



## Breaking the Boundaries: Interdisciplinary Research Approaches & Methods

# Take a Seat: The High-Seat as a Dual- Gendered Space in pre-Christian Scandinavia

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**Abstract:** *Hásæti* (“the high-seat”) may represent more of a shared gender space in pre-Christian Scandinavia than previously understood. The connectivity between gender and space has been re-analysed in both archaeology and history, but usually as separate disciplines. This paper approaches *hásæti* using both archaeological and historical analyses to explore the mingling of authoritative space and gender. Such an approach is paramount in creating a clearer image of pre-Christian Scandinavia, from the people who believed in the Old Norse pantheon to the gods themselves.

The mythological material in both *Snorra Edda* and *Eddukvæði* demonstrate cases where a male sits alone in the high-seat position with a female approaching him or the male and female are sitting in conference as equals on *hásæti*. Further, in *Heimskringla*, a female and male share *hásæti* as a means of bond-making. Both the mythological and historical accounts suggest that space transforms as both male and female intermingle on *hásæti* together. In the archaeological material, the Lejre figurine has been interpreted as masculine or feminine but rarely seen as a conjoining of both, although the image has a dual-gendered expression. With this inter-disciplinary approach, the dual-gendered seated image further suggests *hásæti* to be a shared gender space, and this shared gender suggests the granting of god-like authority.



With this approach, an expansion of our understanding of *hásæti* reveals not only that authoritative space was shared by male and female genders, but that it transformed the space and the abilities of individuals when both take seats as equals.

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**Keywords:** *Hásæti*, Seats, Gender, Ceremony, Hall

## 1 Introduction

Chairs and seating positions vary from mediocre to the most heightened political standing. In the context of pre-Christian Scandinavia, important emphasis is found on one's seated positioning in a hall space: this importance is directly connected to how far or close you are to the lord, jarl, king, chieftain, and so on (Burström, 2019; Byock, 1993; Enright, 1996; Steinsland, 2008; Sundqvist, 2010). Whether a person is even allowed to enter a hall building to be seated or is left outside is not only a commentary on being a part of the party, but also more closely a commentary on being a part of the society, ritual, and communion with the Other World in Old Norse literature (Eriksen, 2013; 2019:562-70). While previous research of the texts acknowledges the significance of seating position, when the phrase "high-seat" is brought up, it is held as an equivalent of saying the "king's seat". Viking Age re-enactments will often have a sort of raised platform with the king at the centre front, occasionally accompanied by smaller chairs equidistant behind the king's seat, forming a triangle shape. However, research by various academics suggests that the space may not have actually been in this shape at all.

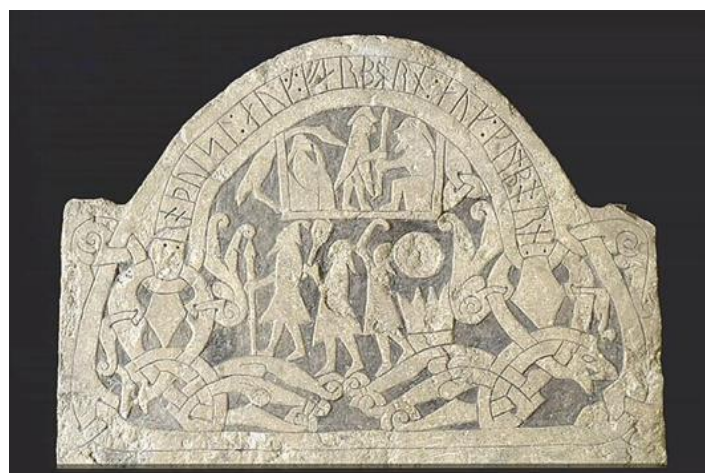


Figure 1: Sanda Kyrka picture stone (Sweden) (Bengt A lundberg/Riksantikvarieämbetet, licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 2.5 Generic license <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5/deed.en>)



One example is the Sanda Kyrka picture stone (Figure 1). In the carved image, a male-dressed figure and female-dressed figure sit looking directly at each other while another male-dressed figure gives the seated male-dressed figure a spear-like object. They are separated by a box at the top of the image. This raised space, usually referred to as “the high-seat/throne/king’s seat”, will be referred to as *hásæti* for the remainder of this article. This image is one of many examples in this article which demonstrates *hásæti* to be a shared space rather than a single chair for the king.

## 1 Methodology

The phrase “Viking Age Scandinavia” has been used in various contexts for various reasons. This research will refer to the dates acknowledged in modern Scandinavia as the Viking Age (700-1066) instead of the dates used by the United Kingdom and United States of America (793-1066). The modern Scandinavian data range is defined by internal Scandinavian events, while the dates stated by the UK/USA are based on the raid on Lindisfarne, an external event. Since this research covers only Scandinavia proper, it will utilise Scandinavian dates.

This research will focus on the following countries: Norway and Iceland for the literature, and for the archaeology Norway, Denmark, and Sweden. The Viking Age mythology was originally recorded predominantly in Iceland. The source for the more historical accounts will be *Heimskringla*, best known as the Saga of the Norwegian Kings. It should be noted here that a large bulk of the mythology was recorded in a post-Christianized Scandinavia by Snorri Sturluson. This means that the mythological sources should be taken with a grain of salt, since the mythologies may have been recorded with certain biases from Snorri’s Christian outlook on his culture’s pagan origins. To try to balance this possible issue, *Eddukvæði*, a compilation of poems on the mythology which both agree and disagree with Snorri’s prose, will also be used. This method will help give a clearer picture to the contexts surrounding *hásæti*. Further, this article will approach the literature not as concrete evidence, but as possible clues to what *hásæti* may have represented in the historical past. *Heimskringla*, the historical account, was also written by Snorri Sturluson. The purpose of using this particular compilation is its consistent reference to men and women sitting on *hásæti*. Research



could extend beyond these two sources, but they are sufficient enough support to broaden the current narrow views on *hásæti*; so, for the purpose of this article, these two sources are adequate.

The archaeological area covered in this research is the entirety of mainland Scandinavia. Although this may be seen as a conflicting difference between the approaches to literature and archaeology, the reason for this approach is that archaeology will often refer to the chair figurines found as the “seeress’s seat” although they are found in separate parts of Scandinavia. The danger with using this phrase is that it creates a scenario where all chair figurines signify a “seeress” when that is not necessarily the only possibility. Further, the phrase creates a standard of belief for all Scandinavia, which contradicts the knowledge that each community functioned separately from the other in practices, beliefs, and rituals. This article’s findings, based on the literature, differs from this interpretation. To broaden the interpretation past the phrase the “seeress’s seat”, this article’s approach to archaeology will tackle the compiled data referring to the chair figurines that are found throughout Scandinavia. It is fully recognised that the literature does not establish any overarching theories about the entirety of Scandinavia with the meaning of these chair figurines. This article does present a fuller possibility with the addition of literary research to back up the theory. To present this research, first archaeology will be discussed, followed by the literature, and a conclusion on how the interpretation for the popular “seeress’s seat” broadens when seeing the object through an interdisciplinary lens.

## 1.1 Historiography

In both the sagas and mythology, the texts referring to *hásæti* describe a definitive space that is raised higher than ground level, in which at least one person is present. However, just as the Sanda Kyrka picture stone shows (Figure 1), the space can be occupied by both a male or female. Research acknowledges this in literary and historical fields as far as translations are concerned, but further discussion of what this means spatially is needed. Most scholarship in archaeology suggests that chair figurines or seated positions are, due to their connections to females, exclusively symbols of “seeress” seats, but an alternative interpretation of the objects suggests that the seats



are symbolic of something beyond just the “seeress” (Jessen and Majland, 2021). Due to the different interpretations of the seated images, this paper will use an interdisciplinary approach using written records, mythology, and archaeology to show that *hásæti* was a space with some form of autonomy attached to it which could transform the surrounding space depending on who sat on it. It will also include an analysis of what sharing *hásæti* meant for a male and female. The discussion will begin with archaeology and the theories established by previous researchers. This will be followed by an examination of the literary evidence referring to *hásæti*, and how this expands the idea of the “seeress’s seat” in archaeology. The analysis will end with a conclusion on the subject of seats, and how they are a shared space rather than dominantly meant for a single, male figure.

## 2 Archaeology

### 2.1 Brief Historiography

Archaeologists have been fascinated with the chair figurines and plenty of examples of seated figurines have been found. The most popular and often referenced is the Lejre figurine (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Lejre Figurine, held by the Lejre Museum (photo by author)

This figurine is an important discovery as most chair figurines do not have individual on them, with Lejre being an exception. The interpretation of this figurine has varied, with suggestions from it being Óðinn to it being a female sitting on Óðinn’s seat. The discussions vary because of the gendered images on the figurine. For example, the figurine wears traditionally female garb while one eye is rubbed away. This essay’s interpretation of this object will come in the concluding section. Although the



interpretation of these objects has varied in the past, a more recent popularised phrase referring to them as the “seeress’s seat” has become the norm (Burström, 2019; Christensen, 2014; Jessen and Majland, 2021; Price, 2019). The reason why they continue to be called the “seeress’s seat” in archaeology is due to the fact that they are mainly found in female graves. Although this is a reasonable suggestion, with an interdisciplinary approach using the literature, the seated figurines suggest a meaning that extends beyond just the “seeress” figure.

The bulk of the archaeological data comes from interdisciplinary research done by Mads Dengsø Jessen and Kamilla Ramsøe Majland (2021) in which they have updated a previous compilation of data on the seated figurines (Section 3.2).

## 2.2 Data

There are a few trends to take into account in the data of the figurines found. Chair figurines have been found in various locations and contexts as shown in the data compiled by Jessen and Majland (2021:4), provided below.

### Denmark

Find location	Catalogue identifier	Shape	Material	Context
Bornholm	NMI, 22580	Barrel	Silver	Hoard
Fyrkat	NMI, D165-1966	Barrel	Silver	Grave, female
Gravlev	Dnf. 10/04	Barrel	Silver	Hoard
Gudme	FSM 205/X55	Box	Silver	Settlement
Mysselhøjgård	ROM 6410PX455	Box	Silver	Settlement



Nybølle	C53078	Box	Silver	Detector find
Tolstrup	NMI, C6676	Box	Silver	Hoard

### 2.2.1 Germany

Find location	Museum identifier	Shape	Material	Context
Hedeby I	ALM KS Hb W394	Box	Silver	Grave, female
Hedeby II	SH1979-221.1	Barrel	Bone	Private stray find

### 2.2.2 Sweden

Find location	Museum identifier	Shape	Material	Context
Barshalder	SHM 32181	Barrel	Amber	Grave, female
Birka Bj. 632	SHM 34000	Barrel	Silver	Grave, female
Birka Bj. 844	SHM 34000	Box	Silver	Grave, female
Birka, Bj. 968	SHM 34000	Barrel	Silver	Grave, female
Eketorp	ÖLM 224617	Box	Silver	Hoard
Folkeslunda	SHM 35077/59	Barrel	Antler	Grave, female
Fölhagen A	SHM 3547	Barrel	Silver	Hoard



Föhlagen B	SHM 3547	Barrel	Silver	Hoard
Sandgårde	SHM 21187	Barrel	Bronze	Grave, ?
Store Ihre	SHM 22917:242B	Barrel	Amber	Grave, female
No context	SHM876	Barrel	Bronze	None

Find location	Museum identifier	Shape	Material	Context
Sarpsborg	C62189	Barrel	Silver	Detector find
Agder	Not yet registered	Box	Silver(?)	Detector find

Below (Figure 3) is a map of the above information with the female graves in red to show the connection between the figurines and females. The second most common find context is within hoards (grey), the third from metal detectors (silver), the fourth within settlements (green), and the fifth stray finds (black).

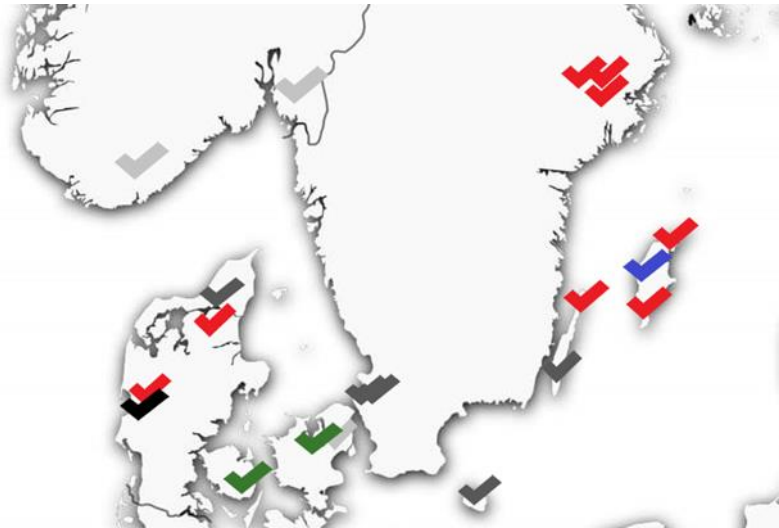
Figure 3: Map of distribution of artefacts given in Table 1 (Jessen and Majland, 2021). Modified by author from original





image [Outline Map of Scandinavia with Countries](#), SuperColoring, licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported license <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>

## 2.3 Data interpretations



From the data above, there are a few things to point out. Firstly, the most common finds of these figurines are in connection to female graves. Secondly, the figurines are mostly cast in silver. Lastly, the finds are mainly found in southern areas throughout Scandinavia. A few conclusions can be made from these points. The chair figurines being largely cast from silver suggests that the chair figurines were valued during the Viking Age. Figurines made of wood or more degradable material could have been made previously but wearable chair figurines became more popular during the Viking Age (e.g., Christensen, 2014). That this trend did not spread beyond southern Scandinavia is noteworthy since the common central places were found in southern Scandinavia, meaning that “seats of power” were literally and figuratively in the same places (Hedeager, 2002; Sundqvist, 2011). That the finds are linked to female graves throughout southern Scandinavia is also significant, as in archaeological literature, it is the main support for the distinctive name the “seeress’s seat”. However, with the information gathered from the literature and combining it with the archaeological record, the “seeress’s seat” continuously proves to be a much more complicated term.



## 3 Literature

### 3.1 Introduction

Turning to the literature, the Old Norse language surrounding “high seats” needs to be discussed. To do so, I will first establish the issues with translation from Old Norse to English with the phrase “high seat” specifically. To begin, Old Norse often uses synonyms or poetic devices (kennings) to reference the same thing but using different language. For example, in a single poem, the kennings **heitu gjalfr unda** (“by the hot surge of wounds”) and **varmt qlðr vitnis** (“the warm ale of the wolf”) are both used to refer to “blood” (Gade, 2009). This explains why in some translations from Old Norse to English, translators will use the kenning, “by the hot surge of wounds”, and others will use the meaning, “blood”. Often, Old Norse translations will include words or phrases with synonymous meanings (Gunnell, 2008; Ross, 2005; 2016). The English translations for “high-seat” and “throne” treat the Old Norse in a similar way. However, this analysis has discovered that in the case of “high seats” and “thrones”, the context around the original Old Norse words show that these words are actually not interchangeable; the way the Old Norse words are presented suggests that each specifically named object had a particular purpose. Below is a discussion of the different Old Norse words that have been translated into either “high seat” or “throne” in English.

### 3.2 Old Norse Words Translated Into “High Seat”

There is a list of words which have been found in various contexts that, although translated as a high seat/throne, prove that the English terms are not synonymous. Since the number of words meaning “a-seated-position” are quite vast, this section will focus on a few words with specific contexts indicating seats-of-significance. A few examples of some Old Norse words translated to “high seat/throne” from *Eddukvæði* include: **qndvegi** from *Atlakviða* (stanza 36); **gullnum stóli** from *Hávamál* (stanza 105); **rqkstóla** in *Vqluspá* (a word which, according to the *Skaldic Project* (2022), only appears in *Vqluspá*) (stanzas 6, 9, 24, 26); and **Hleiðrar stóli** from *Gróttasqngr* (stanza 20) (Kristjánsson and Ólason, 2014). Although the words are translated as either “high-seat” or “throne”, the contexts surrounding each object are different. To explain, the



phrase “*gullnum stóli*” found in *Hávamál* is referring to Gunnlǫð, a female *Jǫtnar* (a race of extraordinary beings that often oppose the gods who are called *Æsir/Vanir*). In this context, she sits in a cave to guard the mead of poetry, and from this position she offers Óðinn the mead in a sacred ceremony (Crawford, 2015; Faulkes and Barnes, 2007; Jakobsdóttir, *Gunnlǫð and the Precious Mead*; Kristjánsson and Ólason, 2014; Larrington, 2014; Sturluson, *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar Nafnapulur og Skáldatal*). In contrast, when the word “*ǫndvegi*” from *Atlakviða* appears, it is referring to a mortal’s honourable seat in a Hall. In this stanza, **ǫndvegi** is used to mock the hero. The use of the word in other contexts suggest it refers to the seat of honour for the most important male in the Hall. However, in this scene, it is one of the last words to be said in a horrible revelation that Atli has just unknowingly eaten his two sons while sitting on *ǫndvegi* (Kristjánsson and Ólason, 2014). Although both words are translated as “high seat/throne”, the social contexts are completely different. The place, sex, and race of both individuals are specifically different, and support that the words likely were not synonymous to each other.

This paper will focus on one word that is literally translated as “high” (*há*) and “seat” (*sæti*), which is *hásæti*. *Hásæti* is used throughout all genres of Old Norse literature from the family sagas and the mythology, to the king’s sagas. *Ǫndvegi* appears often as well but it does not appear in the mythological content. It is hypothesised that *hásæti* is used rather than *ǫndvegi* because *hásæti* is a word that is directly connected to both the pantheon and mortals, meaning that its context has a deeper meaning than just a political seat of significance but is actually a symbol of god-like power and influence. Further, *hásæti* in the mythology and sagas show the space to be more than just a singular seat for a singular person with a singular purpose (Burström, 2019; Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1996; Gardęła, 2014; Sundqvist, 2010).

### 3.3 Mythology

In the Old Norse pantheon, the only *hásæti* that appears in the mythology is called *Hliðskjálf*. The mythology attributes *Hliðskjálf* as exclusively Óðinn’s *hásæti*. Although the myths specify Óðinn’s ownership, there are varying interpretations of what that ownership entails. The main questions are does this ownership also mean exclusive



rights to the space, and what information can we glean from the mythology about the space itself? According to Snorri Sturluson's *Gylfaginning*, Óðinn dominates *Hliðskjálf* to the point that Freyr is punished with love-sickness for Gerðr because he sat on *Hliðskjálf* to look out into the world (Kristjánsson and Ólason, 2014). Although Snorri has attributed Freyr's punishment as the result of an intrusion and overstepping boundaries, *Eddukvæði: Skírnismál* does not hold the same sentiment. *Skírnismál* simply states that when Freyr sits on *Hliðskjálf*, he sees Gerðr and falls in love with her. Freyr pursuing Gerðr in *Eddukvæði* is only a result of sitting on *Hliðskjálf* rather than a punishment (Kristjánsson and Ólason, 2014). Although differences between the two versions of the same myth are not uncommon when comparing Snorri's recorded myths and the poetry, this still suggests that *Hliðskjálf* is open to anyone who wishes to sit on it but perhaps only under the owner's express permission. Another conclusion gathered from these two versions is that Óðinn's ownership does not mean he has exclusive rights to the power *Hliðskjálf* contains. The space holding the power and not exclusively Óðinn's further supports that *hásæti* is a space that can be used by anyone at any time for any purpose. Thus, the seat as an object holds power and significance, and not necessarily Óðinn alone.

Although Freyr sitting on *Hliðskjálf* is interpreted as an invasion, when looking at the rest of the mythology it is impossible to conclude that this space is only to be used by the owner. There is another myth that shows *hásæti* being used by two people at the same time for the same purpose. In *Grimnismál*, both Óðinn and Frigg sit on *Hliðskjálf* while they place bets against each other over the lives of two mortals. That two gods are sitting on *Hliðskjálf* supports the earlier supposition that *hásæti* is a space and not a single seat for a single individual. A female deity being able to access this space starts to reveal that the area would not have been dominated by a male alone. The presence of a female with a male in a place of power is not a new one but the fact that they are both able to sit on *Hliðskjálf* at the same time, discloses that the previously interpreted "seat" is actually able to have multiple people sitting on it.

Research done by Jessen and Majland (2021) and the analyses they use from the literature demonstrate that *hásæti* acts as a shared space. However, pressing the point that the female acted as an advisor to the king on *hásæti* is backed with the example of



Frigg and Óðinn on *Hliðskjálf*, where Frigg is acting as an equal to Óðinn in every respect. In the mythology, Frigg does not act as a guide but as an opponent to Óðinn. In the end, she has more foresight in the matter they bet over, making her capabilities superior to Óðinn's. In the mythology, *Hliðskjálf* is the thing that holds power; this is made apparent in the saga material as well. This myth is perhaps even suggesting that the "seat" is actually a space for sitting rather than just one seat. Along with this revelation, Frigg is able to see as much as Óðinn, further supporting the earlier conclusion that Óðinn's ownership does not limit *Hliðskjálf*'s power. Even more importantly, it does not limit *Hliðskjálf*'s power to only males.

Analysis of mythology supports a few conclusions. In the pantheonic mythologies, there is one specific *hásæti* named *Hliðskjálf* which is specified as Óðinn's *hásæti*. That Óðinn has divine ownership over this space does not mean that he is the only one that can access the power it contains. Both Frigg and Freyr are able to access *Hliðskjálf*, suggesting that Óðinn's presence and permission does not dictate who can use the space. These conclusions will be compared to those drawn from *Heimskringla*, which will be discussed in full in the next section. However, given the argument that females could access this space, it is important to acknowledge one of the most referenced texts to examine for female power in the sagas.

### 3.4 Sagas

In saga literature, *hásæti* is a space that is much more performative than in the mythology. In the sagas, *hásæti* seems to be accompanied by a distinction between those sitting on the raised area and those on the ground level suggesting an involvement of performers and audience. Perhaps the most famous instance in the sagas regarding *hásæti* as a performative space is in *Eiríks saga rauða* where a woman called *Þorbjörg lítlivǫlva* (little seeress - author translation) performs a ceremony to save the settlement in *Grænlandi* (Jónsson, 2020). In this chapter, the community was suffering from a scarcity of food. In an attempt to influence a change, the community decides to appeal to a seeress that lives in the settlement. In the Old Norse text it reads, "**Var henni búit hásæti . . .** ["For her, a high seat was prepared . . ."]". After the ceremony, they resolve the issue due to her seeress abilities.



This is the one of the few references in the Old Norse literature where *hásæti* is prepared specifically for a woman. In most other sources women in this space share the scene with a male, with the original intent being that the space was prepared for the male prior to a woman joining him in the space; the woman's presence usually following a male's invitation. Rather than use this scene to suggest a general understanding of male/female gender complexities, if we look at the individual themselves rather than the sex of the individual, some conclusions become clear. This is a situation where the female in question is only having the space prepared for her because she knows how to access the pagan ceremonies. From research done on the *vǫlva* in this scene, she is regarded as an Other (Byock, 1993; Jessen and Majland, 2021). This Otherness means she is not a part of the internal workings of the culture and further means she is regarded more as a tool than a person. Her Otherness is apparent in that she is the only pagan amongst Christians, she comes from outside the community, and she functions as a medium rather than as an individual in this case. The possibility then for her to not function as solely a woman but as a tool is apparent, making this particular scene, although interesting, not very helpful in determining what *hásæti* meant to a community using it as a shared space internally (Byock, 1993; Jessen and Majland, 2021). This also suggests that these situations, although likely happened, were unusual. To understand the general meaning of *hásæti*, we would need to look at the more common occurrences and compare their consistencies. Thus, the main references used to determine what *hásæti* was in a general understanding will come from *Heimskringla*.

In *Heimskringla: Ynglinga saga*, the formula regarding *hásæti* is similar to *Hliðskjálf* in that a woman is invited to join a male on *hásæti*. The scene begins with King Granmarr inviting King Hjörvarðr to a banquet. The literature reads as follows (Sturluson, *Heimskringla*: translation by Marold, 2012; Finlay and Faulkes, 2011; Hollander, 1964; Aðalbjarnarson, 2002):

**Hásæti Hjörvarðs konungs var búit gagnvart hásæti Granmars konungs, ok sátu allir hans menn á þann pall.**

King Hjörvarðr's *hásæti* was prepared opposite King Granmar's *hásæti*, and all his men sat at a bench [on the side of the hall].



King Granmar's daughter, Hildiguðr, takes “**silfkrálk einn ok fylldi ok gekk fyrir Hjørvarð konung** [a silver cup, filled it, and went in front of King Hjørvarð]”. After they share the cup, King Hjørvarð asks Hildiguðr “**at hon skyldi ganga at sitja hjá honum** [that she should come up to sit by him]”. After a debate on viking-law, “**Þá settisk Hildiguðr hjá honum** [Then Hildiguðr sat down by him]”, where they both talked throughout the night. Hildiguðr and King Hjørvarð later get married (Sturluson, *Heimskringla*: translation by Marold, 2012; Finlay and Faulkes, 2011; Hollander, 1964; Aðalbjarnarson, 2002). Analysis of this case study is needed to conclude whether *hásæti* is a shared space and what movement is happening in this space.

From the mythology, there are a few cases where *hásæti* acts as a shared space. However, perhaps that shared space does not necessarily mean shareable for all people. To explain further, that the visiting king, King Hjørvarð, has his *hásæti* prepared opposite to King Granmar's *hásæti* suggests that two kings do not frequent the same *hásæti* although there is obviously room to do so (Sturluson, *Heimskringla*: translation by Marold, 2012; Finlay and Faulkes, 2011; Hollander, 1964; Aðalbjarnarson, 2002). The possibility of the kings sharing the space is later proven when Hildiguðr joins King Hjørvarð by sitting specifically beside him. However, the sharing of this space is perhaps possible between two people of opposite sex, with the shared space being transformed into one of sexuality, union, and conference. The presence of a female then would be the caveat that transformed the space, making it powerful but in a different sense than a male sitting alone (Carstens, 2015). The conclusions gathered from this case study are that men do not frequent *hásæti* at the same time but can have their own *hásæti* within the same vicinity. The spaces then function as their own microcosms separate from each other (Carstens, 2015). Females can share *hásæti* with males, after invitation, which transforms the space. The separation of males in this space does appear again in a different part of the same saga.

The second case study in *Ynglinga saga* starts with two brothers named Álfr and Yngvi. Both individuals are described as having “**konungdöðm tóku í Svíþjóð** [took kingdoms in Sweden]” but in this story, only Álfr is referred to as having the title of King (Marold, 2012; Finlay and Faulkes, 2011; Hollander, 1964; Aðalbjarnarson, 2002). The two differences between them are that King Álfr is disliked and does not go out to war,



while Yngvi is the opposite. After returning from one expedition, Yngvi catches the interest of King Álfr's wife, Queen Bera. Often the two would sit together late into the night talking. King Álfr is quite disturbed but Queen Bera states that any woman would be luckier to be Yngvi's wife than be married to King Álfr. King Álfr is very angry about this. One night, King Álfr goes into the hall where the following transpires (Sturluson, Heimskringla: translation by Marold, 2012; Finlay and Faulkes, 2011; Hollander, 1964; Aðalbjarnarson, 2002):

**Yngvi ok Bera sátu í há sæti ok tǫluðusk viðr. Hafði Yngvi um kné sér mæki. Menn váru mjök drukknir ok gáfu engan gaum at, er konungrinn kom inn. Álfr konungr gekk at há sætinu brá sverði undan skikkju ok lagði í gǫgnum Yngva, bróður sinn. Yngvi hjólþ upp og brá mækinum ok hjó Álfr banahǫgg, ok fellu þeir báðir dauðir á gólfit.**

Yngvi and Bera sat on *há sæti* and spoke with each other. Yngvi had a sword on his knee. All the people were so drunk and gave no attention when the king came in. King Álfr went to *há sæti*, drew his sword from under his cloak, and stabbed through Yngvi, his brother. Yngvi hopped up, drew his sword, and struck Álfr his killing blow. Both fell dead to the floor.

In this case study, Yngvi and Bera are often found sitting and talking but once they are found to be sitting together on *há sæti*, King Álfr takes action. This scene reveals that when a male and female sit on *há sæti* together, there is a deep suggestion here not only of romance but of political value. This instance again shows that once a female is sat on *há sæti* with a male, her presence transforms the space entirely. The space with the image of the male and female becomes a symbol that was enough to make King Álfr kill his brother Yngvi, suggesting that this moment was not simply attributed to jealousy. The symbol must have been an old one with deeply significant meaning. After all, Yngvi and Bera had talked many nights together but the specific difference between those times and this one that led to Yngvi and Álfr's death was the fact that a male and female sat on *há sæti* and it was not King Álfr (Marold, 2012; Finlay and Faulkes, 2011; Hollander, 1964; Aðalbjarnarson, 2002). This analysis, again, supports the conclusions made in the previous case study. In this case study, males cannot frequent the same *há sæti* at the





same time. Further, a male and female's shared presence on *hásæti* signifies something much more powerful and in some cases, threatening.

These case studies support the theory that *hásæti* is a shared space, this space can act as a transformative element when certain people share the space, and it contains personhood. The literature remains relatively consistent on these points but only a combination of these finds and the archaeological material will determine a clearer understanding of the high seat as it may have functioned in the past.

## 4 Archaeology and Literature: Reinterpretation

It is undeniable that these seated figurines are archaeological finds classified as societally female. Females throughout the Viking world act as foreseers, advisors, and political influencers (Friðriksdóttir, 2013; 2020). Where most research suggests that the “seeress’s seat” is a place of female ownership, this interdisciplinary research reveals that females seated on the high seat would just as likely act as caveats for *hásæti*, since, according to the literature, it is sometimes the object that holds the power and not always the individuals that own them. Women holding the ability to give foresight is evident in both the literature and archaeology (Hedeager, 2015). So, if a female sits on *hásæti*, the possibility for heightened foresight given through *hásæti* is very possible. These objects then perhaps are not necessarily “seeress’s seats” but images portraying *hásæti* in general. The significance of them being connected to women specifically would suggest that women, in general, took the roles of advisor, counsellor, seer, and so on, more often and sometimes more successfully than men (Friðriksdóttir, 2013; 2020; Zeitsen, 1997). The males and females do not hold the power, but rather it is the position and the seat itself that holds the power for those sitting on it. The presence of a male and female transforms the space but that is only due to the nature of *hásæti* being a transformative space in its own self.

Interpreting these objects as exclusively seeress amulets, and treating the position of seeress as an occupation, is limited to only one instance in the literature, which has been previously discussed in *Eriks saga rauða*. This is not to suggest that the seats being attributed to females is off the table as undeniably the seated figurines are linked to women’s graves. However, it does become an issue when it is suggested that every



woman who sits in powerful counsel must be a seeress, when likely most women who were counsellors and advisors were simply women (Walette, 2010). Attributing the power of foresight to females is one thing but claiming that every female who advised must be a seeress follows similar lines to calling sexually charged, intelligent, and herb-using female a witch. Using what we know from both the literature and archaeology, there may be other interpretations that take into account the knowledge we have of imagery of seated positions in the Viking Age. We can use these conclusions about *hásæti* to discuss possible interpretations of the seated figurines.

Although the promotion of the term “seeress’s seat” in archaeology is viable, this article’s focus on interdisciplinary approaches suggests this term is not an accurate label for these artefacts. This is based on the fact that the literature does not have the evidence necessary to support the claim that women sitting in *hásæti* act as seeresses, since seeress was possibly an occupation. However, what the literature does support is women sitting on *hásæti* acting as advisors to men and, perhaps more interestingly, women sitting on *hásæti* as competitors or omen-bringers to men such as in the case of Frigg and Óðinn. Further, since the literature shows that *hásæti* holds the power, then it follows that sitting on *hásæti* affects every person and their given situations differently. *Hásæti* should not then be seen as solely the “seeress’s seat”, since the space transforms the individual and not the individual transforming the space. What *hásæti* is capable of when a woman sits on it is another discussion, but it should be understood that the occupation of seeress is not exclusively linked to the image of a seated woman (Walette, 2010).

Interpreting the Lejre figurine (see Figure 2) as a male or female figure has been previously discussed. If the focus turns to the chair as the centre of power rather than the individual, a new interpretation arises. From what has been gathered from the literature and archaeology, *hásæti* is the space that holds the power for the individuals sitting on it. The humanoid figure’s dual-gendered imagery then makes more sense since *hásæti* is a shared space between males and females. It is *hásæti* that acts as the transformant to make this image become a *hieros gamos* (sacred marriage) between the sexes, making this figure a complete and transcendent being because they sit on *hásæti*.



## 5 Conclusion

In the first section with the mythology, it was established that there is only one mention of *hásæti* and it is a named object, *Hliðskjálf*, understood to be Óðinn's *hásæti*. Regardless of it being Óðinn's *hásæti*, it grants various individuals foresight and knowledge. Óðinn and Frigg sit on *Hliðskjálf* together to compete with each other as equals. The conclusions drawn from this are that *hásæti* is a shareable space, it holds power of foresight, and can be used by women and men simultaneously. In the second section with the saga material, only one instance is found where *hásæti* is prepared for a woman, but that situation is for a specific purpose and a specific individual. The other saga sections show that *hásæti* is a space that two kings do not share. There then remains a limit to the shared space. The presence of a female on *hásæti* further transforms the space, showing that the presence of a female suggests something powerful and sexual. A review of archaeological literature discussed the popularised phrase, "seeress's seat", and that given the lack of general evidence for the seeress as an occupation being seated, it is not an appropriate term for these artefacts. However, the suggestions that women held influential positions as advisors, counsellors, and in some cases competitors while seated on *hásæti* are supported by the sagas and mythology.

Although Jessen and Majland (2021) discuss the performative nature of those sitting on the ground floor in front of *hásæti*, this paper explains that sitting on *hásæti* is more performative than the actions of those not on *hásæti*. In all cases, from mythology to the sagas to archaeology, the figures sitting on *hásæti* act as the central images. We are watching them and engaging with them as the audience while they act out the ceremonial requirements necessary to sit on *hásæti*. We are also watching *hásæti* transform the space, the people who sit on it, and possibly even ourselves. The treatment of objects in archaeology as things with personhood is not a new concept (Eriksen, 2013; Friðriksdóttir, 2013; Christensen, 2014; Gardęła, 2015). The transformative nature of a space and the power that seated positions have in the archaeological material is undeniable.



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