



Archaeological Silence

*Assess the impact of androcentricism within the
historiography of Viking women.*

Essay: 2500 words

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"...As myths are transmitted over time, through different historical and cultural circumstances from those in which they arose, they may gain increasing autonomy: a life of their own." (John Hines).

The evidence relied on by a historian is central to shaping their interpretation of the past and fueling their construction of history. The discovery of new evidence due to the contribution of new technologies has therefore compelled historical narratives to undergo processes of re-analysis and reconstruction. It is these reconstructions that have revealed the necessarily evolutionary nature of the historical narrative, as well as the contextual influences that shaped previous interpretations. The relationship between implicit biases and evidence can be explored through an examination of the historical representation of the roles of Viking women. The recent re-analysis of Viking burial sites has begun to challenge the hegemonic narrative of Viking women as subordinate counterpoints to politically powerful men, while also demonstrating the incontrovertible gendered bias that has permeated the historical myth of the male warrior Vikings. The historical narrative of Viking women is firmly situated within the framework of androcentricism in historical study, which overlooked the meaningful role of women in favour of a dominating focus on males and male-centred activities in Viking society. This focus bolstered the historical myth of the male Viking as a forceful male warrior, cultivated throughout 18th and 19th century historiography and affirmed by early 20th century archaeological scholarship. Despite the relentless historical pursuit of objectivity, the androcentric image of Viking history has been continually propagated within archaeological scholarship, underlined by a lack of critical awareness of "the masculine bias in western scientific 'objective' method and theory"¹. The resultant representations of Viking women are thus

indicative of a conspicuous negation of gender as a central social and historical constituent, which rendered such women distinctly under-represented in the archaeological record. However, scientific re-analysis of Viking burial sites in Scandinavia and England within the last decade has largely exposed this invisibility. Assumptions of male skeletons because of militaristic grave goods have revealed the “preconceptions regarding pre-modern women and armies”² that permeated archaeological excavations around Viking culture and ultimately overlooked the potentially significant political role of Viking women. Therefore, the contemporary re-analysis of Viking burials has illuminated the pretense of objectivity within western archaeological scholarship, which obfuscated the roles of ancient Viking women, representing the broader androcentric male assumptions that informed the historical narrative of Viking women.

The invisibility of women and reduction of gender roles in the archaeological record is exemplified within the historical construction of the Vikings, where the dominant focus on the historical myth of the heroic masculine Viking has obstructed the meaningful examination of Viking women. The continued propagation of the mythical representation of the Viking as bloodthirsty, pillaging warriors has created various distortions in the historical record. Historian Gareth Williams explores the conception of such a historical stereotype of the Vikings in his article, ‘*How do we know about the Vikings?*’ in which he examines how the first written sources that offered a description of Vikings were almost exclusively Christian historical sources like the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and similar Frankish and Irish Annals³. These sources could be expected to depict an unfavourable image of Vikings due to their invasions of the authors’ lands, as the North-Umbrian scholar Alcuin, for example, recorded after the raid in 793 AD on the monastery of Lindisfarne “never before has such terror

appeared in Britain”⁴. Williams accords that these contemporaneous accounts have been central to the creation of the “popular image of Viking atrocities”⁵ and contributed to their characterisation as aggressive male warriors. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the perceived glory of Viking age military conquests were used to cultivate the romantic image of the male Viking warrior in order to bolster Scandinavian nationalistic spirit, and it is in this period in which the homogenous Viking culture was established.⁶ The creation of this popular romantic image is exceedingly evident through Professor Eric Geijer’s poem ‘*The Viking*’ published in 1811. The poem (refer to appendix 1) describes a young boy’s transition into becoming a Viking, who “...ran from ... my mother” to take “in hand my father’s rusted sword” and embark on his life as “the sea-king” who participated in “the blood-games of war”⁷. The poem depicts the boy moving away from the domestic sphere of his mother to the military realm of his father, thus constructing the view of the Viking as the male aggressor intent on participating in warfare and conquest, a representation established by Romantic scholars of the era. The continued proliferation of such an uncritical historical focus on men is evident within Viking professor Lisbeth Kogstrand’s deconstruction of the work of early 20th century Viking historian Johannes Bronsted, where it is “...the absence of gender, men as well as women” that is striking, in which men are “not explicitly presented as men” but as “humans” or “people”⁸. This normative masculinity is reinforced by Viking historian Judith Jesch, in which she asserts “...in all the books written about the Viking Age, there is little mention of these females who undoubtedly existed” which “reinforces the impression that ‘vikings’ were adult males”⁹. Thus, throughout its various reconstructions, the image of the Viking has consistently remained “irredeemably male in the popular imagination” making the existence of a warrior Viking woman “logically impossible”¹⁰.

Furthermore, the assumption that archaeology can provide an accurate, objective examination of the past in its scientific analysis of material evidence has been prevalent since the late 19th century, and was epitomised by the emergence of processual archaeology¹¹ in the 1960s, which adopted a positivist, “scientific, objective, hypothesis-testing approach”¹² in examining evidence. However, this dominating focus on an objective, scientific-based examination resulted in a failure to meaningfully recognise the subjective role of social constructs such as gender as having a primary function in the examination of past cultures. Post-processualist archaeology emerged in the 1970s in Britain as a response to processualist archaeology, and marked a move towards “a renewed emphasis on culture, and an interest in material culture as not only reflecting but also as active in constituting social relations”¹³, a self-aware approach that displaced the previous supposition of objectivity. However, Norwegian archaeologist Ericka Engelstad has argued that post-processualist texts were nonetheless still marked by a distinct lack of understanding gender as historically, socially and symbolically constituted¹⁴. The rise of feminist archaeology in the 1980s, influenced by post-processualism’s “rejection of dispassionate objectivity”¹⁵ in archaeology, therefore endeavoured to highlight the dominant function of androcentricism in archaeological scholarship’s negation of gender, and worked to integrate gender into its discourse of subjectivity¹⁶. Lisbeth Kogstrand defines the role of androcentricism in archaeology in her article, *Is Androcentric Archaeology Really About Men?* as a “major interest in processes or activities presumed to mainly concern men or where men are supposed to be key actors”¹⁷, an underlying bias that is the result of the way history has been constructed by men, who possessed political and economic power¹⁸ and which resulted in “the lack of attention to women, female roles, tasks and objects”¹⁹. Therefore

archaeological scholarship, although seemingly objective, is similarly subjective to the distorting effects of androcentricism.

The growth of archaeology as a historical discipline since the 19th century can thus be meaningfully explored in relation to the masculinity of the historical narrative of the Vikings. Archaeological scholarship surrounding the Vikings has undoubtedly been underlined by the assumption that male Vikings held political and militaristic power, uncritically omitting any purposeful attention to the concept of 'Viking women', which "ignores the more complex historical pattern"²⁰. Such preconceptions were consequentially highlighted by feminist archaeology²¹, influenced by post-processual archaeology²² that emerged in the later 20th century to deconstruct the Viking myth, a deconstruction that was further demonstrated through the scientific re-analysis of burial sites. The re-analysis of Viking burial sites that were incorrectly sexed like the 2017 Birka grave²³, for example, exposed the androcentricism inherent within Viking history. What thus emerged was the necessity of a "feminist review" of male bias that has shaped traditional understandings of women's roles in Viking culture²⁴. The culminating deconstruction of the 'Viking myth' has highlighted the historical negligence towards the roles of women in Viking society for the dominating concentration upon male roles, which came to represent Viking society as a whole. The role of androcentricism in Viking archaeology thus neglects to consider the complexity of prehistoric social relations as gender is portrayed as "another variable that has been added to an unreflexive, positivist approach"²⁵ rather than recognizing gender as a fundamental constituent in the context of prehistoric societies, which would allow historians to understand the complexity of past people's practices of identity.²⁶ As a primary archaeological marker of gender relations, human burial sites from Viking society have inevitably fallen victim to such uncritical androcentric

presumptions of archaeologists. The high numbers of male burial sites uncovered in Scandinavia have supplemented the view that “men had power in Viking society”²⁷, however the process that determines the sex of such burial sites is often based on the analysis of the grave goods, and the presence of objects that are coded as masculine, such as swords, shields or spears, and conversely those considered feminine, such as jewelry and weaving artefacts, does not prove the gender of a burial²⁸. Rather, this act of determining the sex of a skeleton involves the projection of gendered cultural assumptions by the archaeologist analysing the grave²⁹. This is exemplified through the re-analysis of the burial site in Birka, Sweden in 2017³⁰ which confirmed the presence of a female skeleton, rather than the previously assumed male skeleton because of the militaristic grave goods. The re-analysis of the grave reflects how archaeologist’s claims are “as much based on the archaeologist’s assumptions about women as anything else”³¹. This resonates with historian Claassen’s observation that “When sex is assigned to a skeleton of unknown sex, it is a cultural act.”³² The emergence of critical disciplines in archaeology in the later 20th century has thus illuminated the historically distorting role androcentricism has played in the archaeological and historical construction of the masculine Viking myth.

Recent archaeological re-analysis of burial sites in Scandinavia and England have further demonstrated the inaccuracy of the historical representation of gender roles in Viking society and allowed for the reorientation of the historical narrative surrounding the role of Viking women. As Judith Jesch outlines, in the 1970s and 1980s the increase in archaeological activity marked the emergence of investigations that were used to reconstruct the previous representation of Vikings and develop a “broader definition of ‘Vikings’” that transcended the masculine Viking myth.

Historian Shane McLeod’s 2011 study of Viking Age burials in Eastern England, and

their relationship to the Norse migration to England, represents how such new archaeological investigations highlight and deconstruct the manner in which previous excavations operated through an androcentric lens. McLeod uncovered an almost fifty-fifty ratio of female migrants to males, which he argues "...should caution against assuming that the great majority of Norse migrants were male."³³ This evidence also casts doubt on the previous investigations that assigned gender to burial sites based on grave goods, which further illustrates how preconceptions regarding pre-modern women and armies have distorted how scholars view Norse settlement and acculturation. Such preconceptions thus uncritically exclude Viking women from militaristic positions in Viking society. McLeod further points to the fact that 'experts' in archaeology were surprised at finding female remains at an Iron Age hill fort³⁴, which reveals the deep entrenchment of gender norms in archaeological practice. The findings of researchers at the University of Oslo have reinforced these ideas; in their extraction of mitochondrial DNA from eighty Viking skeletons from Norway, they subsequently found that Norse women played a much more significant role in Viking settlement, especially in Britain, than was previously assumed, and thus points to the greater agency of Viking women in socio-political roles³⁵. Germaine Greer herself has echoed the fallibility of these masculine preconceptions, contending that archaeologists' analyses of gender in skeletons have resulted in a high frequency of "curious errors in ascription"³⁶. Archaeological findings published in the *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*³⁷ in 2017 also provide clear affirmation of such preconceptions within the historical narrative. The modern forensic re-analysis of the skeleton discovered in the 1970s in Birka, Sweden, termed Bj581 and assumed to be male, revealed in fact a female skeleton that was buried with a sword, an axe, a spear, arrows, a battle knife, shields and two horses, and supplementary to this grave material there were "gaming pieces – perhaps from hnefatafl,³⁸ a sort of precursor to

chess” which would “suggest the female warrior ... was a battle strategist”³⁹. The individual of Bj581 was previously determined to be a male “based on the assemblage of grave goods”⁴⁰, which reveal an uncritical reliance on gendered stereotypes rather than scientific analysis of the skeleton. Thus the revelation of such evidence of a female Viking warrior with a position of significant military importance is clearly demonstrative of the need to re-orientate the historical narrative of Viking women, and reconstruct the view perpetuated by Viking scholars who “have been reluctant to acknowledge the agency of women with weapons”⁴¹ within Viking society. These assumptions don’t just exclude any purposeful analysis of the potentially significant role women could have played in Viking society, but also “dilute our understanding of past societies and the enormous complexity of human achievements and activities”⁴². Thus, the contemporary discovery and re-analysis of human remains from Viking culture has been essential in exposing the deeply male-biased suppositions that have underpinned previous excavations of Viking burials, and allows for a meaningful re-orientation of the historical narrative towards accepting the greater agency of Viking women.

The historical narrative of the Vikings has previously focused centrally on the dominating historical myth of Vikings as aggressive male warriors who held the primary socio-political power, a construction that has excluded the narratives of female Vikings. Such an establishment of gender roles within Viking society has been inextricably underlined by the romantic cultivation of the Viking in the 18th and 19th centuries, which occluded the purposeful attention to women for a foremost examination of the concept of the male warrior Viking. These preconceptions were further proliferated throughout 20th century androcentric archaeology and historical scholarship that disregarded the role of gender as a main social variable and possessed

a distinct lack of critical self-awareness of its subjective interpretations. The scientific determination of female skeletons in burial sites previously assumed to be belonging to males, due merely to the militaristic nature of grave goods, thus highlights the inaccuracy of the prevailing assumptions of Viking women as politically and militaristically subordinate. The discovery of this new evidence, although not affirming the existence of a matriarchal race of female Viking warlords, does certainly signal the need for redirection. The prevailing historical gaze therefore, should be defined not by an androcentrism that ignores the social importance of Viking women, but emphasises a necessary critical awareness towards the implicit biases shaping previous historical narratives and interpretations of the past.

Appendix 1

Geijer, E 1811 (Translated by Kristina Andersson Bicher 2017), *The Viking*, Accessed 2 June 2018 <<http://www.harvardreview.org/?q=features/omniglots/viking>>

The Viking

When I was fifteen my hut grew cramped,
There where I lived with my mother.
Tending to goats made the days so long;
My mind was unsettled, in flux.
My thoughts and dreams wandered but nothing was sure,
Gone was the gladness I felt once before
 in the woods.

With a sudden urge, I rushed to the summit
Saw below me the ocean unbounded.
So lovely, what pleasure, the song of the waves,
Rising up from the froth and the spray.
Billowing waves come from far foreign lands,
No shackles can hold, nor ropes bind
 out at sea.

One morning from shore, I spotted a ship;
Into the bay it shot like an arrow.
My heart swelled and my mind grew fevered,
What was missing was clear to me now.
I ran from the goats, from my mother as well,
And the Viking took me aboard a ship
 bound for sea.

Forceful winds filled the sails;
We flew on the backs of the waves.
Into deepening blue, the mountaintops sank
I felt such a thrill; I was dauntless.
Taking in hand my father's rusted sword
I swore I would conquer for kingdom and country
 out at sea.

When I turned sixteen, I slew that Viking
Who dared scold me as spineless and weak.
I became the sea-king and the waters drew me
Straight into the blood-games of war.
When I stepped ashore, I won castles and palaces,
Gambled the spoils with my warrior band
 out at sea.

From horns we drained the dark must of mead,
Slaked our thirst on the storm-driven seas.
Riding the waves we ruled every coast—
In Valland, I found me a maid—
For three days she cried, but then was content,
Our wedding was held—a joyous event
out at sea.

Once even I ruled over countries and castles,
And drank under soot-darkened timbers,
Tended my kingdom, watched over my people,
And slept behind walls, behind locks.
It felt endless—this winter of home and hearth,
And though I was king, my world became cramped
by the sea.

I did nothing wrong, but could find no peace,
Besieged with requests for my aid,
To protect, like a fortress, the farmers' homes,
Like a lock on the beggars' sacks.
About fines and oaths, robbing and thieves
I'd heard my fill—how I longed to be far away
out at sea.

So I prayed—but the long winter finally ceased,
And the shores now were strewn with wildflowers,
And the waves once again playing their tune
Calling out: *to the sea, to the sea!*
Spring winds raced through valley and hill,
And the wild streams tumbled in delight
out to sea.

Gripped by some ancient, invisible bond,
I was lured by the rising waters,
Strew my riches all over the fields and towns,
And shattered my crown into shards.
Then poor as before, with a ship and a sword,
My future unknown, I resumed my Viking quest
out at sea.

Like the unbridled wind, we frisked and caroused
On the distant, rollicking surf.
We saw how people on all foreign coasts,
In the same way as us live and die.
Worries also take root when men settle down;
But the Viking path knows no regret
out at sea.

Once more, I stood watch with my warrior crew
for ships in the faraway blue.

Were Viking sails seen—then that meant blood;
If a merchant ship—that was free passage.
But a bloody victory the brave man is owed,
And Viking friendship is sealed with swords
out at sea.

If by day I stood on the rolling prow,
A shining future lay before me;
As calm as the swan in swaying reeds,
I would ride on the surge of waves.
My due was the bounty that happened my way,
Unfettered and free were my hopes
out at sea.

But if at night I stood on the rolling prow,
And heard the roar of a solitary wave,
It was surely the Norns, weaving their weft,
In a storm that shot right through space.
Like the fate of men are the swells that break:
Best to be ready for what may befall
out at sea.

I was twenty years old—then calamity struck,
The waters demanded my blood.
The sea knew it well, having drunk it before
Where the hottest battles raged.
The fervid heart races fast,
But soon will be cooled in the icy realm
of the sea.

But I don't regret that my days were numbered:
My journey was quick, then, but true.
There are many paths to the place of the gods;
And better to reach there soon.
The waves murmur their deathsong as they flow;
On them I've lived—and there my grave waits
out at sea.

...

So sings from a lonely mountain hall,
The shipwrecked Viking in the churning surf—
The ocean draws him down—
And the waves, the waves chant their song,
And the carefree wind keeps changing its course;
But the remembrance of valor *still lives*

Endnotes

- ¹ Engelstad, E 1991, 'Images of power and contradiction: Feminist theory and post-processual archaeology', *Antiquity*, vol 65, no. 248.
- ² McLeod, S 2011, 'Warriors and women: the sex ratio of Norse migrants to eastern England up to 900 AD', *Early Medieval Europe*, vol 19, no. 3, pp. 255-375.
- ³ Williams, G 2011, *BBC - History - Ancient History in depth: How do we know about the Vikings?* viewed 25 April 2018, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/vikings/evidence_01.shtml>.
- ⁴ Ibid
- ⁵ Ibid
- ⁶ Erenow, Reinventing the Vikings - The Vikings: A Very Short Introduction, viewed 2 June 2018, <<https://erenow.com/postclassical/the-vikings-a-very-short-introduction/12.html>>
- ⁷ Geijer, E 1811 (Translated by Kristina Andersson Bicher 2017), *The Viking*, Accessed 2 June 2018 <<http://www.harvardreview.org/?q=features/omniglots/viking>>
- ⁸ Kogstrand, L 2011, 'Is Androcentric Archaeology Really About Men? ', *Journal of the World Archaeological Congress*, vol 7, no. 1, pp. 56-74.
- ⁹ Jesch, J 1991, *Women in the Viking Age*. Suffolk: The Boydell Press
- ¹⁰ Ibid
- ¹¹ Formerly known as New Archaeology
- ¹² Engelstad, E 1991, 'Images of power and contradiction: Feminist theory and post-processual archaeology', *Antiquity*, vol 65, no. 248.
- ¹³ Ibid
- ¹⁴ Ibid
- ¹⁵ Brass, M. 2004. *Is the archaeology of gender necessarily a feminist archaeology?*. Accessed from the World Wide Web on 25 June 2018.
- ¹⁶ Ibid
- ¹⁷ Kogstrand, L 2011, 'Is Androcentric Archaeology Really About Men? ', *Journal of the World Archaeological Congress*, vol 7, no. 1, pp. 56-74.
- ¹⁸ Nordin, P 2005, 'Wealthy women and absent men- gender in early Iron Age burial-grounds in Ostergotland ', in TAAF Svenberg (ed.), *Dealing with the dead- Archaeological perspectives on prehistoric Scandinavian burial ritual*, Riksantikvarieambetet's Forlag.
- ¹⁹ Kogstrand, L 2011, 'Is Androcentric Archaeology Really About Men? ', *Journal of the World Archaeological Congress*, vol 7, no. 1, pp. 56-74.
- ²⁰ Jesch, J 1991, *Women in the Viking Age*. Suffolk: The Boydell Press
- ²¹ Feminist archaeology employed a feminist perspective in interpreting the past, foregrounding a focus on gender.
- ²² Post-processual archaeology sought to identify the forces that influenced variability in past human behavior and saw culture as varied and symbolic, rejecting scientific determinism.
- ²³ Hedenstierna Jonson C, KAZT 2017, 'A female Viking warrior confirmed by genomics', *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, vol 164, no. 4, pp. 853-860.

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- ²⁴ Adams, J, *The Lives of Women in the Viking Age: The role of critical feminist and historical assessment*, Accessed from the World Wide Web on 1st November 2018
<<http://wgst.athabascau.ca/awards/broberts/forms/Jessica.pdf>>.
- ²⁵ Geller, PL 2009, 'Identity and difference: complicating gender in archaeology', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol 38, pp. 65-81.
- ²⁶ Ibid
- ²⁷ Foss, AS 2013, *Don't underestimate Viking women*, viewed 25 April 2018,
<<http://sciencenordic.com/don't-underestimate-viking-women>>.
- ²⁸ Ibid
- ²⁹ Classen, C, ed 1992, 'Exploring Gender Through Archaeology', *American Anthropologist*, 95: pp 1017-1018
- ³⁰ Hedenstierna Jonson C, KAZT 2017, 'A female Viking warrior confirmed by genomics', *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, vol 164, no. 4, pp. 853-860.
- ³¹ Greer, G 1970, *The Female Eunuch*, London: MacGibbon and Kee
- ³² Classen, C, ed 1992, 'Exploring Gender Through Archaeology', *American Anthropologist*, 95: pp 1017-1018
- ³³ McLeod, S 2011, 'Warriors and women: the sex ratio of Norse migrants to eastern England up to 900 AD', *Early Medieval Europe*, vol 19, no. 3, pp. 255-375.
- ³⁴ Ibid
- ³⁵ Carrasco, S 2014, *DNA Retrieved From Viking Skeletons in Norway Suggest Women Were Vikings, Too*, Accessed from the World Wide Web on 20 January 2018, <<http://www.newhistorian.com/dna-retrieved-viking-skeletons-norway-suggest-women-vikings/2366/>>.
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- ³⁸ Ancient Scandinavian strategy board game
- ³⁹ Coccozza, P 2017, *Does new DNA evidence prove that there were female viking warlords?* | *Science*, viewed 31 November 2018, <<https://www.theguardian.com/science/shortcuts/2017/sep/12/does-new-dna-evidence-prove-that-there-were-female-viking-warlords>>.
- ⁴⁰ Hedenstierna Jonson C, KAZT 2017, 'A female Viking warrior confirmed by genomics', *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, vol 164, no. 4, pp. 853-860.
- ⁴¹ Hedenstierna Jonson C, KAZT 2017, 'A female Viking warrior confirmed by genomics', *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, vol 164, no. 4, pp. 853-860.
- ⁴² Norton, H 2017, *How the female Viking warrior was written out of history* | *Science* | *The Guardian*, viewed 31 November 2018, <<https://www.theguardian.com/science/2017/sep/15/how-the-female-viking-warrior-was-written-out-of-history>>

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