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# “Hail, Ye Givers,” Sex and Gender in the Viking Age

A discussion of Sex and Gender in Birka 581 and The Oseberg Burial

By

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**Abstract**

Though much work has been done regarding sex and gender in history and prehistory, there lacks an interdisciplinary perspective regarding the use of textual sources of mythology-based religions combined with archaeological evidence. Utilizing the historical texts of the Poetic Edda and the sagas recorded in tandem with an osteobiographic approach, we can see evidence for a non-strict gender system that allows for mobility between traditionally male and female roles. Using the Birka 581 and Oseberg burials in combination with the religious mythology, it is clear that gender in the Viking age likely was not a simple binary but a spectrum that allowed for multiple expressions of gender.

## Introduction

In his 1973 article, *The Loss of Innocence*, David Clarke said, “Past archaeological states were appropriate for past archaeological contexts, and past explanations were very much related to past archaeological states of knowledge” (Clarke 1973, 8). As the discipline grows and evolves, so too must our theoretical framework. Throughout the history of archaeology and, indeed, anthropology more broadly, the uncritical assumption that scholars can apply western presumptions of the world to all cultures has been progressively reconsidered. Much work remains to be done in this vein, particularly regarding apprehensions of the pre-historical and to further understanding diverse experiences of gender and sexuality. The archaeological examinations regarding sex and gender have been done under the assumption of a strict gender binary with rigid gender roles based on artifact associations. Cross-culturally, ethnocentric associations have meant that functional items, such as daggers, swords, or projectiles, have been associated with men and the male-bodied, and less functional items, such as jewelry and combs, with women.

Similarly, hunting has been understood cross-culturally to be a masculine profession, while gathering would be ascribed to women (Weglian 2001, 144). We now know, however, that many cultures do not abide by this binary ideal and cannot be evaluated using this model. Scholars, including Judith Butler, Roberta Gilchrist, and Margaret Conkey, have recently pushed to include feminist and queer perspectives within archaeology.

In this study, I will enter the discussion surrounding gender roles of the Viking Society. Though there was a patriarchal hierarchy in the Viking age, I will demonstrate that there was no strict gender binary using the mythology from the time as well as two select graves (Price 2002). Myths have been vastly underutilized in archaeological examinations until recent years and even

## Blair 4

more underutilized in the academic conversations surrounding sex and gender. Using two graves, the Oseberg double internment and the Birka Warrior Grave, I intend to revisit the narratives of these three women in an osteological and cultural sense. I will draw on Norse mythology to elaborate on the possibilities of gender fluidity in Viking age culture.

The primary collection of myths regarding the gods and heroes of the Viking age is *The Poetic Edda*, a collection of myths and poems from the 12 and 13th centuries, and it was initially written by Snorri Sturluson, an Icelandic Christian writer, and poet who was determined to study his people's history. His religious lens can still be seen in these texts; while the *Prose Edda* is more of a collection of these stories, still with Sturluson's influence, anthropologists and other researchers cannot discount these stories' influence on the Norse Pagan religion (Brodeur 2011, 2-3). However, while undoubtedly reflecting concerns of Sturluson's era, the texts also include details regarding daily life, stories about both the gods and Warriors and poems that would have been well known among the general population prior to Sturluson's time.

I will base my study of myth on the religious texts of the *Havamal*, considered an important document to guide people's lives in the past and present, *The Poetic and Prose Eddas*, and the gods Loki, Odin, and Freyja. The *Eddas* describe the stories of the gods as they move through both the mortal and godly worlds, as well as tales of the human heroes of the Viking past. These texts are the most commonly referred to writings involving the Norse Pantheon. As the religion still exists to this day and there are multiple translators, I will use the work of these translators to substantiate my claims of a lack of strict gender structure among the old gods and, by extension, the Viking culture. Overall, these documents point to a gender fluidity in the worldview of Viking culture. This fluidity and the gods' multifaceted human aspects will be the basis of my argument for a more fluid, nonbinary version of gender.

## **Background**

The height of the Viking Age in Scandinavia, 750-1050 AD, comes just before the widespread Christianization of the north (Price et al., 2019). The historical context, coupled with the chronology of many sites attributed to the Viking occupation, highlights how previous analyses have largely ignored the religious facet of Viking society in the initial discussion of these graves. The biases towards grave goods associated with war and violence are particularly prominent in Viking age archaeology, as skeletal remains associated with male grave goods have been interpreted as male individuals. However, as will be discussed later in the case studies, some of these skeletons belong to females, creating a fascination with the so-called “warrior women.” This fascination with warrior women is pushed by the media. However, it has been under-scrutinized by scholars as the roles of females in Viking society had primarily been invisible or had secondary roles within the society. Furthermore, archaeologists gave more weight to the mortuary objects found within these graves, which tended to be culturally masculine objects rather than skeletal morphology and cultural context. Because of this, a reevaluation of how the assignment of gender to a grave must include not only grave goods but skeletal morphology and cultural context.

The written record from the Viking era is limited, with the majority of written records coming from the Sagas, Eddas, and *Havamal*. The *Havamal* provides instructions for the followers of the religion in both the past and present. The *Sagas* and *Eddas* allow for further contextualization of the culture as the gods and heroes were typically depicted as human-like or human. Raffield notes that there has been much debate about whether researchers should include these myths in studying the Viking age. Ultimately though, we should be taking each of these

## Blair 6

sources not as an absolute but as clues to social patterns, customs, and attitudes in the Viking age; their addition to the archaeological record cannot be ignored (Raffield 2019, 814). The *Eddas* and *Sagas* are highly organic texts built upon early material such as oral tradition, occasionally written texts, and the medieval imagination of a cultural memory (Price 2002, 31). The use of these texts, however, is not uncontroversial, as they were written nearly a century after the Viking era, as the Vikings did not tend towards textual records.

In investigating sex and gender in Viking age Scandinavia specifically, I will be following the recent work of Neil Price, Marianne Moen, and Ben Raffield; Scandinavian scholars who have been using the written record as an added layer of analysis of the Viking archaeological context in the areas of children, religion, sex, and gender in the archaeological record. These records are also the framework for my study of Birka grave 581 and the Oseberg Burial from the Viking era of Northern Europe.

The Birka burial was initially labeled as a male due to the functional items found within it would be considered an atypical female grave, especially when compared to my second site, the Oseberg burial, which was found with multiple less functional items and the genders of the inhabitants were never in question. However, it is recognized that the dead do not bury themselves, and these items may be attributed to these people in death but not representative of their lives. Perhaps, in cases where the artifacts do not match the assumed traditional grave goods for an individual, there is a more complex relationship between the grave goods and the remains. This complexity leads to the further use of the historical record and religious texts of the time.

In the remainder of this paper, I will detail the definitions of gender and religion and how they relate to the context of the Viking era, as well as highlight and discuss the case studies of

Birka 581 and the Oseberg Burial. Finally, I will discuss the mythology and how the selected myths and gods further the study of sex and gender in the archaeological record of Viking age Scandinavia.

### **Gender in the archaeological record**

In the study of history, there has been a reliance on written records separate from the archaeological record, as “Archaeological evidence is left by both men and women, whereas historical documents have been mostly written by men” however, in combining the two researchers open their findings to a broader spectrum of questions and answers (Graslund 2001: 82). With this recognition, feminist scholarship has attempted to recontextualize the past with a more holistic view of the past, including sex, gender, and queer studies.

Due to the recognition of a gender spectrum and the addition of written records into archaeological investigation, further questions of the past regarding sex and gender can be assessed. These questions include: Is there a way to assess gender in the archaeological record, and if so, why is this important? Should we use our own perceptions of gender ideals in past cultures? And more broadly, can we assess gender roles? While there has been work done regarding Viking society addressing these questions from an archaeological perspective, the addition of the written record has been lacking.

Feminist scholarship has gained steam in archaeology despite its late adoption (Richardson 2010, 341). This development led to significant interpretation changes as the field moved from a male-dominated to a more gender-inclusive field. Since the first wave of feminist activism in the late 19th century, more female-identifying people have entered fields like anthropology and have obtained graduate degrees in the field (Conkey 2003).

It was not until the 'second wave' moving into the 'third wave,' however that archaeological inquiry began to shift from male-centric perspectives, as discussed by Roberta Gilchrist in her 1999 book *The Archaeology of Sex and Gender*. Second-wave Feminist studies are where the difference between sex and gender begins to be examined more thoroughly through Queer Theory and how we, as modern researchers, identify roles in the past. Queer theory is not only the study of topics related to the LGBT+ community but also the theory surrounding the 'other' or things considered 'different from the norm' (Gilchrist 1999). Feminist scholars also discuss the androcentrism of the field in the past, not only analyzing the gender associations of the archaeological evidence but how the field was predominately built by European Men (Gilchrist 1999, 22).

Typically, sex and gender are considered to be a single category in archaeological interpretations, particularly in a European setting (Weglian 2001, 137). Gender has been assigned based on by the grave good assemblages, with 'male' and 'female' designations made in the absence of knowledge of the biological sex of the inhabitant of the grave and, sometimes, without the skeletal remains present (Weglian 2001, 137).<sup>1</sup> However, scholars now recognize that gender and sex are not necessarily the same category but rather exist on a spectrum (Gilchrist 1999). Spectrum, in this case, being used to describe the existence of gender and gender presentation within and outside of the binary of male and female, as well as the context-dependency of sex and gender in the archaeological record (Arnold and Wicker 2001, xiii).

By taking a feminist approach to sex and gender, bioarchaeologists recognize skeletal sex and that societal roles are divided into more than just female and male. A deeper understanding

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<sup>1</sup> The term sex refers to the biological remains analysed by archaeologists for morphological indications of a biological identity.



of gendered trends is best evidenced where there is no direct written history through the archaeological evidence found within graves.

Gender specifically holds multiple meanings across the humanities and becomes a somewhat problematic term as, through contemporary studies, various definitions and variations have come to exist within this category. Ideally, we would like to know all these differences, but we will always have an incomplete picture of gender as these definitions are also based on how one defines themselves. To understand gender, described by Gilchrist as “The Cultural interpretation of sexual differences that result in the categorization of individuals, artifacts, spaces, and bodies,” as it is analyzed in the archaeological record, we must also understand the cultural contexts that people are found in (Gilchrist 1999: XV).

Gender, as defined by Gilchrist, is thus, culturally defined, not to be confused with gender identity, which would be how one identifies themselves within the social gender structure (Gilchrist 1999, XV). Sex is a biologically determined category shown through genetics, secondary sex characteristics, and skeletal structures. A gender binary is a system in which there are two options, most commonly “male” and “female,” from which to choose or, more likely, be placed by the society surrounding the individual, which is why we should be questioning the validity of only using a binary system in historical contexts.

There are multiple theories regarding both the internal and external expressions of gender. In her research, Anne Fausto-Sterling discusses the genetic and chemical relationships between biological sex and cultural gender. Though one critique of her work is the broadness and generalizations she creates between the categories of sex and gender, much of her work regards a more chemical reason for these differences. However, she does make a case for differentiation between gender and biological sex, as well as the potential chemical, genetic and physical

differences. Fausto-Sterling does take nurture, or in this case culture, into account; however, much of her work is focused on the hormonal influences, which unfortunately cannot be viewed in an archaeological context and has little to do with the cultural contexts (Fausto-Sterling 1992).

Nevertheless, her work outlines the need for these culturally expressed genders, putting her in discussion with Judith Butler, who argues that gender is a social performance (Butler 1999). Fausto-Sterling's work regarding gender identity comes from a more neurological and psychological background, utilizing psychological studies of individuals with childhood gender dysmorphia and sexual developmental disorders (Fausto-Sterling 2012, 46). Although psychological differences are not seen in the archaeological record, the knowledge of a more biological basis for gender identity existing outside of the osteological sex and cultural performance further proves the existence of gender systems outside of the binary. Although we cannot psychologically evaluate the peoples of the past, we can see remains of the performances central to Butler's argument in the archaeological record.

Gender as a social performance is the basis for my argument, as, within Viking society, we see people acting in accordance with the culture surrounding them and what the society allows. Butler discusses the meaning of the person and identity as it relates to gender identity in her book *Gender Trouble, Feminism and the Subversion of identity* (1999). She determines that the social context the person finds themselves in is related to the structure of personhood. This personhood is how they act or present themselves socially and alone. While the question of what personhood means to the individual centers around internal features and performances as well as how they present these features through time, we are only able to view these potential performances archaeologically through artifacts and written records (Butler 1999, 134).

## Religion

Religion determined many aspects of the gendered experience in Viking culture as told through the *Sagas* and *Eddas* of Viking siðr. Religion often conjures the idea of a rigid system with strict adherence to laid-out rules and values; however, before the mass Christianization of Europe, many cultures would not have had this idea of religion (Price 2002). Most commonly, the Norse pagan religion is referred to as forn siðr or heiðinn siðr and is understood to be a belief system based on a combination of gods and ancestor worship. It is considered a shamanistic style of religion (DuBois 1999; Price 2002). Much of the focus in siðr is based upon the acts and rituals within the religious community. These terms come from a post-Christianised landscape that seeks to demonize pre-Christian religious and spiritual beliefs, heiðinn siðr translating literally to ‘heathen customs’ (Laidoner 2020, 8). Because of this post-Christianised lens in which the primary religious texts are written, some scholars do not believe it can be considered a religion (Laidoner 2020). However, if the author, being an outsider, discounted every historical text, there would be far fewer reliable sources in written history, and these texts still offer valuable information that would otherwise be unavailable.

This is especially true as the *Sagas* were written by historians and poets using location names, genealogies, and poetry from the time to reconstruct the written record (Laidoner 2020). Regardless of whether these texts now exist due to poets and historians, the ideas for these texts had to have come from somewhere, irrespective of their Christian influences. Religion is a part of everyday life that shapes the individual's worldview and the culture around them (DuBois 1999). The importance of religion to the Viking age cannot be discounted when discussing societal expectations for its people. These stories can be used to gain further insight into the biographies of the burials that will be addressed in the later section. While we should not allow

the *Sagas* to color our understanding of society altogether, the *Sagas* and *Eddas* should still be taken into account based on what they can tell us about the culture and how it is viewed by the descendants of the culture (Moen 2019). As stated previously, the Norse *siðr* religion was very important to the people at the time. This is because, as with many cultures, religion informed the living of day-to-day life. Additionally, the *Havamal* is a text that is both a stand-alone and also combined into the *Poetic Edda* (Crawford 2015).

Examples from the *Havamal* include the ability to know when to leave, much like the animals who know when to leave the field; to leave a burden that cannot be solved for the morning as it will still exist tomorrow when your mind is clearer from sleep; and to carry a weapon as you never know when it will be of use. There are also sections with advice for love, hosting, and continuations on how to be a ‘wise man.’<sup>2</sup> The descriptions of the gods within the stories are also important as their characteristics depict religious and cultural expectations of the general population. Three major gods that show the multifacetedness and fluidity of what it would mean to be male and female are Freyja, Loki, and Odin.

Freyja is a major goddess of the Norse Pantheon, married to Odin, and a member of the Vanir. She is a goddess of beauty, fertility, magic and battle. Freyja can choose alongside Odin which of the dead will join her feasting hall, Fólkvangar, in the afterlife (Price 2002). Sacred animals linked to her include cats, which draw her chariot in battle and are important in iconography regarding her devotees (Price 2002, 60; Morales 2022). Having multiple attributes,

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<sup>2</sup> “21. Hjarðir þat vitu, nær þær heim skulu, ok ganga þá af grasi; en ósviðr maðr kann ævagi síns of mál maga” “23. Ósviðr maðr vakir um allar nætr ok hyggr at hvívetna; þá er móðr, er morgni kemr, allt er víl sem var.” “38. Vápnum sínum skal-a maðr velli á feti ganga framar, því að óvíst er að vita, nær verðr á vegum úti geris um þörf guma.” “21. Herds know the hour of their going home and turn them again from the grass; but never is found a foolish man who knows the measure of his maw.” (Overton 2017, 32) “23. The unwise man is awake all night, and ponders everything over; when morning comes, he is weary in mind, and all is a burden as ever.” (Overton 2017, 36) “38. Let a man never stir on his road a step without his weapons of war; for unsure is the knowing when need shall arise of a spear on the way without.” (Overton 2017, 65)

such as fertility and battle, is not uncommon in the Norse pantheon, and her brother Freyer, or Frey, is also a fertility god with multiple associations (Morales 2022). Freyer is more associated with peace than battle.

Although a god of chaos and mischief, Loki is also known to help the Vanir and Æsir when asked. Though he is a half-giant, he is considered one of the Æsir (Morales 2022). Loki's gender presentation changes throughout some of the *Sagas*, most notably the *Thrymskvitha*, where he becomes Thor's bridesmaid. These myths, though Christianised, still do not stigmatize the lack of rigid gender experienced by Loki, probably due to the original author's respect and love for his people's history (Brodeur 2011, 3). Though he is associated with many negative aspects of life, such as mischief and chaos, he is also known to be a god and protector of children.

Finally, the most recognized god among the Norse pantheon, Odin, the All-Father. Odin is known by many names and a member of the Æsir, he is married to Freyja and blood brother to Loki. Dr. Price lists the vast number of names Odin is known by in his 2002 book *The Viking Way*, as well as Odin's involvement in *ergi*, a dishonorable description of passiveness in homosexual sex acts (Price 2002, 214). The association with *ergi* is something that gods, who consider themselves to be 'manly,' avoid, evidenced by Thor's initial avoidance of being dressed as a woman in the *Thrymskvitha*. Thor did not want to be seen by others as being lesser or as losing *hvatr* or his more manly traits. In the *Lokasenna*, when Loki enters Ager's Hall, where the rest of the gods are having a party, he instantly insults everyone in the building. The women are insulted in a sexual nature based upon their supposed unfaithfulness to their husbands or simply by whom they have slept with, while the men, save for one, are insulted based on their ability in warfare (Crawford 2015, 100). The notable exception to this rule is Odin, who is insulted for

living as a woman on earth and practicing “womanly witchcraft” (Crawford 2015; Price 2002). In Norse Paganism, there are multiple types of witchcraft, some of which are gendered (Price 2002). Odin and Njorths returned these types of insults to Loki. This is also where Loki and Odin trade insults regarding their respective times spent on earth as women.

Odin is the undisputed head of the gods, yet is associated with *ergi* and occasionally with womanly magic, as discussed within the *Lokasenna*. A god of war, Odin exhibits multiple dualities while also being a god of knowledge and poetry. Odin is widely seen as the pinnacle of what it would mean to be a Viking Man, though he still exhibits traits associated with femininity and shamefully female acts, not limited to his time as a witch on earth.

These texts provide cultural context for the gendering of graves and grave goods. The multifaceted and very human aspects of the gods and heroes provide a basis for which further archaeological investigation can be done. They also provide evidence for a relaxed gender system in which both the men and gods within the stories can partake. This system allows its participants to have both traditionally male and female qualities within single bodies. Textual evidence is also helpful in determining migration, illness, gender roles, and how children acted and were treated in society. Cases such as the BJ 581 burial, reevaluated genetically in 2017, and the Oseberg burial, which has numerous publications and theories surrounding the inhabitants of the burial, can benefit from combining the techniques of paleodemography, and osteobiography, as well as using historic and religious texts.

Thus far, we have examined a brief history of understanding gender in a social world and how scholars can view these concepts archaeologically and the textual evidence of religion. Feminist archaeological approaches to sex and gender have paved the way for the examinations

done of the Oseberg and Birka burials through the expanded definitions of gender and sex and the interplay between these aspects of human imagining and society.

### **Mortuary Analysis**

Gravesite analysis traditionally involves investigations of grave goods and their assigned meanings, osteological sex using the standards set forth by Buikstra and Ubelakers 1994 morphological standards, paleodemography, and osteobiography. Gender is often assumed through grave goods as these are attributed to the skeletal remains. Only recently have skeletal remains, grave goods, and written records been used in tandem to determine the history of individuals, such as in Dr. Price's 2002 book and Dr. Moen's research regarding sex and gender in the Viking era (Price 2002, Moen 2019).

Skeletal remains have been regarded as archaeological material and used for their unique form of information that otherwise could not have been gained: such as injuries, healing patterns, and further evidence of mortuary practice. Researchers have recently added migration patterns, data on diseases, and treatments to their findings through paleodemographic and osteobiographic approaches. Paleodemographic research is done through large sample sizes. Ideally, large samples provide information on demographic trends, diseases, nutrition, diet, and mobility. However, large samples may not always be available as there may be restrictions due to preservation and excavations. In cases where large sample sizes do not exist, researchers have developed osteobiographies to evaluate single burials. While this approach has limitations due to a lack of a comparative biological and cultural baseline, it is useful to delineate the lifestyle of particular individuals.

Sex estimation can be affected by human variation, presumed age at death, and preservation conditions in which they are found (Boldsten et al. 2021, 7). Sex estimation through morphological skeletal features, in conjunction with grave goods, has been essential in reconstructing gender roles. However, it is also important to take into consideration that people do not see each other as skeletal remains but as social actors within a contextualized society that requires nuance and understanding to unravel (Hollimon 2017). Hollimon argues that researchers can view this nuance through the evidence for the performance of culturally constructed gendered tasks on the human body (Hollimon 2017, 53-54).

Using skeletal markers, researchers can evaluate daily and repetitive activities that leave traces on the body. These specific analyses may provide additional information regarding gender roles and, therefore, can evaluate Hollimon's assertion that researchers can further understand potential nonbinary or third gender individuals from society(2017). These individuals will have distinctive osteological markers that do not align with the assigned sex of the remains and the corresponding perceived gender. These markers will have a greater reflection of the individual than grave goods, or textual evidence can provide (Hollimon 2017). Osteobiography remains much as Frank and Julie Saul originally formulated in 1972, determining personal affiliations from an assemblage of information available from the individual (Hosek and Robb 2019, 2). Osteobiography is more on the personal level of a study rather than the population size and provides additional information on the structure of individual lives that can complement the paleodemographic approach (Hosek and Robb 2019, 2). Because we are using a small sample, this approach will be the most suitable for discussing gender and the roles these women may have occupied in life. Combining the osteobiographic approach with textual analysis can help add to the understanding of a third gender system or a nonbinary system.



### **Osteological Case Studies.**

Not all sites containing human remains are created equal. No two burial sites have the same chance of being discovered, meaning there is an inherent bias toward larger sites or sites where desirable land is excavated for more modern building projects (Boldsen et al. 2021, 5). When analyzing what remains of both the person and the notes taken during initial excavations, it is also important to remember that many of these excavations took place in the early phases of archaeology, which focused primarily on monumental sites or contexts with many grave goods, and that the notes of the initial excavations are not fully available. This does skew any information that can be learned as sites of lesser “importance” or that held fewer grave goods were of lesser note and therefore did not always make it into the record, even as footnotes. Fortunately, in these particular contexts, we do have records of the skeletal remains and their burial positions as they were found at the time of excavation. Here, I will summarize, examine, and add information to the Birka 581 and Oseberg burials through the use of textual evidence provided by the *Sagas* and *Eddas*. Beginning with the Birka burial, an example of a nontraditional female burial containing traditionally male items, and juxtaposing this to the Oseberg burial, which contains traditionally female items, I intend to showcase the vast range of being and performing life as a biological female<sup>3</sup> in the Viking age.

### **BJ 581**

The burial of BJ 581 in Birka, Sweden, is a prime example of the reevaluations necessary for archaeologists. The original excavation in 1878 presumed the grave's individual to be male (Price et al., 2019). The main reason behind the original label of “male” given to these remains

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<sup>3</sup> Biological female based on skeletal morphological features as well as ancient DNA studies.

was based upon the grave goods found at the site and the gender attributed to these grave goods. This is also why this site was simply accepted for over 100 years; warrior grave goods were, and often still are, automatically assumed to belong to men. This revelation of being biologically female based on chromosomal studies done in 2017 is still being scrutinized and had to, once again, be defended in 2019 with a discussion of parallels to other sites and critical issues (Hedenstierna-Jonson et al., 2017; Price et al., 2019). Although Price et al. state in their 2019 rebuttal of critiques of their findings that we can never for sure know the true gender identity of the person in the grave, we can unequivocally call them biologically female, as they have two X chromosomes and has always carried two X chromosomes since the site remains unchanged since the initial excavation in 1878 (Price et al. 2019).

Strontium analysis was also conducted to determine if the woman of BJ 581 was of local or nonlocal affiliation and mainly was inconclusive. However, she is more likely to be of nonlocal origin, moving to Birka in adulthood, when the third molars formed or just after (Hedenstierna-Jonson et al. 2017). The strontium values in the first, second, and third molars could indicate a more nomadic life during her childhood, moving between the formation of the first and second molars as the levels are lower than average for local populations (Hedenstierna-Jonson et al. 2017, 857). Though she was likely non-local, she still came from the Viking sphere, making her culturally Viking. This cultural identity is solidified by the type of burial she received, indicated by the types of grave goods and monumental structure attributed to the site (Price 2019). Genetically, she also shows more affinity towards the modern-day populations of Scandinavia, Denmark and Norway, the North Atlantic islands, Iceland and the Orkneys, and the British isles, more specifically England and Scotland (Hedenstierna-Jonson et al. 2017). As noted by the authors, these locations all fall within the Viking World, though it was

not the location where she was buried. It is worth noting that within comparisons to select locations in Sweden, she is more closely aligned with modern populations in the south of the country, which may have something to do with immigration and migratory patterns. Since she is from the Viking world, it can be assumed that her community's beliefs and religion would have been that of the Norse gods.

The Birka grave is a wooden chamber grave placed on an elevated terrace and includes much of the furnishings one would expect to find in a prominent warrior's grave, such as the remains of two horses, weapons, and gaming pieces (Hedenstierna-Jonson et al., 2017). The chamber itself was found through a depression in the ground, marking the collapse of the chamber roof, with no other greatly distinguishable grave marking. It is theorized that the marking for the chamber may have been a 4m long granite boulder that was blasted apart by the original excavation (Price et al. 2019b). If true, this would have been a massive grave marker for a prominent person in society.

Researchers believe she may have been a mounted archer because of the types of weapons found with her, namely armor-piercing arrows (Price et al. 2019). The original excavators identified the remains as male goods in 1878. They were then sexed according to Buikstra and Ubelakers' 1994 morphological standards and found to have long gracile bones and a wide sciatic notch altogether, create the image of a woman at least 30 years old by Vilkins in 1975 (Hedenstierna-Jonson et al. 2017, 855). Vilkins was quickly questioned on the reliability of his findings. His findings were then reevaluated and supported by Kjellström, who provided age and sex estimation for Hedenstierna-Johnson et al.'s 2017 article referenced here (Price et al. 2019b). It was reevaluated each time because many researchers could not conceive the idea of a female being buried with male-aligned grave goods. This is all in reference to the biases

regarding warrior-type graves. Osteological sexing has been done multiple times and was disputed, citing possibilities of remains being somehow removed from context and mixed with remains from other sites, possibilities of double internment, and debates regarding genomic testing results. Each of these arguments has been disproven as the remains were labeled on the remains themselves in the initial excavation, and the original excavation records state there has only ever been one individual within the grave (Price et al. 2019b). This uproar is despite the fact that women have been found in grave contexts containing “masculine” grave goods for the better part of a century (Gardela 2021, 22). So much weight regarding identity has been put on these grave goods and the ideals reflected by excavators and modern societal standards of gender, the cultural context has been blatantly ignored. This context is available through the written records of religion.

The individual in the Birka burial is assumed to be a high-ranking commander based on the high number of grave goods and type of textiles found with her. These textiles were analyzed by Birka's leading textile specialist, and determined to belong to a cavalry commander (Price et al. 2019, 184). While biologically female, she may have similarities to the woman of the *Gísla Saga*, having earned enough *hvatr* through her abilities in battle that she may not have been seen as what today would be the category of “woman,” but instead was seen according to her station as a commander. In 1993, Clover used the *Gísla Saga*, an Icelandic Hero Saga, to discuss the gender systems within the Viking age. She uses the antonyms of *blauðr* and *hvatr*, which are used as character descriptions throughout the story, postulating that one can gain or lose masculinity. One, *blauðr*, is an adjective that would mean weak, soft, and feminine, while the other, *hvatr*, would be the opposite, masculine and strong (Clover 1993, 1). According to the *Sagas*, these terms are used for both men and women, which means there is a possibility of a

gender system that does not follow the strict binary typically associated with culture by the western European school of thought. The woman in the Birka grave may have found a way to gain *hvatr* through her abilities in a battle that allowed her to become such a well-respected warrior, and presumably, a well-respected person.

This designation of revered warrior could also be seen through her associated grave goods. The goods found with her were not the weaving looms, jewelry, or other assorted womanly objects one would assume would be found with her. Instead, they were animal sacrifices, arrows, and armor (Hedenstierna-Jonson et al., 2017). This is also why this individual was initially believed to be male, along with the outdated idea that warriorhood is a definitively masculine activity (Price et al. 2019, 189). As we will see in the Oseberg case, a lack of masculine objects does not equate to a lack of stature but, in fact, shows the multiple facets that women may have had, especially when compared to the Birka burial.

While I agree with Price et al.'s assessment of the biological sex, the individual's gender identity may never be definitively known. Using the mythological evidence available from the Eddas, researchers can question the nuance of this woman warrior. This is not to distract from her abilities as a woman warrior but to enhance the understanding of the gender structure and the gender options available to her at the time.

Many Viking gods have multifaceted portrayals, such as Odin, Freyja, and Loki, three significant deities. Odin is repeatedly feminized through his descriptions in the mythos, whereas Freyja has multiple more masculine attributes. If Odin and Freyja could socially hold both male and female associations, why could this not be true for their devotees? This warrior may have been female, with masculine attributes, much like Freyja, a feminine goddess who was also a goddess of battle. Valkyries and shield maidens are also found in Norse mythology and

occasionally in the written and archaeological records and defy the binary stereotype of men being warriors and women being homemakers (Gardela 2021). The woman in the Birka grave fits within this woman warrior stereotype created by the Valkyries of mythology.

In the *Lokasenna*<sup>4</sup>, Odin is insulted in the same way as the goddesses due to his time spent on earth in a witch's coven practicing womanly magic (Crawford 2015). Odin is the recognized head of the Norse pantheon and exhibits a fluidity of gender presentation and expression that cannot be discounted when discussing the gender systems and structures of the past. This particular myth showcases multiple contradictory aspects of the gods, such as Odin, a god of poetry, a god of war, practicing “womanly magic,” and having disguised himself as a witch on earth (Crawford 2015, 105:24). This is relevant when examining the Birka grave, as she is a biological female participating in what would be thought of as a traditionally male role, mirroring how Odin practiced a form of magic that women traditionally did.

Freyja, too, fits this fluidity of presentation, being the archetype of the beautiful warrior goddess that has so fascinated the media in recent years, and this image is true to the roots of the religion. Though she is exceptionally beautiful and the ideal of femininity, she is still a warrior, driving a chariot led by cats into battle and welcoming fallen heroes into the afterlife (Price 2002, 56).

Though we cannot evaluate the fluidity of the individual within the Birka Grave when they were alive, we can see from the mythology clear evidence of the ability to be assigned one sex, Freyja being female and Odin male, while also having traits and associations that would

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<sup>4</sup> In the *Lokasenna*, Loki trades insults with the whole pantheon after not being invited to drink. Odin, who has previously made a pact with Loki never to drink unless Loki is offered a drink, invites Loki to sit with them so that he may not slander them for being inhospitable to a traveler (Crawford 2015, 102: 9). Here, readers learn of Odin's time as a woman in a coven of witches, as he and Loki trade insults regarding their respective times on Midgard, the realm of humans. Though this is called *perverted* regarding both gods, it is not entirely clear if this is due to them presenting as women or for living among humans on Midgard (Crawford 2015, 105: 22-24).

traditionally be given to the other. She is biologically female in a traditionally male role. Not only did she participate in the role, but she must have excelled in some way to achieve the type of status that would lead to the many grave goods and animal sacrifices left in her grave. Much like Freyja, she exhibits the possibility of being biologically female while taking on the attributes of warfare and battle that would have been more likely to be attributed to a male equal.

### **Oseberg**

Conversely, the Oseberg Burial is widely considered the grandest of high-status female Viking burials, rather than the male-aligned warrior burial of Birka, as it relates more to the feminine aspects of the culture. It has been re-evaluated time and time again, looking at grave goods, burial practices, and osteological remains. The accolade of the wealthiest burial in northern Europe comes from the preservation of wooden artifacts within the burial (Ruffoni 2019). The sex and gender of these remains have not been questioned, as it contains the osteological remains of two women and the grave goods one would associate with a female burial. While some mythology has been used in an attempt to identify the women entombed here, it has been used in a limited sense in regards to meanings in this high-status burial.

The Oseberg burial is a mound and boat burial, with the remains being found in a two-phase mound located approximately 95 km south of Oslo, Norway, in the Slagen valley north of Tønsberg. The site has excellent preservation due to the damp clay hermetically sealing the mound, and the organic material had no chance of decaying (Holk 2006; Ruffoni 2019, 22). The burial is 145 feet across and 19 feet high. However, when the excavation began, the mound had shrunk to only eight feet high after the soil subsided (Sjøvold 1958). The site is dated to the 700's-early 800's and was partially excavated in 1903 by a local farmer, who, after finding

Viking age woodwork, brought in the local university with large-scale excavation beginning in the spring of 1904 (Ruffoni 2019).

Unfortunately, complications occurred in the site's history that created a loss of data as the site was the target of grave robbers, which led to the remains being strewn about the burial chamber during a mound break in 953 AD (Holk 2006). It is still unknown if there was a specific reason, religious or secular, for the mound break, as many goods were left alone. The only significant disturbance of note was the disturbance of the remains. Because the remains were unceremoniously spread across the burial floor, it took more time for researchers to discover two women interred within the mound rather than one (Holk 2006).

The women in the double inhumation are approximately 30-50 and 50-80 years old, as multiple aging methods have been used to determine the age of the women over the years (Holk 2006). However, it is generally agreed upon that the age of the younger woman is within the middle of her approximate age range of 40. In comparison, the older woman is generally seen at the end of her age range, putting her at approximately 80 (Telefon 2022). The elder of the two presumably died as a result of cancer, while there is no definitive cause of death for the younger woman (Telefon 2022). One set of remains, belonging to the older woman, is mostly complete, while the other, belonging to the younger, has many bones missing (Ruffoni 2019, 32). Using carbon dating and isotopic analysis, the two women are believed to have lived in a similar area and been of the same status, based on diet, and have died near the same time (Ruffoni 2019, 32-33).

DNA was taken from both sets of remains; however, nothing conclusive could be learned from the older women, meaning there is no indication of if these women were related (Ruffoni 2019). Both women are presumed to have been approximately 153 cm in height. The older



showed signs of illness in childhood with two fused cervical vertebrae, advanced-stage cancer, and osteoporosis (Telefon 2022). The younger of the two seems to have lived a relatively healthy life, with the only evidence of damage to the bones being from a metal object being used against her teeth, hypothesized to be either a metal toothpick used to clean her teeth or a needle for sewing, and an injury to her clavicle that shows minor remodeling before death meaning the injury was likely not what killed her (Telefon 2022: Ruffoni 2019).

There has been much speculation about the women's identities, ranging from witches, and high-status chieftains to Queen Asa and other related queens from the sagas, none of which have been definitively proven (Ruffoni 2019). Popular belief still holds that the mounds' inhabitants are Queen Asa and her relative, regardless of the recent dates that put the remains too young to be these women (Ruffoni 2019, 25). Other speculation puts one of the women, likely the older, as either a chieftain's wife, a practitioner of witchcraft or seiðr, or the goddess Freyja's incarnation on Midgard, the term used for the Earth in the mythology.

Oseberg contains not only a double inhumation but multiple animal sacrifices, including a minimum of ten horses and an ox, sleighs, beds, tents, typical boat accessories such as ropes and oars, and a decorated cart (Sjøvold 1958). This cart is decorated with cat-like figures that may represent Freyja's cats and the chariot she is often depicted with when her more war-like aspects are explored (Ruffoni 2019). This evidence leads many to believe the women may have been sorceresses, as Freyja is also associated with witchcraft as a member of the Vanir. Their relationship with Freyja may also be due to their status in society. Another grave good found is a wooden staff, believed to be a cultic object related to the *völva*, an Old Norse term for sorceress tied closely to bearing the staff (Ruffoni 2019, 35: Price 2002).

There are also tapestries dedicated to the goddess, furthering the idea that these two women were part of a cult related to Freyja. Freyja is heavily associated with the practice of *völva*, the Norse feminine aspect of *siðr* magic (Price 2002). She also is the head of a feasting hall in the afterlife known as *Folksvangr*, where she receives half of those fallen in battle (Price 2002, 346). She is well respected as a significant member of the Vanir, one of the primary races of the gods. The goddess is tied closely to femininity, and the war and sorcery associations mentioned previously are respected within the Norse pantheon. When she is requested as a bride in trade for Thor's hammer, Mjölfnir, Thor impersonates her as she refuses to be traded in this regard<sup>5</sup>. These two high-ranking women in a possible cult related to Freyja may have had a bearing on their status in death and the high-status grave goods they were buried with. The *Thrymskvitha* also showcases the respect that not only those who worshiped the gods had for Freyja, but the respect the pantheon had for her. Thor does not question her when she says no to his request and instead allows himself, though reluctantly, to be dressed as her and go in her place (Crawford 2015, 119).

The respect held for Freyja in the pantheon may translate into the high regard that may have been held for these two women in life, as not only are there tapestries to the goddess but cat iconography on the sled, likely a representation of the cats that drew Freyja's chariot in battle, and staffs that were likely used in magical and religious ceremonies.

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<sup>5</sup> The *Thrymskvitha*, The Theft of Mjölfnir, or literally "Thrym's Poem," is a well-known myth from Norse Mythology and details the adventure of Thor, the Thunder god, and Loki, the god of Mischief, as they attempt to steal back Thor's mighty hammer Mjölfnir from Thrym the Giant (Crawford 2015, 117: 10-12). Once he realizes it may not be in Asgard, home of the gods, he employs Loki in his search. Loki uses Freyja's magic feather suit to fly in order to search for Mjölfnir, ultimately finding it in Thrym's possession. Thrym states that he will return the hammer if he is allowed to marry the most beautiful goddess (Crawford 2015, 115-116:1-9). "The two of us, man and woman, are going to Jotunheim", is a phrase said twice throughout the *Thrymskvitha*. The first time Thor demands Freyja, the goddess of fertility, battle, and death, to don a wedding dress and travel with him to get his hammer back, but she refuses (Crawford 2015, 117: 11). The second time is stated by Loki, "Son of Laufey", as he tells Thor to don the wedding dress and keys of a woman, and he will join as Thor's Bridesmaid and is described as "Thor's clever bridesmaid" for the remainder of the myth (Crawford 2015, 120: 26).

## Conclusion

The graves of Birka 581 and Oseberg showcase two different ways of being a high-status biologically female person in the Viking era. Some links can be made to Freyja in both burials through her many associations: witchcraft, femininity, and battle, though these links are far more explicit in the Oseberg burial. In the Birka burial, Freyja, Odin, and Loki having multifaceted representations in the mythology, allow us to see that there was likely more to her story than being either a female Viking or a warrior. Instead, both identities could likely have existed simultaneously. The Oseberg burial highlights the female-oriented aspects of society: *völva*, womanly witchcraft, fertility, and femininity. The Birka burial highlights the more male-oriented aspects: strategy, battle, and warriorhood. All the individuals discussed in this paper are indisputably biologically female, but their roles in society seem to have been vastly different, as represented by their grave goods and the study of these sites with the addition of the written mythology.

The use of cultural texts such as the *Eddas*, regardless of the time period written, can give a unique insight into why these grave goods may be associated with remains of different sex and any gender system that could have been commonplace. Though skeletal remains can tell us more about the biological sex associated with these remains, people see each other as complex actors within society, making society an active part of the gender and gender perception of these remains.

The Birka grave shows the possibility to rise through social ranks as a woman, possibly through the gaining of *hvatr*, much like the woman in the *Gisla Saga* who showed her ability to rise above her assumed *blauðr* from being born with female sex characteristics. The ability to

rise through the social ranks regardless of gender on one's merit finds its place in the *Sagas* and *Eddas* and can be seen through the status of this woman.

Conversely, the Oseberg burial is precisely what a high-status women's grave would be assumed to look like, containing female-aligned grave goods such as a possible *völva* staff and other non-functional items, as well as goods attributed to the goddess Freyja. A discussion surrounding cultic activities and their status within these cultic activities can be explored further through an active engagement with known myths. It is not too far out of the realm of possibilities to assume that it was their status within this society that allowed the older woman to live for so long with her injuries. She would have been in pain for much of her life and likely would have needed medications for the pain as well as assistance in day-to-day activities as it was her second and third cervical vertebrae that were fused (Holck 2006). There are theories that the younger woman that was entombed may have been there in a sacrificial nature, but there is not enough evidence to support this claim. No osteological damage corroborates this theory since the damage to the collarbone shows evidence of healing (Ruffoni 2019, 32).

As seen through the Birka and Oseberg burials, females had multiple functions and roles, including functions not exclusively associated with typically female roles. Each of these women was buried with high respect and high status, as both a warrior, in the case of Birka, and as a high-ranking woman, in the case of the double burial of Oseberg. While the grave goods and their associated gender and social context can assist in evaluating social status and gender, the additional information gained from the written religion assists in the further understanding of these burials and other aspects of social life. Without the Viking religion, there is no context in which the society could thrive. Without the *Havamal*, there is no advice on how to live from Odin, the high god. There is no context for Valkyries, shield maidens, and the gendering of

magic and actions that so many like to point to in their discussion of the Viking Age without the context provided through the *Eddas* and *Sagas*.

Reconstruction of past cultural identities regarding sex and gender can be done through an interdisciplinary approach. Using a combination of osteobiography, textual analysis of religion, and historical perspectives of ancestors, researchers can gain further understanding of what gender and sex may have meant to the culture at the time, as well as how these ideas may relate to other contemporary and modern societies. Though these sites have been studied for many years, adding another frame of analysis allows for further insight into the culture. We must be aware that these two burials may represent a select part of Viking society, as they are both high-status burials. However, there is little evidence that the gendered ideals depicted by these two graves are not abnormal in society.

Although gender is inherently a social construct and thus difficult to determine in the archaeological record, especially in places with an oral tradition rather than written, using sources of mythology, cultural texts, and clues from skeletal remains can help researchers discover more than a gender binary, and with the addition of these sources, a more expansive form of gendered trends. Although the texts may not have been written during the time of the widespread worship of the religion, the ideas do stem from somewhere, in the case of the *Eddas*, from Snorri's interest in his people's past, poems, and genealogical records. His respect for his people's history shines through his biases regarding his religion and how that may sway him to portray the Heathen gods. Religion and religious texts reflect the morals of the peoples and, in the case of the Norse pantheon, represent a multifaceted version of each god and person. Using a gender binary when assessing these gravesites would be to ignore an entire facet of the culture told to us through the mythos and religion. The *Eddas* and *Sagas*, while a view of the past

themselves, are still historical documents that should be considered when these sites are examined.

Further work can be done regarding sex and gender in the Viking context through a larger sample size, the addition of children's graves and associated items, and more extensive use of the textual evidence from religion regarding adolescent norms and male and female deities' mythological associations. A larger sample size will allow researchers to substantiate claims of a non-rigid gender structure within a general population, as the two graves examined here are high-status graves indicative of highly regarded individuals that have aged into adulthood. Further use of the textual evidence may reveal more information regarding children and if they were given alternative tasks based on their assigned sexes and the presentations that these children may have been associated with in the mythology.

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