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# Pulling the Strings: The Influential Power of Women in Viking Age Iceland

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Pulling the Strings:  
The Influential Power of  
Women in Viking Age Iceland

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Icelandic women during the Viking Age managed households, raised their children, tended to the animals, and wove the cloth, along with a host of other duties overlooked by their male counterparts. These women were the unacknowledged strength within their societies. Through an examination of the culture that surrounded female Vikings in pre-Christian Iceland, historians present a more thorough understanding of the roles that these women played. This is especially evident in the study of female influences employed within pre-Christian Icelandic society. The women of Viking Age Iceland exercised power through their management of household and familial interactions, maintaining influence within a publicly male-dominated society.

Medieval Iceland was the home of Norse settlers from approximately 870 AD. The Era of the Viking Age began with their first overseas raid in 793 AD, at the monastery in Lindisfarne, in the kingdom of Northumbria. Northumbria is now a part of northern England and south-east Scotland. During their travels, Norsemen discovered Iceland for themselves in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Originally settled by Irish monks, known as the *papar*, Iceland became inhabited by more Vikings as time went on. The majority of the ‘good’ land along the coastline was taken up by the Vikings within thirty years of settlement. As the monks did not appreciate the rowdy and non-Christian lifestyle of the Vikings, their migration to Iceland effectively ejected the monks from the island. A common school of thought among scholars is that the very first Norse settler was Ingólfur Arnarson, and that he arrived in Reykjavík where he built a homestead in 874 AD. One of the most notable of the early Norse settlers in Iceland, however, was a woman named Unn the Deepminded. Found in *Laxdæla Saga*, Unn was the daughter of the powerful Ketil Flatnose, who fled to Scotland, rather than submit to Harald Finehair.<sup>1</sup> After the passing of Unn’s male

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<sup>1</sup> “Unn the Deep-Minded Takes Control of Her Life,” in *Viking Age: A Reader*, edit. by R. Andrew McDonald et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 126-129.

relatives in Scotland and Ireland, Unn sailed with her followers to Iceland.<sup>2</sup> Throughout her story, she is portrayed as a woman of good standing who did what she thought was best for herself and her family.<sup>3</sup> Like Unn, women during the Viking Age held power that focused on interpersonal relationships within their communities and families.

The nationwide conversion of Iceland from Paganism to Christianity took place in 999 or 1000AD. It was decided on amongst those of highest respect and authority in the hope that everyone being ruled by the same laws and religious beliefs would promote peace among the people. Almost all of our written sources on women in the Viking Age are written after the nation-wide conversion to Christianity, as the church brought with them their written language.

The conversion to Christianity in Iceland affects the primary sources that we have in multiple ways. Due to the illiteracy of pre-Christian Vikings, each source is written approximately a few hundred years after the supposed events occurred. There is little we can do to prove that any of the events written in the sagas are completely factual, and the time delay between the event and its transcription only exacerbates the dilemma. These writings were also usually transcribed according to the viewpoint of Christian monks, rather than Pagans, which could have altered the details of different events. While pagans and Christians had could have similar thought processes, how one views the world is commonly tinted by one's theological viewpoint.

The types of primary sources that this thesis paper focuses on include sagas, legal codes, and histories of Iceland. Sagas are a type of literature from medieval Iceland that are a narration of a specific person, peoples, or land.<sup>4</sup> Although these stories are a form of literature, there is

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<sup>2</sup> "Unn the Deep-Minded Takes Control of Her Life," 126-129.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *Saga and Society: An Introduction to Old Norse Literature*, trans. by John Tucker (Victoria: Odense University Press, 1993), 165.

much that scholars can learn about Viking society and their values from reading them. First told orally, they were only written down generations after they originated. A unique feature of these sagas is that although they were written by those in the Christian community, they were written in the tongue of the people, Icelandic, instead of in Latin.

During the research for this thesis paper, the *Laxdæla Saga*, *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, and *Njal's Saga* were the ones that were consulted. *Laxdæla Saga* is an Icelandic saga written in the 13th century, telling the story of the people in the Breiðafjörður area of Iceland from the late 9th century to the early 11th century. This particular saga holds more direct references to women than many of the other sagas, and focuses on the love triangle between Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir, Bolli Þorleiksson, and Kjartan Ólafsson. *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* is an Old Norse king's saga that focuses on the life, exploits and legacy of Olaf Tryggvasonar. He was the great-grandson of Harald Finehair, first King of Norway. Olaf Tryggvasonar played an important part in the conversion of the Norse to Christianity. *Njal's Saga*, also an Icelandic saga, focuses on many family feuds which results in the deaths of quite a few. While both *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* and *Njal's Saga* focus their attentions on men, women appear in smaller roles, imitating their status in real life.

The Book of the Icelanders, *Íslendingabók*, is a history of Iceland. Written by a priest by the name Ari Þorgilsson between the years 1122 and 1133. *Íslendingabók* is the oldest known Icelandic text.<sup>5</sup> It discusses the chronological events of Iceland. Þorgilsson was assisted in his writing by the opinions of the two Icelandic bishops, as well as the chieftain Sæmundr hinn fróði. Due to this assistance, one can assume that this book offered the “official” view of the history of Iceland. The book itself makes use of oral stories and recounts who his informants were.

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<sup>5</sup> Ari Thorgilsson, *The Book of the Icelanders*, edit. by Halldor Hermannsson. Vol. 20. (Ithaca: Cornell University Library, 1930), 61.

The law codes of Iceland were originally a set of oral laws and traditions, which were later written down and expanded upon in 1117-1118 AD, after the nation-wide conversion to Christianity. These laws- were named the Grágás, or Grey Goose laws. As each of the thirty-six districts of Iceland was led by separate goði, or chieftain, keeping the law uniform could be difficult. In order for citizens to air grievances, seek retribution, propose engagements and other concerns that dealt with the law, þings were put into place in 930, and occurred about twice a year. As the needs of the people grew, a nation-wide Alþing, otherwise known as the parliament of Viking Age Iceland, came into being once a year, for the entirety of Iceland to attend. The Alþing was located at Þingvellir, which was located approximately forty-five kilometers east of what later became Reykjavík, the capitol of Iceland. At the Alþing, the law-speaker and legislative assembly would settle cases and disputes, trading would occur, along with betrothal proposals and other transactions.

Throughout my research with the different works of scholarship consulted for this paper, I find that many of the authors' main points correlated with one another. Each of the works I consulted were written within a relatively small timeframe in relation to one another, and as such, rather than contradict each other, the different scholars tended to expand upon each other's work, and even acknowledge each other. Even if they disagreed on some aspect or another of what life was like for a Viking woman, each scholar shared common viewpoints of what influences and roles these women Vikings played in their societies. Some of the scholars even referenced their own prior work in an effort to continue their research from where they had left off.

Carol J. Clover's article, "Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe," written in 1993, discusses how although men and women can share some of the same

attributes, such as bloodthirsty or strong, these terms however, are separated by the division of the stereotypical roles of masculinity and femininity, and how these different traits carry over into the division of labor between the sexes.<sup>6</sup> She continues to discuss different stereotypical attributes associated with each gender, and how those are portrayed into Viking society. These traits are then used to look into line of hereditary succession, and how important paternal inheritance was for the Vikings.<sup>7</sup> Clover proposes that females would only inherit if there were no other living male relatives left, and uses the example of *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* to further her theories. Clover states that Hervör, a woman breaking the tradition of paternal inheritance, was additionally able to inherit from her father due to her masculine behavior and attitude, along with her being an only child with no surviving male relatives.<sup>8</sup> When looking into the different roles that these Viking women held, finding out some of the psychology behind the motifs is especially helpful to try to understand the thought process behind the roles of which these women played.

Jenny Jochens wrote the article "Consent in Marriage: Old Norse Law, Life, and Literature" in 1986.<sup>9</sup> This article discusses different ways that churchmen inserted themselves into the Norse society as Christianity became more prevalent in medieval Iceland.<sup>10</sup> Jochens begins by analyzing charters and other legal texts to determine about what time consent to marriage came to be honored by the majority of society.<sup>11</sup> Jochens states that as early as 1152, with the establishment of the archbishopric in Niðaróss, the clergy began introducing parts of their marital views as legislation, part of which included the prohibition of divorce, which was

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<sup>6</sup> Carol J. Clover, "Maiden Warriors and Other Sons," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 85, no. 1 (1986): 35.

<sup>7</sup> Clover, "Maiden Warriors and Other Sons," 39.

<sup>8</sup> Clover, "Maiden Warriors and Other Sons," 40.

<sup>9</sup> Jenny M. Jochens, "Consent in Marriage: Old Norse Law, Life, and Literature," *Early Law and Society* 58, no. 2 (1986): 142, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40918735>.

<sup>10</sup> Jochens, "Consent in Marriage," 142.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

relatively common among Vikings prior to Christianity.<sup>12</sup> Before the churchmen brought about this change, a wedding match was entirely up to the groom, his family, and the bride's male relatives.<sup>13</sup> Jochens brings forth information that proves it took quite a while for the average layperson to accept that marriage required the consent of the woman, and some never did. She lists a grouping of secular laws that she found which were "issued after ecclesiastical legislation had made the doctrine of consent the law of the land, [that] contained penalties against a woman who married contrary to the advice of her male kin."<sup>14</sup> Jochens' research concerning the rights that a Viking woman held concerning marriage and divorce enhances the research for this paper, as the laws she states, along with other findings, give insight into what the Viking mind was thinking about marriage.

Ruth Mazo Karras' article, "Concubinage and Slavery in the Viking Age" was written in 1990.<sup>15</sup> She explains that although she was looking into concubinage both prior to and during Christianity, most sources have at least been tainted by the Christian world, as they were the ones to bring about literacy.<sup>16</sup> Karras points out that there was little distinction made between concubines and slaves as relationships with neither being a legal marriage, and as such, both had few, if any, legal benefits.<sup>17</sup> Prior to the church's institution of regulations regarding the matter, the primary issue that was caused by concubinage was the status of legitimate and illegitimate children.<sup>18</sup> This issue of legitimacy persisted long after Christianity came into practice. The passing of inheritance rights for illegitimate children create problems for modern historians: one

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<sup>12</sup> Jochens, "Consent in Marriage," 143.

<sup>13</sup> Jochens, "Consent in Marriage," 144.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ruth Mazo Karras, "Concubinage and Slavery in the Viking Age," *Scandinavian Studies* 62, no. 2 (1990): 141, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40919117>.

<sup>16</sup> Karras, "Concubinage and Slavery in the Viking Age," 141.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.



cannot simply look to the children to determine the mother's rank in society.<sup>19</sup> Karras then details the differences between concubinage, slaves, and polygamy.<sup>20</sup> These three roles that women could play within a marriage-type setting each encompass different responsibilities and benefits, or lack thereof. As Karras goes into detail about each of the roles and how they affect those around them, her research provides deeper understanding of what types of power these Viking women truly did have.

In her article, "Never in Public: Women and Performance in Old Norse Literature," Zoe Borovsky discusses women's roles within the household, and how they preserved their families' honor while fulfilling their assigned roles. She uses an example from fellow scholar Helga Kress, which details the change in femininity that encompassed the Viking women, from the "strong woman" to the meeker Christian woman.<sup>21</sup> According to Borovsky, Kress "has cited the presence of the 'strong woman' as evidence of an ancient female hegemony—an oral tradition—that was later eclipsed by the emerging Viking patriarchy and finally submerged by the Christian hierarchy."<sup>22</sup> As Kress notes, the importance of women's power was overtime depleted, as other societal values, such as ruled-by-men Christianity, took its place. It is important to understand that during the Viking Age, these 'strong women' would be the last major grouping of female power for the next few centuries.

During the Viking Age, most of the power within Norse society was held by men. They were the ones that could participate at the events of the Alþing, become notable warriors, and manage homesteads, among many other political, social, legal and economic opportunities that were hard to come by for a woman. Despite the fact that men ruled the majority of the power

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<sup>19</sup> Karras, "Concubinage and Slavery in the Viking Age," 142.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Zoe Borovsky, "Never in Public: Women and Performance in Old Norse Literature," *The Journal of American Folklore* 112, no. 443 (1999), 6.

<sup>22</sup> Borovsky, "Never in Public," 6.

worldwide, women of Viking Age Iceland held a type of power that instead focused on the interpersonal relationships that these women were an essential part of. These women were able to raise the children, keep the ships' sails in good order, keep the larder stocked, and before the nationwide Christian conversion, divorce their husbands if they so choose. Of course, they had many other opportunities to exert their influence as well, but the all-encompassing point is this: although men were legally in charge of society, women still had a large amount of influence over their own lives.

In Viking Age Iceland, men were legally and politically at the forefront of their society. Men were responsible for creating and enforcing laws, as well as keeping their farmsteads running smoothly. The majority of Icelandic men were farmers, focused on animal husbandry, with a small minority having roles such as the *goði*, or *chieftain*. The elite had farms of their own but ran them from a more managerial position. Even though they were normally separated by status and wealth, each freeman was equal before the law.

The *Grágás*, Iceland's law codes, were written by men, for men. Thus, these laws are focused on matters that mostly affect themselves, and not the women in their community. At the Alþing, the men were the ones to hold the booths, and participate at the Law Rock. Law Rock was where the Lawspeaker took his seat as the presiding official of the Althing, where the proceedings would be initiated and closed. The Law Rock was also where law cases, speeches and announcements were made. Any male could attend the Law Rock and place charges against someone, yet women were not allowed to attend, even if the matter under review concerned them. If a woman needed to place charges against someone, or was needed to defend herself, her male relations were in charge of overseeing that their women were represented properly.

During the Viking Age, a woman who had yet to be married was considered to be under the authority of her father or the next highest ranking male figure within her family. Almost all marriages were arranged by both the woman's male relatives and the groom's family. Although these women had little to no say in whom their family picked out as a suitable husband, they were usually able to share their opinion about whether or not they would accept the match. In the case of royalty, men tended to respect the bride-to-be's opinion, such as in the instance of King Olaf Tryggvason of Norway (c. 960-1000) and his sister Astrid.<sup>23</sup> In *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, King Olaf agreed that the match of his sister, to Erling Skalgsson, would be beneficial to all, and yet he still left the final decision up to Astrid. In the *Grágás*, the laws of Early Iceland, however, there is no mention of needing the bride's consent to make a marriage legal, only that fathers and brothers were in charge of any marriage arrangements for their female family members.<sup>24</sup>

As these men were legally responsible for themselves, as well as for the women in their family, it was up to the men to decide upon betrothals.<sup>25</sup> According to saga evidence, the father of the bride could not seek out a worthy husband for his daughter, but had to wait to be approached by a young man he considered worthy.<sup>26</sup> Such a young man would be ideal if he had sufficient funds, a home with land, a family of notable standing, and was himself in good social-standing.<sup>27</sup> If approached by a man considered to be unworthy, fathers in the sagas could, and did, turn them away.<sup>28</sup> Women were only allowed part in these negotiations if all male relatives were dead or unavailable; a woman could negotiate her own daughter's marriage, but only then.

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<sup>23</sup> "Olaf Tryggvason and the Conversion of Norway," in *Viking Age: A Reader*, edit. by R. Andrew McDonald et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 403.

<sup>24</sup> Jenny M. Jochens, "Consent in Marriage: Old Norse Law, Life, and Literature," *Early Law and Society* 58, no. 2 (1986): 144. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40918735>

<sup>25</sup> Jochens, *Consent in Marriage*, 144.

<sup>26</sup> Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 24.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 24.

Despite women not having much say in the betrothal, her family usually had the bride's best interest at heart, trying to arrange the best match possible for all of those involved.

Although having the bride's consent made arrangements easier for all involved, it was not legally required until the Christian church grew in prominence and authority in Icelandic society. Upon the introduction of Christianity into Iceland, the church made the consent of the female a requirement for a legal marriage. In 1189, Archbishop Eiríkr of Niðarós wrote a letter to Iceland's two bishops, stating that a marriage was not considered to be complete without the bride's full consent in front of witnesses.<sup>29</sup> Although ideally the bride would now have full autonomy to decide who she would marry, many male family members still exerted their control over their women. It is not certain how much protection these new laws afforded women who went against their family's wishes. Jochen's states that even as late as 1429, a woman would still marry a man she did not desire for fear of her father.<sup>30</sup> She also notes that secular laws, issued after these new ecclesiastical rulings, decreed punishments for women who married men that their fathers advised against.<sup>31</sup>

Agreeing on a betrothal required many steps. The groom-to-be would visit the father of his chosen bride, bringing with him a group of men, one of whom was specified to be the groom's spokesman.<sup>32</sup> Only after a few days spent with the bride's father would the spokesman speak up and broach the subject of betrothal.<sup>33</sup> Treated as a business transaction between the groom and the bride's father or guardian, women were rarely consulted, as it was not required by law in pre-Christian society.

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<sup>29</sup> Jenny M. Jochens, "Consent in Marriage: Old Norse Law, Life, and Literature," *Early Law and Society* 58, no. 2 (1986): 143. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40918735>.

<sup>30</sup> Jochens, "Consent in Marriage," 144.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 24.

<sup>33</sup> Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 24.

Examples of the betrothal process can be seen throughout the different sagas and law codes. In *Brennu-Njal's saga*, a woman named Unn finds herself betrothed to a man named Hrut, without ever having met the man. At the Alþing, Hrut's brother Hoskuld decides it is time for Hrut to find a wife, and he already has a woman in mind: Unn. Hrut agrees to the match, and goes to discuss arrangements with Unn's father, Mord. Hoskuld leads the meeting, saying to Mord, "I want to talk business with you...Hrut wants to be your son-in-law, and pay the price for your daughter. I'll do all I can to make sure the deal happens."<sup>34</sup> Clearly treating this engagement as a business negotiation, none of the men brought Unn into the conversation to ask her what her thoughts on the matter were.

As fathers were not required to have their daughter's consent in arranging a marriage, many of them did not. An example of this can be seen in *Njal's Saga* with betrothal between Unn Mords daughter and Hoskuld's brother Hrut.<sup>35</sup> Unn was not consulted at all for her betrothal, as it was all arranged by Hrut, Hoskuld, as Hrut's spokesman, and Unn's father Mord.<sup>36</sup> They treated the betrothal as a business transaction rather than a marriage between two willing participants.<sup>37</sup> Hoskuld even went so far as to tell Hrut to "take a look at her," to see if she appeals to him, just as if they were shopping for material objects, rather than searching for a future wife.<sup>38</sup> The entire "transaction" took place in Mord's booth at the Alþing, where Unn's feelings on the matter were not considered even once. She is simply told only later that she is now engaged.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> "How Unn Mordsdaughter Found Herself Betrothed," in *Viking Age: A Reader*, edit. by R. Andrew McDonald et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 148-149.

<sup>35</sup> "How Unn Mordsdaughter Found Herself Betrothed," in *The Viking Age: A Reader*, 148-149.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> "How Unn Mordsdaughter Found Herself Betrothed," in *The Viking Age: A Reader*, 148-149.

Heeding the bride's opinion on a marriage was not required, nor was it often sought. As the bride was not commonly a participant in the negotiations, her opinion on whether or not she wished to be engaged to any particular man was not always taken into consideration when finalizing the match. During this time period, weddings were seen as something of a merger between families, and as such, were considered to be under the male's realm of authority.

In fact, the *Grágás*, which were written after the nationwide conversion to Christianity, states that only if a woman wished to become a nun, could a father not force his daughter to marry. Churchmen tried to institute the idea of consent among Icelanders as early as 1152, due to the fact that the church was doing away with divorce.<sup>40</sup> Consent did not become part of the laws of Iceland until 1189, when Archbishop Eiríkr of Niðaróss sent a letter to the two Icelandic bishops that stated that a marriage was not complete unless a woman gave her consent in front of witnesses.<sup>41</sup>

Before Christianity, however, even though men were not required to seek the bride's consent, often they would be considerate of their opinions. Other examples of fathers and guardians seeking the woman's approval of her betrothal can be found throughout the different sagas. In *Laxdæla Saga*, Hoskuld Dala-Kollsson came to a man named Bjorn, and sought to marry his daughter, Jorunn. Even though Bjorn welcomed the proposal, as Hoskuld was of great social standing and wealth, he decided to let Jorunn decide for herself if she would marry Hoskuld. When given the freedom to decide, Jorunn still relied on her father for his final decision. "Everything we have heard about you, Hoskuld, would make us give you a favourable

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<sup>40</sup> Jochens, 143.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

answer, for we believe that the woman that marries you would be well provided for. However, my father shall have the final word, for I shall consent to whatever he wishes in this.”<sup>42</sup>

This theme is seen again when Hoskuld’s son, Olaf Hoskuldsson, wishes to marry Þorgerd, the daughter of a man named Egil Skallagrímsson. Even though Olaf was Hoskuld’s illegitimate son by an Irish-slave woman, his father’s fame and standing, along with his own achievements, allow Olaf better prospects than he would have had otherwise. Hoskuld decides it best if Olaf is to marry Þorgerd, and Olaf agrees as long as he will not be made a fool by being denied.<sup>43</sup> At the Alþing, Hoskuld and Olaf enter Egil’s booth, and proposition him with the marriage.<sup>44</sup> Egil is excited by the prospect, but declares that Þorgerd shall have the final say, as he will not force her to marry someone against her will.<sup>45</sup> Þorgerd initially declines the proposal, because Olaf is the son of a slave-woman, despite all of his other worthy-attributes in addition to being the grandson of a king in Ireland.<sup>46</sup> Upset by the turn of events, Olaf and Hoskuld return to Egil’s tent to try to turn things around.<sup>47</sup> After a one-on-one conversation with Olaf, Þorgerd changes her mind and the betrothal is arranged.<sup>48</sup> This story of Þorgerd shows that despite not having power over choosing who she was to marry, she did have the power of her father respecting and honoring her wishes, to not force her into a marriage that she did not want.

Before Christianity, marriages among the Vikings were not necessarily monogamous. Kings and powerful men often had multiple wives and concubines.<sup>49</sup> Although bigamy was technically illegal, there are many cases among the social and political elite where polygamy was

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<sup>42</sup> *Laxdæla Saga*, 48-50.

<sup>43</sup> *Laxdæla Saga*, 48-50.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Jesch, *Women in Old Norse society*, 20.

involved.<sup>50</sup> As long as the man in question could pay the bride-price and support any children born out of the unions, all was considered to be legally and socially acceptable.<sup>51</sup> Originally, Icelandic children born illegitimately, either to a slave or to a free-person out of wedlock, did not have rights of inheritance, but this changed over time. The women who were concubines were often treated with similar respect as the legitimate wife, and were given responsibilities within the household proper.

Marriage was mostly used as a tool to ensure an orderly passing on of property and other inheritance, including land, livestock, and man-made possessions.<sup>52</sup> To ensure that there were no major upheavals among society, marriages between people tended to stay within the social status one was born into. Mainly the key issue was whether someone was born free or unfree. This distinction later evolved into how much a person and their family had in wealth and prestige, due to the amount of slaves declining over time. The sagas suggest that to the people of Iceland, the status of a person mattered more than how much money one had.

There were many regulations regarding marriage betrothals, and yet there were no minimum age requirements by law. Traditionally a young girl was seen as being old enough to marry once she reached the age of twelve.<sup>53</sup> However, seeing as weddings mostly consisted of a transference of property, most families waited until the age of maturation to betroth their children.<sup>54</sup>

Despite there being no laws regarding age requirements for a marriage, there were laws regarding other matters that would today be seen as taboo, such as incest.<sup>55</sup> Couples were not

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Jesch, *Women in Old Norse society*, 21.

<sup>53</sup> Jesch, *Women in Old Norse society*, 22.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Jesch, *Women in Old Norse society*, 23.



allowed to marry if they were within a certain degree of blood relation.<sup>56</sup> These laws, however, did not prohibit people from marrying other people who were related to each other.<sup>57</sup> There are stories where a woman married her dead-husband's brother, and of a law-speaker who lived with a mother-daughter duo.<sup>58</sup> Because this was not technically incest, this marriage was permitted, although the situation was not a common occurrence.

Once married, a woman is entrusted with duties that are to benefit her new household. After becoming officially wed, a woman's first and foremost duty was to bear her husband children. Although she might get pregnant multiple times during her lifespan, she likely had only two to three living children, as infant and child mortality was quite high.<sup>59</sup> Due to the relative unimportance of women and children until they were of use to the society as a whole, it is of some difficulty to find any sources relating to pregnancy and child-rearing.

A wife's day-to-day "women's work" focused largely inside of the household, including, tending to the elderly and sick, weaving homespun, and producing and managing the food.<sup>60</sup> Traditionally the first gift given from husband to wife were keys. Many women carried a set of keys for every lock in their home, including the food storage and the money chest. As only the women had these keys, they represented the power that women held within their household.<sup>61</sup>

One of the ways women helped support their family economy was to weave homespun, or wool. Women sheared the sheep, cleaned the wool, and spun the yarn. Ells of homespun were not only meant to make clothing and tapestries from, but were also used as the primary form of payment. According to the *Grágás*, an ell of homespun was fifty-four to fifty-seven centimeters,

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Jesch, *Women in Old Norse society*, 23.

<sup>59</sup> Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 65.

<sup>60</sup> Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 22.

<sup>61</sup> Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 20.

and six ells “of given quality”, along with two ells broad, equals an ounce-unit.<sup>62</sup> The cloth prepared by these women was simple in design, yet carefully and well made.<sup>63</sup> Homespun was used for many things. It is what men made their sails out of for their boats and wrapped their cargo in. It was how the law speakers were paid and it covered the walls of churches and homes in decorative images, as well as what made the clothes on their backs.<sup>64</sup> Homespun was used for many other things as well, these were just the most notable of examples. Women were also in charge of creating and storing food for the family. They tended and milked the animals, and made the butter and cheese. The fact that the woman of the house was in charge of these two very important commodities gave them an immeasurable amount of power.

Many graves found of Viking women have included items that portray who, and what, this woman was to her family and community. Women were also buried in what was considered her nicest outfit. These outfits include brooches, which were not only used to keep their clothes held together, but as a place to hang small tools, such as a knife or spindle whorl. Items that have been found in these gravesites include: spindle whorls, wool brushes, loom weights, weaving battens, weaving tablets, needles, and various tools used for smoothing finished cloth.<sup>65</sup> Also found in graves are iron shears, containers, and knives. These are likely used for shearing wool for cloth, as well as food preparation.<sup>66</sup>

As mothers, Viking women were in charge of rearing their children. Because women did not have the traditional sense of power that their male counterparts had, mothers exercised their influence through their sons. They promoted the interests of their sons in hopes of improving their social status, while in return sons protected their mothers physically, legally, and in

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<sup>62</sup> Grágás, 224.

<sup>63</sup> Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, 19.

<sup>64</sup> Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 142.

<sup>65</sup> Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, 19.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

defending her honor. While sons were not required to heed their mothers' advice once they reached a certain age, the sagas show us that many sons still respected their mother's opinion, and often sought her approval. In *Njal's Saga*, Queen Gunnhild, the widow of Eirik Bloodaxe, is able to influence her son Harald Greycloak, even though he is not only a grown man, but also king.<sup>67</sup> She uses this connection with her son to increase the social status of her lover, Hrut.<sup>68</sup> As a widow, Queen Gunnhild is still able to command a household by herself, even without a man by her side. When she takes Hrut as her lover, she uses her influence over her son and others, along with her own wealth, to make sure that they are happy together and that no one interferes with their relationship.

Despite Gunnhild's story, this kind of autonomy was not the case with most widows. Once her husband had passed, a woman and any children born of their union would tend to merge back with the mother's birth family. The widow and her children would stay with her family until the possible opportunity of a new marriage arose. One benefit of a woman losing her husband, was that the widow would have more say in the arrangement of her new marriage and could even turn the man down if she deemed the match unfitting. If the widow did remarry, she would take her dowry from her first marriage and, along with her children, join together into the household of her new husband.

A common characteristic of mothers represented throughout the sagas is that they drove their relatives to take up arms, defend the family's honor, and seek retribution for a murdered or slighted family member. Referred to as goading or whetting, as one might sharpen a blade on a stone, Viking women would belittle men's masculinity, and use guilt or other such ridicule, until the men were forced to take action. In the *Gudrun Drives her Sons to Take Revenge*, Gudrun

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<sup>67</sup> "Queen Gunnhild has her Way with Hrut," in *Viking Age: A Reader*, 130-133.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

finds out that her daughter, Svanhild, is sentenced to death by being trampled by horses, on orders of her husband Ermaneric, King of the Ostrogoths.<sup>69</sup> Overcome with grief, Gudrun goads her sons into taking revenge, killing the king.<sup>70</sup> This same theme can be seen within many others stories throughout the Viking sagas. Other examples include *Gudrun Osvifrsdaughter's Incitement of her Sons* and *The Goading of Hildegun*. In *Gudrun Osvifrsdaughter's Incitement of her Sons*, a different Gudrun than the first, years after her husband has been murdered, guilts her sons into taking revenge for their father, since where they had been too young to do seek revenge at the time of his death. In *The Goading of Hildegun*, Hildegun's husband has been murdered by his foster-father's sons in a never ending chain of revenge that encompasses the theme of *Njal's Saga*. These examples of women Vikings' ability to incite their sons to take revenge for a fallen family member shows the impact these mothers had on their sons. If the sons did not care for their mothers or their opinions, the likelihood of them taking up the cause would not have been probable.

Goading and whetting can also be seen as Viking men go off to war. The women would sometimes accompany the men on their journey, yet when the actual battle occurred, they would stay back at either camp or their ships. If the men came back before all of the fighting had ended, the women would beat at their breast, pull their hair, and belittle their manhood until the men went back to finish off their opponents.<sup>71</sup> While back at the camp as the men were off fighting, the women were still expected to do the chores typical of a housewife, including doing the cooking, laundry and other such housework.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> "Die Lieder des Codex Reius," in *Viking Age: A Reader*, 137-142.

<sup>70</sup> "Die Lieder des Codex Reius," in *Viking Age: A Reader*, 137-142.

<sup>71</sup> Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, 105.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

Unlike most of Christian Europe during this time period, the Vikings in Iceland made laws so that divorce was legal, and could be decided upon by the man, woman, or as a couple. To make a divorce official took but three steps. The couple was required to say “I divorce you” in three different locations.<sup>73</sup> Those three places were to be in public in front of witnesses, in the threshold of one’s house, and once while both the husband and wife were laying together on top of their marriage bed.<sup>74</sup> As with most cultures, these customs were symbols that stood for the three ways a man and woman are considered married. The public announcement represented their status and relationship as a couple within society, the threshold announcement was for their household and how they worked and lived together as a family, and the announcement on their marriage bed represented their sexual relationship coming to an end.

Once divorced, the couple divided up their income and property, the wife reclaiming her dowry in addition to any property or wealth that became hers in the splitting of holdings. The higher a woman’s or couple’s status and wealth, the more likely she would be able to get more when the assets were divided amongst the couple. There are even examples of prenuptial agreements within the sagas. When Gudrun marries Þorvald in the *Laxdæla Saga*, their prenuptial contract states that she will control their property during marriage, and no matter how long they remained together, she is entitled to half of that property in the event of divorce.<sup>75</sup> Another part of the contract states that Þorvald is required to buy Gudrun whatever she wants, no matter the price, so that no other women of the same amount of wealth can have anything better than her.<sup>76</sup> Þorvald is also required to keep up with the farm’s expenses.

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<sup>73</sup> Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, 58.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> “Laxdæla Saga,” in *Viking Age: A Reader*, 149-150.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

Due to Gudrun's greed, the marriage does not work out, so after living together for only two years, Gudrun decides to divorce Þorvald by making him seem effeminate, which is seen as solid grounds for divorce. Gudrun conspires with Þord Ingunnarson to trick Þorvald into wearing a low cut shirt, which is considered too feminine. Gudrun does this so she can divorce him and be with Þord instead.<sup>77</sup> Unlike in the story of Gudrun and Þorvald, most Viking women were powerful enough, however, to end their marriage on their terms, without trickery.

Regarding property, everything a wife brought into the marriage remained hers and did not come under her husband's control. It stayed with her even if a divorce occurred. Children of the divorced couple inherited from both their mother as well as their father upon their parents' deaths. While babies and toddlers automatically stayed with their mother, the older children were divided between the parents according to which parent held the most wealth and societal status of the two, and how the children would affect their social standing. Older children, therefore, become a part of the divorce negotiations, with women having equal claims to the children as the men.

During the Viking Age women held power that focused on interpersonal relationships within their communities and families. Men, by contrast, held legal and social power. These women served as mothers, daughters, wives, weavers, farm managers, and so much more. The jobs that these women performed often went unappreciated or unnoticed, yet helped to keep their society running smoothly. Throughout their lives Viking women may have legally been the charges of their men, but they still exercised power over many decisions and actions. The Icelandic women during the Viking Age exercised power through their management of household and familial interactions, maintaining influence within a publicly male-dominated

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<sup>77</sup> "Laxdæla Saga," in *Viking Age: A Reader*, 149-150.

society. These women held a power that was both defined and complex, making an impact on their society, their families, and their own lives.

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