was a witch, thick-bodied and sinister.*"²³⁴ However, this could also be irrelevant given the translation of the text. James Montgomery does not translate the term as "witch," but prefers "crone" instead. In some

²³² Price, *The Viking Way*, 132-133.

²³³ Moen, *The Gendered Landscape*, 10.

²³⁴ Ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan and the Land of Darkness*, 51.

circumstances “witch” and “crone” can have a similar meaning, but in this context the difference between the two is significant, and therefore Ibn Fadlan allegedly stating she is a “witch” in one popular translation seems to be more a matter of appearance than practice.²³⁵

This particular remark could also be taken from the context of Arab standards rather than Scandinavian or Rús. Just what defines a “sinister” look is unknown, and the “thick-bodied” could carry negative connotations from an Arab point of view, or may be neutral and simply describing her appearance. She was also described as being “old,” although what the qualifiers for this is also undefined, and since the lifespans of ancient people rarely reached over 60, and many not much over 40, this person was either long lived or highly worn.²³⁶ “Old” is relevant to the time. Another aged woman, Auðr the Deep-Minded, was described as “heavy-set” in her old age.²³⁷ Therefore, the commentary about the *Angel of Death* being thick-bodied could be related to her age.

The traveling nature of the vödur, compounded by their honored treatment and potential payment of their services, is also somewhat detectable in the *Angel of Death*, as she was giving bracelets and part of a traveling band of Rús, much like the Germanic sybils. As previously discussed, scholars debate the idea of an Old Norse ritual hierarchy or collective in regard to the pagan religion, but that is not to say that such positions could not have been a profession for some.

5.5 *The Angel of Death: A forgotten profession?*

It is difficult to believe that Fadlan's *Angel of Death* was a singular case. People died every day, and the pagan religion was one saturated in ritual. It stands to reason that communities employed the services of a “funeral director.” Whether or not such a figure resided over the death rituals of all deceased community members or just the elite cannot be known. The number of elites within a community would be less than commoners, so longer elaborate burials would perhaps take less time to prepare for and perform. However, “elite” burials extend beyond kings or chieftains, and include the vödur themselves.²³⁸ Alternatively, perhaps the *Angel of Death* was only called upon for rites that required a human sacrifice. If she is a “chooser of the slain,” then maybe her participation was dictated by this particular ritual feature, leaving rituals not involving human sacrifice to be performed by family members or chieftains.

²³⁵ Montgomery, *Ibn Fadlan and the Rusiyyah*, 19.

²³⁶ Ole Jørgen Benedictow, *The Medieval Demographic System of the Nordic Countries*. (Oslo: Middelalderforlaget, 1993) 29-36.

²³⁷ Smiley et al., *The Sagas of Icelanders: A Selection*, 282; Sveinsson, *Laxdæla saga*, 11-15.

²³⁸ Price, *The Viking Way*, 84-119.

Before moving forward, let us recapitulate what the Angel of Death's responsibilities were in Ibn Fadlan's account. First, she is said to have been the one to orchestrate the entire funeral from the start. This might include assigning the various tasks required to carry out the celebration and ritual. How involved with preparations is less known than her active role during the final funerary activities. This ten-day ordeal is a great commitment of time and resources dedicated to the burial of a chieftain. The funeral of lesser ranked community members would not be as elaborate, and burials of the slave class may have been quite meager. So, the social rank of the individual(s) interred would dictate the extravagance of the ritual and burial.

The Historiska database lists 1,255 graves that have been excavated in Birka. Of those, about 9% are chamber graves, 16% coffin graves, and 50% cremation graves. The remainder are other inhumations.²³⁹ Regardless of the extravagance of each burial, each had some kind of funerary activity associated with them, but elite graves would have had more attention. It took some time and planning, at least on the part of the family, to commit the dead to the earth. This activity may have included some interaction with a religious practitioner.

One would assume, based on the account of the Rús funeral, that deceased elites would have been shown more attention than their less fortunate community members, especially those with ritual evidence similar to the Rús funeral, that included animal or even human sacrifice. Chamber burials are largely regarded as for the elite members of society,²⁴⁰ but that does not mean that cremations or coffin graves were for non-elites. Still, that chamber graves made up only 9% of the excavated sample, may be in line with the percentage of a society's upper-class population. If we are generous and increase that number to 20% requiring a more elaborate funeral, how manageable would that be for a single practitioner.

To see how manageable a community would be for a single practitioner, I examined the available evidence at Birka. Birka was a popular trade center during the mid-8th century to the late 10th century,²⁴¹ with an estimated population of 500-1000 people at any given time.²⁴² T.D. Price explains that although estimates for the number of graves at Birka was previously claimed to be around 3,000, new estimates suggest that it is conceivably between 4,500 and 5,000.²⁴³

²³⁹ Historiska Museet. "Björkö - Burial Ground." *Björkö - Burial Ground*, 2011. http://mis.historiska.se/mis/sok/birka.asp?sm=10_7.

²⁴⁰ Frans-Arne Stylegar, "Kammergraver fra vikingtiden i Vestfold" in *Fornvännen: Journal of Swedish Antiquarian Research* 100, no. 3 (2002), 162-177.

²⁴¹ T. Douglas Price, Caroline Arcini, Ingrid Gustin, Leena Drenzel, and Sven Kalmring, "Isotopes and human burials at Viking Age Birka and the Mälaren region, east central Sweden," in *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 49, (2018) 19. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaa.2017.10.002>

²⁴² TD Price, "Isotopes and human burials at Viking Age Birka and the Mälaren region, east central Sweden," 20.

²⁴³ TD Price, "Isotopes and human burials at Viking Age Birka and the Mälaren region, east central Sweden," 22.

In a previous paper, I compared the four-10th century völvur graves found at Birka and found that it was possible that one woman per generation (a generation being about 25 years) could have served in Birka during her lifetime. I based this on the dating of graves Bj.760, Bj.660, Bj.834, and Bj.845 with an average lifespan of 40 years, and assuming the practitioner would be an independent professional for an average of 20-25 years, beginning at age 15-20. Naturally, some lived past the age of 40, but few beyond 60, so it is important to emphasize that these are averages. I have added the tables from my previous paper below.

Burial	Lifespan	Grave Dates	Grave Type	Grave Location
Bj 660	Mid - Late 800s	900 ~	Inhumation, Chamber	North of Borg 2A
Bj 834	Late 800s – Early 900s	913-932	Inhumation, Chamber	Homeland 1C
Bj 845	Early - Mid 900s	925-943	Inhumation, Chamber	Homeland 1B
Bj 760	Early 900s - Late 900s	900 - 970	Cremation, pit	Homeland 1C

Table 1. Björkö Völva Graves by Lifespan / Burial. If the average lifespan during the Viking Age is typically 40 years, and if the age of a Völva beginning her career was presumably about 20 +/- (possibly younger or older), then a Völva could have served her community for about 20 years. Data source: Price, 84-96.

Burial	Early Range	Late Range
Bj 660	b. 860 d. 900 r. 880 – 900	b. 860 d. 900 r. 880 – 900
Bj 834	b. 873 d. 913 r. 895 - 913	b. 892 d. 932 r. 912 – 932
Bj 845	b. 885 d. 925 r. 905 - 925	b. 900 d. 940 r. 920 – 940
Bj 760	b. 840 d. 900 r. 860 - 900	b. 930 d. 970 r. 950 – 970

Table 2. Service dates. If each of the above Völva lived for about 40 years, the service may have gone as exemplified above (the first date column is the early range, the second the later date range).

Considering that it looks like the völvur in Birka *could have* served their community in consecutive terms, if a community did make use of a “funeral director” perhaps there would have been a specialist during each generation as there seems to have been with the völvur. It is tempting to ask whether an *Angel of Death* could have been a völvur considering she was a female ritual specialist, but that may be too assumptive. We do not know if she only presided over funerals, or if she had other responsibilities outside of this function that filled her time. Could she have offered other services between the living and the otherworld as well? We can never know, and it may have been an individual choice. This thought extends to any ritual specialist, and the idea that they may have only offered a single service, or they may have offered a variety.

Individual specialists may have tailored their craft based on the needs of their communities, and their own abilities. We also do not know if she was a singularity or if there were others like her, female or male, and there is still the debate of if she was a Scandinavian, or if her occupation reflected Slavic or other customs instead. Scholars more knowledgeable than I have been unable to come to any certain conclusion, so it is an aspect that will have to go unanswered for the time being. However, there are enough concepts and habits that the Norse shared with their neighbors, including shamanic-like practices.²⁴⁴ Furthermore, settlements like Birka enjoyed plenty of “international” influence as a trade city connecting Scandinavia to the east and other settlements.²⁴⁵ Between the vödur graves in Birka (as well as a majority of vödur graves throughout Scandinavia) and the account about the *Angel of Death*, something within the pagan ritual domain was quite potent in the 10th century, before the new faith took full hold.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Researching this topic has made a few trends in scholarship evident, specifically in the preference for certain source material. When discussing topics concerning the Viking Age when no contemporary material is available, scholarship leans towards source material that post-dates the age in question, leaving information from earlier periods out of the discussion. There are some exceptions to this when dealing with topics that have an obvious relevance, but on the whole many earlier sources are abandoned in favor of the later material. This is understandable because the time difference between the Viking Age and the Late Medieval period is less than the difference between the Viking Age and the Roman Iron Age when the earlier material was written down. A difference of a few hundred years is theoretically better than a difference of several hundred years. However, the social and religious changes that occurred in those few hundred years towards the end of the Viking Age and into the Late Medieval period were culturally considerable in comparison to the earlier Iron Age. The earlier periods and the pre-Christian Viking Age, including the periods of transition, still shared an ethnic religion. The coming of Christianity changed not only the beliefs and customs of the people, but the centralized religion also aided in creating a more centralized government. To my mind, this is a greater difference than the number of years between periods. The Viking Age is one that falls at the end of the Iron Age, and at the beginning of the Middle Ages, creating a unique transition point for cultural change. Considering when a culture changes it keeps some of the old and

²⁴⁴ Neil Price, “Sorcery and Circumpolar Traditions in Old Norse Belief,” In *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink, (New York: Routledge, 2012), 244.

²⁴⁵ Edgren, “The Viking Age in Finland,” 477.

blends it with the new, post-Viking Age sources are still quite useful. But some scholarship should consider looking at the customs and beliefs of an earlier time more than they do. I think the similarities between the ancient Germanic sorceresses like Veleda, the Old Norse sorceresses like Þorbjörg, and the entity known as Þorgerðr Hölgabrúðr who has traits of a vödur, valkyrie, and a goddess demonstrate a successive belief in spiritually powerful women.

Research also tends to have a dependency on literature, especially Icelandic sources, and less so on archaeology, when perhaps they should be more balanced. This statement is not an absolute, and in some cases one source is just more available or relevant than the other. Subject matter makes a difference, as well as region, and it is with the latter point that we should be extra cautious. While it is incredibly useful to use the Icelandic sources to fill in the gaps for the most easterly regions of Scandinavia, the cultural differences can at times be enough to need to separate the two. If there is a trend in the archaeology of Sweden, for example, but no saga evidence for such an occurrence, we must take care not to dismiss it as if the sagas have the final say. Fortunately, in many cases saga and archaeological material are relatively cohesive with one another, and for discussions about Viking Age spiritual beliefs it is incredibly helpful.

It should also go without saying that blanket statements about ancient Scandinavian customs should be carefully considered. Throughout this research I discovered themes that were regional, pan-Scandinavian, or potentially pan-European. There were more blurred lines than distinct ones. Our modern methodological minds prefer to have definitive answers and classifications for all things, as if we were trying to create an organized system with predictable solutions, but this is unreasonable especially with a past that had structure, but still not a centralized organization. When it comes to ritual specialists and other religious entities, we want to discover features that would help us classify them, or determine a hierarchy. Yet, at a time when religious cohesion existed, at least to some degree, there was still no institutionalization of the pagan faith as there was later with the Christian one. So, it is not surprising to see the blurred lines, lack of definitive hierarchy, or reliably discernable classification or even logic.

What has been particularly noticeable is the themes within religion and death when compared to the world and daily concerns of the living. The motivations of Viking Age minds functioning in daily life are naturally concerned with survival, but it often comes through in the form of power, wealth, and reputation. In the realm of the ritual specialists, the theme is fate, death, war, and fertility. The themes for both spheres are related, but the focus is different enough. With the ritual specialists, reputation is ambiguous; sometimes exalted other times distasteful. They are not exactly wealthy, but they did possess some valuable items. Power is present, but in some instances more passively so. It manifests in a fearful respect, rather than in

social and lawful admiration as it does for chieftains. The secular concerns of power, wealth, and prestige are things that one can control or influence, while the concerns of fate are inevitable and beyond one's control. For that people needed a specialist to guide them through the fluid unknown. The question of profession has also been broached, and it seems that both the vödur and the *Angel of Death* had received some kind of compensation for their services, and understandably so when working amongst mercantile communities, or a culture overly concerned with wealth. A profession does not require a hierarchy to be present, nor does it require a perfect list of services offered by every practitioner. Such things can function organically, and conform to the needs of the individual communities.

This paper specifically focuses on female ritual specialists, although I have acknowledged that men could have also been in these roles. However, the textual and archaeological sources together show that not only were women more likely to fit these roles, but men were socially dissuaded from it. The recognition of women dominating a specific role outside of the household needs to be normalized. At this point, it is likely that the public would assume religious roles were filled by men by default, being unaware of the realness that these roles could have just as likely been filled by women, and in some instances more likely. Witches and sorceresses were more than just a plot device or some elaborate fantasy, but their abilities (or the belief in their abilities) were real if one believes the presence of staffs in burials indicates the existence of vödur. In my mind, these figures have the potential to be a popular female fascination beyond the whetting woman, and currently more prevalent than real-life "shieldmaidens." Where influential men are found in law speakers, formidable women can be found in vödur.

Finally, the four types of female ritual specialists that I have outlined in this paper show a progression of concepts expressed in their associations. They all have some link to Óðinn, even the earlier Germanic sybils, and they are all agents of fate mediating between the living and the otherworldly forces. They sit on the periphery of their communities, being admired and feared, functioning within the community, but liminally so. Each maintain a domestic connection through their actions (weaving) or the symbols they possess (spinning distaffs). The early Germanic sybils have an evident similarity to their later successors, the vödur, and the vödur were suspected real life practitioners as was the *Angel of Death*. They had connections to the east, their rituals involved song, and they guided people in matters of fate in some way. The valkyrjur also played a hand in fate, and acted as psychopomps guiding the dead to their afterlife, as did the *Angel of Death* in a more performative way. In all, these figures demonstrate female ritual specialists that functioned throughout the Scandinavian (or Germanic) regions. And

although we cannot be sure if the *Angel of Death* was a Scandinavian, Slavic, or other ethnic specialist (or a combination there of), she and the ritual she presided over had enough in common with Scandinavian customs that it is plausible. Furthermore, with such a significant point of transition where people went to such efforts to bury their dead, and the beliefs about the afterlife, it is reasonable to consider that a populated community might have a specialist to handle the deaths of at least their more prestigious members, or for specialized rites such as those with a sacrificial victim.

Endnotes

ⁱ Here otherness is about the individuals, often women, who are part of the civilization but demonstrate traits or abilities that not everyone may possess. See also: Joonas Ahola and Frog's "Approaching the Viking Age in Finland: an Introduction," in *Fibula, Fabula, Fact: The Viking Age in Finland* edited by Joonas Ahola and Frog with Clive Tolley, 61-70. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2014.

ⁱⁱ Men have sex with and choke the slave girl, but one of them also exposes himself to spiritual threat when he ignites the fire (see Gunnell, "'Magical Mooning' and the 'Goatskin Twirl: Magical Practices.'" The dangers and power to the women involved should be self-explanatory.

ⁱⁱⁱ The contributions of Auður Magnúsdóttir, Catharina Raudvere, Leszek Gardela, and Hilda R. Ellis Davidson should also be noted.

^{iv} Women were not without some power, which would often come in the form of social capital, but still others chose actions that reached for more control. Jenny Jochens elaborates more on this idea in *Women in Old Norse Society*.

^v It has been speculated that the color blue indicates some interaction with death in sagas. This compounded with blue clothing found in relations to vödur is curious. Indeed, in *Grimnismal* Geirroð is warned that a sorcerer will soon be visiting, and shortly thereafter Óðin (the sorcerer) shows up wearing a blue cape. More about the relevance of color has been discussed in the following article: Straubhaar, Sandra Ballif. "Wrapped in a Blue Mantle: Fashions for Icelandic Slayers?" in *Medieval Clothing and Textiles*, Vol. 1, edited by Robin Netherton & Gale R Owen-Crocker, 53-66. Woodbridge, UK: The Boydell Press, 2005.

^{vi} Celtic mythology found in stories like *The Mabinogion*, *The Táin Bó Cúailnge*, as well as Roman records, and archaeological evidence totals over a hundred deities represented in Gaelic, Welsh, Brythonic, Gaulish, and other "Celtic" cultures, with neither males or females overly dominating. Finnish mythology, from what can be gathered from folktales such as *Kalevala*, have a fairly balanced representation in entities: with realms being ruled by a male and female married pair. However, likewise to the Scandinavian mythos, women do seem to dominate the realms of death or magic, although much more subtly so. See also: Davidson's *Roles of the Northern Goddess*, pg. 178, or Miranda Green's *The Gods of the Celts* cited below, in addition to the primary sources mentioned above.

^{vii} A reading of Gaelic and Welsh myths, as well as archeological findings of bog bodies and ritual deposits suggest that the Celts also believed in the liminal spaces of waterbodies, mounds, hills, and high places. See: Davidson's *Roles of the Northern Goddess*, pp. 156-160, and the primary sources mentioned in the previous endnote.

^{viii} Jenny Jochens tackles the difference between pagan and Christian marriage, in *Women in Old Norse Society*, and addresses similar comparisons elsewhere in the text. She generally concludes that it is impossible to say whether pagan or Christian Scandinavian women had it better or worse than the other. Truly it comes down to a matter of perspective we cannot entangle with our modern cultural indoctrinations.

^{ix} Some scholars have taken up the study of suttee-like tendencies within the northern European sphere, and have suggested that Scandinavian rituals involving the sacrifice of slaves, or a spouse is proof of this, and possibly a much older tradition still manifesting itself in the late Iron Age. See: Ellis, *The Road to Hel*, 50-56 as previously cited.

^x There are only small details about burials in the sagas. Passing mentions of someone buried under a cairn (*Laxdæla saga* 37), upright in a doorway (*Laxdæla saga* 17), or buried sitting upright in a mound (*Njals saga* 78). Little else is mentioned aside from the presence of grave goods, or other minor details that fuel the story, and the manner in which certain individuals were buried undoubtedly has some significance: literary if not culturally. Sagas do mention feasts in honor of the dead, as exemplified by Hoskuld Dalla-Kollsson (*Laxdæla saga* 26-27), and Auður Ketilsdóttir's (*Laxdæla saga* 5) deaths.

^{xi} Gold is prominent in the sagas and eddas. Gold rings, guldgubber, Draupnir, and Freyja's tears are all indications of gold value. For gold-based currency, see: Dagfinn Skre's *Means of Exchange*, p. 345.

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