

# A remarkable woman

## Painting a picture of Auðr djúpúðga Ketilsdóttir or Aud the Deep-Minded

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### Abstract

[O]k þykkjask menn varla dæmi til finna, at einn kvenmaðr hafa komizk í brott í því líkum ófriði með jafnmiklu fé ok föruneysi; má af því marka, at hon var mikit afbragð annarra kvenna.<sup>1</sup>

(Sveinsson 1934: 7)

“[W]hat an exceptional woman Unn [i.e. Auðr] is” (Kunz 2008: 6), is something all the sources on Auðr djúpúðga Ketilsdóttir seem to agree on. Yet, any attempt to draw an image of Auðr can prove a source of controversy. She is without exception one of the greatest women in the Old Norse literature, yet what we know of her life could be written on the back of a postcard (she lived to be about 66)<sup>2</sup>. What is particularly frustrating is that the biggest part of her life has so far yielded only two historical documents that name her. The first of these is a record documenting the colonization or land taking of Iceland between 870 and 930, the other a historical work written by Ari Þorgilsson or Ari the Learned recounting the early history of Iceland, respectively *Landnámabók* and *Íslendingabók*. The oldest extant manuscript of *Landnámabók* was written down by Sturlu Þórðarsson in the thirteenth century. The oldest surviving manuscript of *Íslendingabók* was recorded in 1120. So we can see Auðr only through the eyes of those who lived a couple of centuries later. This scarcity of knowledge could lead to a lot of speculations. However, the later years of Auðr's life are in fact relatively well documented, for someone of her gender. For the time when she was an aged widow there are a number of sagas bearing on that period of her life. Of these, the most important one is *Laxdæla saga*. Auðr sets the standard for all the other female characters who feature in this saga. When Auðr is called exceptional, is this because of her looks, her personality or something else entirely? In this paper a fresh look at the limited range of historical and semi-historical documents relating to the period from her birth until circa 900 - the year in which she passed away – may offer some interesting clues to this woman's life and may help us to understand why she was so remarkable in the eyes of historians and writers from the twelfth century onwards.

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<sup>1</sup> Translation: She took along all her kinsmen who were still alive, and people say it is hard to find another example of a woman managing her escape from such a hostile situation with as much wealth and so many followers. It shows what an exceptional woman Unn was. (Kunz 2008: 6)

<sup>2</sup> Her estimated date of birth is 834, while the year of her death is estimated to be around 900.

## Bibliography

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