Lagertha: The Shieldmaiden

Lagertha is a legendary Viking shieldmaiden known from Saxo Grammaticus’ early 13th-century CE Gesta Danorum. According to the Danish history, she was the first wife of Ragnar Lothbrok, a legendry Viking king said to have lived during the 9th century CE. The Gesta Danorum is the only historical source that even mentions her and ties her in with the more broadly-known Ragnar mythos, making her more of a footnote within his legend rather than a core element. She makes for a bold footnote, though, and an interesting character in her own right; brave and skilled, she is twice responsible for ensuring victory for Ragnar in [**battle**](https://www.worldhistory.org/disambiguation/battle/). his stories are rooted in the Old Norse traditions known from medieval Icelandic [**literature**](https://www.worldhistory.org/literature/). Specifically, Lagertha herself may have been inspired by the Norse goddess Thorgerd, local to Hálogaland, Norway.

The Gesta Danorum

Saxo sets the stage for Ragnar and Lagertha's meeting by describing how the Swedish King Frø has slain Siward, King of the Norwegians, who was Ragnar's grandfather, and has publically humiliated Siward's female family members by putting them in a brothel. Ragnar, having just succeeded his father Siward Ring (Sigurd Hring or Ring in other Ragnar stories) to the throne of Jutland in Denmark, hears of this and is obviously not pleased. Coming to Norway with vengeance on his mind, Ragnar is met at his camp by some of the women who had been scorned, dressed up in male attire and ready to join him to hunt down the Swedish king. In the ensuing successful battle, it is one maiden in particular who stands out to Ragnar; he even goes so far as to attribute the victory to her might alone. This is, of course, Lagertha, who is described by Saxo as

...a skilled amazon, who, though a maiden, had the courage of a man, and fought in front among the bravest with her hair loose over her shoulders. All marvelled at her matchless deeds, for her locks ying down her back betrayed that she was a woman. (IX).

As if the ghting skills of the legendary warrior were not enough to set Ragnar's heart aame, he also hears she is of noble birth, so he instantly starts courting her long-distance by sending messages to her home. Saxo tells of Lagertha feigning interest and basically leading Ragnar on while she sets up an advanced defence system around her house in the Gaulardal valley (in present-day Norway): a bear and a dog stand guard on her porch, ready to tear her would-be lover to pieces. When Ragnar travels to her home thinking he is in for an easy win, he meets the guardians who – although a surprise to him – prove no match and fall to his legendary skills, one speared and one strangled to death. Lagertha becomes Ragnar's prize, and in their subsequent marriage, they have two unnamed daughters as well as a son, Fridleif. Three peaceful years Ragnar spends in Norway before unrest in his own Danish kingdom calls him back there. At this point, Saxo's account turns to more familiar waters when it comes to the Ragnar legend. He introduces King Herodd of Sweden – known from the main source on Ragnar, The [***Saga***](https://www.worldhistory.org/Saga/) of Ragnar Lothbrok, as Herruð, jarl of Götaland in Sweden – whose daughter Thora has been raising a bunch of snakes who grow out of control. Herodd offers his daughter's hand to whoever can rid them of their slight problem, and Ragnar,

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After returning to Denmark to fight a civil war, Ragnar (who, according to Saxo, was still annoyed that Lagertha had set beasts against him) divorced Lagertha in order to marry [Thora Borgarhjört](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%9E%C3%B3ra_Borgarhj%C7%ABrtr) (Þóra Borgarhjǫrtr), daughter of King [Herraud](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herrau%C3%B0r" \o "Herrauðr) (Herrauðr) of Sweden.[[1]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lagertha#cite_note-The_Early_Cultures_of_North-West_Europe,_414-1) He won the hand of his new love after numerous adventures, but upon returning to Denmark was again faced with a civil war. Ragnar sent to Norway for support, and Lagertha, who still loved him, came to his aid with 120 ships, according to Saxo.[[2]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lagertha#cite_note-The_Danish_History-2) When at the height of the battle, Ragnar's son [Siward](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sigurd_Snake-in-the-Eye) was wounded, Lagertha saved the day for Ragnar with a counter-attack:

Ladgerda, who had a matchless spirit though a delicate frame, covered by her splendid bravery the inclination of the soldiers to waver. For she made a sally about, and flew round to the rear of the enemy, taking them unawares, and thus turned the panic of her friends into the camp of the enemy.[[2]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lagertha#cite_note-The_Danish_History-2)

Upon returning to Norway, she quarrelled with her husband, and slew him with a spearhead she concealed in her gown. Saxo concludes that she then "usurped the whole of his name and sovereignty; for this most presumptuous dame thought it pleasanter to rule without her husband than to share the throne with him".[[2]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lagertha#cite_note-The_Danish_History-2)

“Lagertha.” Wikipedia, The Fee Encyclopedia, Wikipidia Foundation, 27 July 2023 last updated,

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lagertha.