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Book review:

Michèle Hayeur Smith and Alexandra Sanmark, eds., *The Hidden Lives of Viking Women: Archaeological and Historical Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2025), pp. 192, £ 29.95

reviewed by LINNÉA ROWLATT

A co-edited volume from Michèle Hayeur Smith (Smithsonian) and Alexandra Sanmark (Highlands and Islands), *The Hidden Lives of Viking Women: Archaeological and Historical Perspectives* is a wide-ranging investigation into the lives of women during the Viking Age. Along with the history of these women, the chapters of this extraordinary interdisciplinary work assemble and illuminate the Viking matriculture, which – broadly speaking – is defined as the system of symbols which pertained to women, the maternal, and the feminine, and which shaped social expectations of women and the opportunities available to them. The ten authors of this volume, each a recognized expert in their field, offer rich explorations of women's little-known contributions to and roles in Viking culture and society. However, I am not an expert in this field; therefore, after briefly describing the

contributions of each author, I review the edited volume for what it reveals about the Viking matriculture.

In their comprehensive Introduction (referred to as Chapter 1), Smith, Sanmark, and Kevin P. Smith (Smithsonian/SUNY) clearly articulate the research questions which drive the compilation: *Did women contribute to society only as caregivers bound to the home, or were their lives and roles more complex with responsibilities and opportunities that at times might have complemented, and at other times, supplanted their roles as caregivers and domestic workers? Can we find alternative and more 'masculine' public roles that women held than were assumed in view of past research?*[1] The answer to these questions is clearly positive and the book's focus on women's experiences outside of the traditional framework emphasizes the possibilities and opportunities that were available to Viking women alongside the gender-typical responsibilities of reproductive and domestic labour.

These uncommonly-examined topics include aspects of violence relating to women in the Old Norse legal system, Viking women as colonizers in Britain, women in trade and exchange, gender balance and cooperation in Viking Age households, the role of serving drink in choosing the hero, *Vǫlva*s and their tools, women's textile magic, and a biography of Friðgerðr Þorðardóttir, a Viking Age woman in Iceland. With such a wide range of topics, there is a risk that the volume could be shambolic. However, Smith and Sanmark have organized the chapters coherently, moving from legal codes to magic in an orderly manner and the flow of text reads smoothly. Of course, there is an intimate relationship in any cultural system between cultural meanings and social behaviours; Geertz himself might suggest, in this instance, that the Viking matriculture described, interpreted, and reflected Viking social reality – a model *of* reality - as well as prescribing and shaping Viking social behaviour - a model *for* reality. This edited volume is fruitful in both areas.

Models *Of* Reality: Women in Viking Society

In the second chapter of the book, 'Aspects of violence connected to women in the Old Norse legal systems,' historian Anne Irene Riisøy (South-Eastern Norway) investigates Old Norse laws concerning violence committed by women and the redress available to women for violence committed against them. In placing the focus on early Norwegian laws, this chapter balances a tendency to accept Icelandic legislation as normative throughout the Viking world. Exploring a variety of sources, including remaining sections of the *Frostathing Law* and the *Gulathing Law*, as well as offering comparisons with Icelandic law *Gràgàs*, Riisøy concludes that there were no formal legal distinctions made between women and men in the earliest Norse laws. Women who committed violence faced the same consequences as men, whether paying compensation to the victim or being killed as

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a permitted revenge; they also had to face the possibility of a public declaration of outlaw status and/or the need to pay fines to the monarch. Likewise, women as injured parties had the same rights to compensation and/or revenge as men.

Riisøy notes that Viking Age society was heavily stratified and that factors other than sex – social status, wealth, or personality, for example - may have been more determinative of the levels of violence committed by women than sex. Aggression was a cultural characteristic permitted to the Viking elite, along with violence or threats of violence, and more important than the sex of the perpetrator was the presence of family and allies who could defend their position in the social hierarchy. The honour culture of the elite was the same whether for men or women; there was likely a great difference in the scope for violence available and its compensation between an elite woman and a poor woman than between an elite woman and an elite man. This insight threads through the rest of the book, shaping not only our knowledge of Viking matriculture but, also, of the larger Viking culture.

Written by Shane McLeod (Highlands and Islands), the book's third chapter 'Migrants, conquerors, settlers: Viking women in Britain' reviews new evidence for the presence of Viking women in Britain during the first waves of invasion and the early acculturation period along with their migration within the British Isles between 793 and 1016 CE. Based on inferences and conjectures from archaeological and historical evidence, where the former outweighs the latter, McLeod offers substantial evidence for a high level of mobility among women. Mostly in domestic roles but also as rune carvers, practitioners of magic, and potentially as warriors (the evidence for this last is contested), they arrived in Britain as part of conquering armies and initial land settlements, and migrated throughout Britain, Scotland, and Ireland. Freedom of movement among women is a recognized marker of a strong matriculture, one where women are at liberty to develop their full human potential alongside domestic and reproductive responsibilities.[2] While McLeod notes that most Viking ventures were family enterprises in which women would have participated, Viking women in Britain also had the opportunity to step outside of domestic roles, whether permanently or temporarily, within a framework of cultural support.

In Chapter 4, archaeologist Unn Pederson (Oslo) explores the introduction of women as economic actors – tradeswomen, effectively – to the historical narrative of the Viking Age and summarizes recent findings to assert women's contributions as instrumental in the nascent market economy of the period. Despite Anna Stalsberg's seminal contributions to this subject from 1979 to 1991, particularly her argument that trade was not a gendered activity among Vikings, Pederson traces the presence of ongoing sexism in the field:

2 Marie-Françoise Guédon, 'From Matrilineal Kinship to Matriculture: Establishing a Canadian Agenda. Workshop Report,' *Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies*, 1(1): 2020, 81.

practitioners sometimes accept an implicit androcentric gender perspective even while there is a general trend towards gender neutral terminology.

Centring an examination of the hoard discovered at Haugen in the nineteenth century with support from more recent finds, Pederson largely bases her argument on the presence of weighing equipment (weights and balances) in many Norwegian graves confirmed as women's. A discussion of Viking women's associations with drinking vessels and the ubiquity of remains of such vessels in recognized trading centres leads to speculations about the role of women in trade. Specifically, Pederson asserts that knowledge of appropriate moments for certain types of trade, ease with local and foreign customs, and an ability to navigate the tensions of their own society means that Viking Age women may have assumed positions as arbiters, mediators, knowledgeable consumers, and traders with the power to dictate what constituted appropriate or fair deals. With this argument, Pederson positions Viking women as economic agents in their own right. This agency is, along with mobility, a core element of a matriculture where women are recognized as having the authority to dispose of resources as they see fit.

In the fifth chapter, Alexandra Sanmark and Tara Athanasiou (Highlands and Islands) explore the concept of gendered work and gendered space during the Viking Age and Norse period (750–1300 CE) with archaeological evidence from subsistence farming households in Scandinavia and Iceland. Carefully noting the difficulty of confirming speculation, the authors postulate that meeting their daily needs for subsistence was more important to Vikings and Norse people than gendered delimitations between activities. Nevertheless, some tasks were gender specific: textile production, for example, was carried out exclusively by women, as was milking the cow(s) and making dairy products. Similar to the discussion concerning women and violence in Chapter 2, though, a woman's social status seems to have been more determinative of the work she did than her gender.

Victorian beliefs that women should occupy the domestic, private sphere and men the public sphere influenced historical research into gendered spaces and early research on the Viking and Norse people did not escape this distortion; even as obvious a contradiction as the task of dairying taking place beyond the threshold of the house (above) eluded notice. Sanmark and Athanasiou provide further examples from the Sagas, laws, and archaeology to challenge this bias, asserting that the overlap and sharing of space – both private and public - by women and men of the period renders the suggestion of a gender division between public and private spheres unsupportable. It is more important, they state, to understand the cooperation between women and men which Viking Age and Norse households required to succeed.

These four chapters focus on social aspects of the Viking matriculture, revealing, clarifying, and speculating about the range of social behaviours that were available to women. That the matriculture supported women's mobility and trading activity, as well as declaring gender equality in the eyes of the law, suggests a matriculture where women's choices were greater than hitherto acknowledged. These descriptions of Viking women's cultural models of suitable social behaviour for women expand beyond reproductive and domestic labour into the economy, to which one can speculate that the relative ease of their mobility contributed. These clarifications further extend into subsistence farming, the core of Viking Age society, where gendered spaces and gendered activities are shown to have been less important than the sheer act of survival in a demanding environment.

Models *For* Reality: Women in Viking Culture

Moving into the Norse mythic-heroic tradition with Chapter 6, Karen Bek-Pedersen (Aarhus) probes the textual motif of special drinks offered by extraordinary women to exceptional men. Exploring the role as undertaken by Valkyries in Valhǫll, by Sigrdrífa with Sigurðr, and by goddesses and jǫtunn-women, Bek-Pedersen suggests that the offering of a drink to the man is the moment of choice; he is not chosen and then given a drink, rather, handing him the drinking vessel is the act of choosing itself. The ritualistic nature of this deed demonstrates feminine agency to no small degree, since it regularly precedes marriage or sexual relations between the two. Exploring the motif's antiquity, found, among others, in myths about the founding of Marseilles, Bek-Pedersen concludes that a crucial feature of the ritual is that the drink comes from the woman; he cannot simply take it, she must give it to him. The agency that this suggests and its symbolic aspects may not have translated into this level of agency for individual living women, but the author perceives the ritual as "a deep-rooted traditional view of the power of the feminine principle, whose role and function was still remembered and retained in old mythical-heroic imagery."[3]

In Chapter 7, Olof Sundqvist (Stockholm) restores a role as cult leaders of their community to women by analyzing a narrative about *gyðja* and *húsfreyja* Friðgerðr, found in the *Kristni saga*. Beginning with detailed clarifications of Old Norse terms for women cult leaders and the analytical terms for classifying religious leadership, Sundqvist presents the story of Friðgerðr and her son Skeggi, frames it with social and cultic contexts of the area (western Iceland) and period (the late 900s CE), and explores the elite status of the *húsfreyja* in some depth, along with her role in cultic leadership. Friðgerðr's behaviour is compared with that of two male cult leaders also mentioned in the *Kristni saga*, as well as

3 Karen Bek-Pedersen, 'Choosing the hero: Drink and the institutionalisation of heroism,' *The Hidden Lives of Viking Women: Archaeological and Historical Perspectives*, eds. Michèle Hayeur Smith and Alexandra Sanmark (Oxford and Havertown: Oxbow Books, 2025), 117. EXPAND – check all authors' affiliations are included in text

that of the ritual specialist known as a *vǫlva*. Supported by some careful attention to translations of texts, the author concludes that it is highly likely that Friðgerðr held the role of *gyðja*, or cult leader, at her home in Hvammr during the late tenth century, whether in collaboration with her husband or alone in his absence. As witnessed by the *Kristni saga*'s author, she performed rituals at the *stalli/stallr* (ritual platform or altar), but does not appear to have provided the services of a *vǫlva*. As such, her position as *húsfreyja of* her household included access to the position of *gyðja* and, with it, ritual leadership; this was likely true of *húsfreyja* throughout Old Norse society.

Moving from the lady of the household to the ritual specialist in Chapter 8, 'The *Vǫlva*'s toolkit: Viking Age ritual specialists and the tools of their trade,' Leszek Gardeła (National Museum of Denmark) offers a survey of research on Viking Age magic and its women practitioners, the *vǫlur*. She goes on to explore the material remains of practitioners with a particular focus on their tools, especially their staffs and the miniatures found in their graves. She convincingly argues that Vikings considered magic staffs to be animated objects which, along with any particular *vǫlva*, may have required post-mortem physical suppression to keep them from activities after death (if they were not stoned to death and buried where they died). Gardeła asserts that placing stones on the corpse of a *vǫlva* and/or breaking or bending her staff, along with particular miniature items, are means of identifying the graves of *vǫlur* and encourages deeper interdisciplinary research in mortuary archaeology.

The final chapter of the book, 'Women's textile magic in Viking Age Iceland,' written by Michèle Hayeur Smith, explores the associations of women's creation of textiles with magic. She reminds the reader that although Viking society was patriarchal, women nevertheless had domains of supremacy and one of these was the necessary activity of creating and managing cloth. Strongly supporting known cultural associations made by Viking Age people between spinning, weaving, and magic with evidence from sagas and archaeology, Hayeur Smith concludes that both ordinary women – the women whose handwork clothed Viking people – and the *vǫlur* had access to textile magic that was based in the *nornir* (elemental female beings who sit at the root of the world tree and weave the fates of gods and humans). This access gave women not only a degree of personal agency, but, through goading, a lever of control over men.

Hayeur Smith also provides a certain conclusion to the volume in the last section of her chapter, where she reminds the reader of the patriarchal structure of Late Iron Age patriarchy in the Viking world. By calling up this structure, we are grounded once again in social and cultural reality (such as they may be understood from centuries in the future) and must acknowledge that the scholarship in this book serves to illuminate what has

been hidden through time and in scholarship: the lives of Viking Age women in a society oriented towards men.

Conclusions

Although patriarchal Viking Age society centralized men and their activities, and scholarship long copied this attitude, *The Hidden Lives of Viking Women* provides a clear outline of a Viking matriculture which extended beyond the domain of reproduction and domestic attentions to children and men. Equality under the law, relative freedom of movement, opportunities for trade, situational equality within the family unit, and access to religious authority (sometimes exclusive access) are known markers of a strong matriculture. The authors clearly state, however, that this matriculture was available primarily to women in leadership roles (elite women and *húsfreyja*), and that a woman's social status likely played a greater role in her personal freedoms than her sex. Which is to say, slave women or women who did not preside over their households as *húsfreyja* were unlikely to have access to this level of authority and freedom. Sadly, they were likely to be the victims of the Viking patriarchy more frequently: targets for sexual predation and assault, owned as chattel, and chosen to accompany dead elite men to the other world in funerary sacrifices – signs of a very weak matriculture.

Effectively, then, for a Viking Age woman to have access to a strong matriculture (societies can have more than one, just as they can have several religious subcultures) a woman may have needed to have won the birth lottery, so to speak, thereby establishing her in an environment where her family's status extended certain privileges to her, including the opportunity to demonstrate virtues such as strength of will, cleverness, or leadership. However, if men behaved like women, particularly weaving or practicing *seiðr*, they were deemed to be full of *ergi*, lost respect, and may have lost their lives. Throughout the book, authors give close attention to gender identities and are careful to note the difficulty of identifying non-standard identities from the archaeological record.

While this edited volume has some significant strengths, there are still some drawbacks. Notably, the book lacks an index; this absence makes cross-referencing similar types or pieces of evidence, locations, and themes across authors a challenge. The text itself can be difficult to understand at times, due to the in-text citation style selected by the editors (footnotes or endnotes might have been preferable) amid grammatical challenges posed by non-native English language writers.

Despite these limitations, however, this volume is still an extremely valuable contribution to scholarship in both Women's Studies and Viking Age Studies, as well as all the fields included in this interdisciplinary work.

About the Author

Linnéa Rowlatt, PhD, is the Managing Editor of the Network on Culture's flagship project, *Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies*. She has published a monograph, *Weathering the Reformation: Religion and Culture in Early Sixteenth-Century Strasbourg* (2024), and co-edited *Matriculture, Shamanism, and the Authority of Women: The Powers That Be* (2025).