

## Violence-motivated far-travel - The case of Auðr djúpúðga<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Medieval Old Norse-Icelandic literature recounts numerous stories of men travelling far and wide to all the geographical corners of the world for various reasons. It is very rare that these accounts narrate about travel by female characters. As in Old Norse-Icelandic literature women are often confined to *innan stokks* (i.e. indoors; the household sphere), whereas men venture *utan stokks* (i.e. outdoors; the worldly sphere). Even so, there are exceptions to this rule like for example Guðriðr Þorbjarnardóttir who in *Eiríks saga rauða* leads an expedition to Greenland and later on undertakes a pilgrimage to Rome.<sup>2</sup> Most of the travel-accounts that feature women deal with similar pilgrimages to the south or with violence-motivated travel to the west. The latter in particular illustrate how travel/migration caused by violence or violent conflicts can empower people, more specifically empower women. These accounts are rarely extensive and as such are often excluded from studies on this particular subject.

This paper will therefore focus on one of these stories, namely that of Auðr/Unnr djúpúðga Ketilsdóttir. Hers illustrates that exceptional circumstances call for extreme and exceptional measures in which women can travel and even play a significant role. Her travels are transmitted through *Landnámabók* and several *Íslendingasögur* (namely *Laxdæla saga*, *Eiríks saga rauða* and *Eyrbyggja saga*). According to these sources she makes three journeys during her lifetime: she travels from Norway to somewhere on the Hebrides, from Ireland to Scotland, and from Scotland she sets sail to Iceland via the Orkneys and the Faroe Islands. In this paper I examine violence-motivated travel with a focus on the role of women, in particular Auðr's role. I hope to show that journeys motivated by violence or violent conflicts can have a positive outcome and are not always depicted in a negative light. Far-travel motivated by violence has the potential of empowering women. Auðr's role transformed from a passive role – a young woman who was used as a pawn by her father – into an active role – a widow who carved out a distinctive role for herself. The hostile environments and the tumultuous times during the Settlement Age meant that many fathers, husbands, sons and brothers were either away or slain. In the absence of these male relatives, women had to assume heavier responsibilities as heads of family. One of them, Auðr, could rise to the

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<sup>1</sup> I've taken my inspiration from John Shafer who has written a lot on the subject of travel and the different motivations to travel in the sagas. See 'Bibliography' for more extensive list of references.

<sup>2</sup> Nancy Marie Brown has written a book on Guðriðr and her voyages: *The far traveler: Voyages of a Viking Woman*.

occasion and stand her ground as an independent woman being remembered in our memory as one of the most prominent and powerful settlers of Iceland.

Þessir landnámsmenn eru gófgastir í Vestfirðingafjórðungi: Hroskell, Skalla-Grímr, Sel-Þórir, Björn enn austræni, Þórólfur Mostrarskegg, Auður djúpauðga, [...]. (*Landnámabók* 1986 : 209)

These were the leading settlers of the West Quarter: Hrosskel, Skalla-Grim, Sel-Thorir, Bjorn the Eastener, Thorolf Mostur-Beard, Aud the Deep-Minded, [...]. (Pálsson 1972: 80)

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