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Women Traders of the Viking Age: An Analysis of Grave Goods

by Emily Mierswa

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This essay is a revised version of a paper originally written for ANTH 797 (Archaeology of Power and Identity), taught by Prof. Eleanor Harrison-Buck in Spring 2016.

What does a Viking look like? Chances are, the image of a robust, seafaring male warrior appears in your head, adorned with a horned helmet and carrying metalworker weapons. Yet this stereotype of Viking identity is fast being debunked and re-shaped. In 2000, a *Time Magazine* article sought to revise the popular image of Vikings as pagan thieves by highlighting some of their lesser-known achievements. “The Vikings were indeed raiders, but they were also traders...they were democrats who founded the world's oldest surviving parliament...they [explored] North America some 500 years before Columbus” (Lemonick 2000). Who knew?

In fact, this “new” image of the Vikings had been common knowledge amongst archeologists for decades. Moreover, *Time's* image of Scandinavian lives during the Viking Age was hardly a complete one: all the achievements mentioned in the article were credited to male members of society. Norse people of the Viking Age have long been thought to follow distinct and rigid gender roles. This image of a male-dominated culture was reinforced in the *Time* article: “By day the women cooked, cleaned, sewed and ironed, using whalebone plaques as boards and running a heavy stone or glass smoother over the seams of garments” (Lemonick 2000).



Figure 1. Viking Box-Shaped Brooch (Walters Art Museum/Wikimedia Commons).

As we are learning from archaeological studies, however, this picture of the role of women in the Viking society is nowhere near complete. In particular, goods recovered from female graves near important trade centers have shed new light on the important *economic* roles of women traders as members of Viking society. This essay explores both the intrinsic significance of these findings as well as what they reveal about the power of gender archeology to unearth new perspectives, not just upon Viking

women but also—and more broadly—upon the societies to which they belonged. Notably, the study of burial representation has shed light on female Viking identities beyond the domestic sphere by revealing alternative roles that were available to women as traders. To explore these alternative roles, this paper draws on recent literature that relies on grave goods and deposits of what may be called “engendered female artifacts.”

Gender Archaeology: A Brief Intellectual History

Before a more thorough understanding of women in Viking society could develop, women first had to be recognized as a part of the archaeological past. Most work up until very recently has focused on this original phase of study—“finding women”—more specifically, identifying the traces left by women within material culture. This was the original goal of gender archaeology, emerging from the first wave of anthropological feminist literature in the 1970s and early parts of the second wave of feminism (Ortner 1974; Slocum 1975).

Initial investigations in gender archaeology homogenized women’s roles and were largely confined to examining women’s relationships with men and others in the domestic group (Conkey 1991; Stig Sørensen 2009). The second wave of feminism in the 1980s and 90s moved beyond ‘finding women’, as archaeologists began to envision the identities of Scandinavian women more expansively (Stig Sørensen 2012, Conkey and Spector 1984; Dommasness 1982, 1987)). The third wave of feminism in the late 1990s addressed more complex questions regarding masculinity, femininity, strict gender binaries and Western stereotypes, among other issues. As more information on gendered roles, status differences, and other intersecting identities became available, archaeologists began to bring complexity to their inferences about how past societies functioned. Today, archaeologists make extensive use of gender theories that were laid out as part of the third wave feminist movement. Still, as the *Time* magazine article shows us, the “finding women” approach to archaeology has been slow to change in popular circles.

The gender archaeology of Northern Europe generally follows the evolution of gender archaeology globally but has some unique features. Women were not considered to be influential nor important members of society in the Viking Age until significant gender archaeological theorizing was done in the 1990s. As Conkey (2007) and others have noted, most authors of identity studies research in gender archaeology are women (also see Stig Sørensen 2013, 397). However, the beginnings of gender archaeology in Northern Europe were informed less by identity studies than by the centrality of Marxist perspectives, as well as by interest in women’s roles in the job market throughout Scandinavian history (Stig Sørensen 2013, 400). Women’s contributions to household income and subsistence were emphasized over their social status or other occupational roles.

The first wave of feminism brought a heightened awareness of female underrepresentation in the archaeological record of Northern Europe (Stig Sørensen 2013). Later during the second wave, a general “add-women-and-stir” trend emerged in excavations and in scholarly literature where women’s presence and actions were acknowledged in largely male-centric terms. It was not until the 1990s that “the distinction between sex and gender began to be criticized as the concept of ‘gender’ and later ‘sex’ was problematized” (Stig Sørensen 2013, 403). This shift led to a turning point in the development of gender archaeology. Moving beyond the simple quest to find women in male-centered terms, a more wide-ranging set of conversations began to address several different aspects of female identity that could influence a woman’s life course and occupational roles in Viking society and culture. For instance, Thedéen (2012) emphasizes the issue of intersectionality (or multiple simultaneous identities), noting that all women cannot be lumped together.

Most recently, work has even begun to focus on individuals. As Marie Louise Stig Sørensen states in her review of gender archaeology in Northern Europe, these trends “have allowed gender archaeology’s traditional preoccupation with burial evidence to gain new significance as it enables a closer focus on the body, the life course, and the way in which individual identities are formed through life stories” (Stig Sørensen 2013, 405; see also Stalsberg 2001). Still, the application of feminist theory to the Viking Age lags notably behind gender archaeology elsewhere. It is important to note that the number of scholars in Norse

bronze. They are beautifully molded into knotted patterns. Tortoise or oval brooches were an everyday item of wear for adult women. One brooch was placed on each shoulder of a woman to hold together the straps of her dress. These brooches were often attached to each other with metal-linked chains or ornate sets of beads strung together. Oval brooches are comparable to modern chain collar pins.

Tortoise brooches were found not only at urban trading centers. Quoting Jansson (1987, 790; 2000; 129), Thedéen notes that because tortoise brooches' representation "encompasses rural farms, it is reasonable to assume that the objects were brought there as possessions of permanently settled Scandinavian women ((Thedéen 2012, 76). Box brooches are more representative of females of all ages in trading and urban settlements (Kershaw 2009; Thedéen 2012, 62). These brooches were developed and used between 800 and 1000 AD. The box brooch was a single brooch that attached in the center of a woman's dress, likely to hold together and attach outerwear. They were heavily-crafted molded or carved bronze pins (Jesch 1991, 15; Thedéen 2012). If undisturbed within the burial context, they are often found in the center of the chest or below the chin.

As time went on, the use of these brooches in Viking settlements expanded beyond their functional purpose (Thedéen 2012, 70). Such objects "reflect[ed] the rank and status of the dead woman, or the tasks she had undertaken in this life and thus the tasks it was expected she would undertake in the past" (Jesch 1991, 19). While a direct correlation between life and burial representation is not the only way to look at grave goods, this interpretative view can speak to what kind of life women in the Viking age had. One key that has been proposed for understanding women's status in trade is the hypothesized secondary use of brooches, which sometimes appear in a particular form within the burial context: weighed down with lead filling (Jesch 1991; Thedéen 2012, 74).

The British Isles were the first lands to be visited by the Viking expeditions and in early settlement phases of the ninth, or early tenth, century (Jesch 1991, 36). Scandinavian settlement burials on the Orkney Islands of Scotland were densely populated by Norse people throughout the Viking age (Jesch 1991). At times, the Scandinavian immigrant populations displaced the natives. One specific cemetery on the island of Westray indicates that women traveled to Viking settlements beyond Scandinavia. Here, six of the seventeen recognizable graves are identified by oval brooches (Jesch 1991, 37). Early on in the Viking diaspora, there is little scope for distinguishing women from the group. However, women's roles and occupations in later settlements can be explored with a more exhaustive look at grave goods.

Early identifications of women at settlements and trading hubs did not spark a conversation about women in the Viking age. This changed as successive waves of gender theory came to influence archaeology. Studies of Varangian women (Scandinavians who settled in current day Russia during the Viking age) began to look at ways in which women were able to gain social standing outside of the house or farm. Anne Stalsberg's (2001) analysis of graves and weighing equipment found at sites that were connected with urban centers (and where women were present) suggest a possible association between women and trade (Stalsberg 2001, 73). Scales and weights are used in most trades to ensure correct payment and distribution of goods. The presence of scales in graves suggests that the women who were buried there had been active in trade and the economy during their lifetimes. While a study limited to Russian settlements is not enough to draw conclusions about Viking women as a whole, it is relevant to note that women all around Scandinavia and Norse

settlements, have been found to be buried with scales and weighing equipment (Stalsberg 2001; Stig Sørensen 2009, 261). In addition, other recent work also points to trade as an important source of status for women.

Recent fieldwork at Viking settlements at Gotland, an island in the Baltic Sea, has yielded evidence of trade and of the manipulation of Scandinavian ornaments. Burial sites with manipulated gendered goods including Gotland and Fyrkat in Denmark and Birka in Sweden. Fyrkat, a burial ground outside the coastal fortification, was found to contain box brooches of gilded silver and niello (a late Iron Age engraved metal of copper, silver, and lead). This unique find does not include a fastener, suggesting that it was used for a purpose other than that of a garment pin (Thedéen 2012, 68). Other manipulations include the addition of a chain to suggest a function as a pendant. Such an object was found at Grobina in Latvia, a site that can be linked to trade (Thedéen 2012, 67-74). Gräslund (2010) demonstrated that Scandinavian ornament production occurred at Viking settlements in a culturally consistent manner throughout the Viking age. However, the manipulated box brooches at the above sites suggest that new functions for traditional Scandinavian ornamentations emerged that were unique to trade centers.



Figure 3. Viking Box and Scale (Berig/Wikimedia Commons).

The repurposing of box brooches from clothing pins to weights offers the key to new interpretations of Viking women. Thedéen has analyzed a number of lead-filled box brooches that were classified as stray finds from a 1968 excavation at Hedeby, Germany and were not closely examined during the original excavation (Thedéen 2012, 74). Hedeby was a well known early trade center for Vikings, which means that the finds offer direct evidence of the link between trade and altered female ornamentation. This link is also supported by an excavation at the Viking settlement of Lund, Sweden, which yielded a box brooch outside of a burial site (Thedéen 2012, 67). Occurring in a unique context of a public square, the box brooch offers evidence of female presence at these main public areas. This would not be surprising if central squares had also served as trading locations.

The discovery of weighted female gender goods (Thedéen 2012) and Varangian scales at female graves (Stig Sørensen 2009) provides evidence for an assessment of Viking women's roles in trade at urban and trading centers. While these case studies are mostly reinterpretations of older excavations (thus often lacking important notes on context) they are based on reputable evidence and add much to our understanding of the lives of Viking women.

Perceiving Vikings Differently: The Potential of Gender Archaeology

Over the last twenty years (and especially in the last five) Viking gender roles have been more carefully studied and women are now being perceived as having a hand in trade (Jesch 1991; Stalsberg 2001; Stig Sørensen 2009; Thedéen 2012). Despite these advances, the field of gender archaeology in the Viking Age is still in its infancy, and much remains to be explored concerning women's status and roles in Viking settlements and trade. Building on third wave feminism, gender archaeologists today view women's roles in far more complex terms that take into account male roles, status, age, and many other factors (Stig Sørensen 2009; 2013). Increasingly, they are viewed in a way that explores that intersectionality of their many identities having to do with trading, farming, rank, religion, and age. Yet Back Danielsson's (2012) finding (based on a study of publication trends in

archaeology journals) that gender studies are marginalized in archaeology clearly extends to Viking studies as well. Thus, there is a clear need for more gender archaeology studies, based on the ideas of third wave feminism, that can offer fresh interpretations of the lives of Viking women.

This paper's evaluation of grave goods from settlements that were part of trading networks suggests that Viking women had significant roles in trade and in the urban centers where it took place. Women were laid to rest with scales and weighted brooches that represent their work as traders during life, as well as goods that were sometimes included for use in the afterlife. In short, the image of a brutish male warrior returning home after a merciless raid of foreign lands should not be the image of Vikings that automatically comes to mind. Rather, Vikings were multifaceted people who had many identities beyond that of the male fighter, warrior, and thief. In particular, the public's understanding of the Vikings should be broadened to include women's various roles in the community beyond the domestic sphere. Gender archaeology has a vital role to play in enhancing our understanding of Viking women and their contributions to their respective societies.

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