"'Gone looking' for female Viking warriors": Reimagining Viking Gender and Sexuality Through Michael Hirst's *Vikings*

by

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Introduction

The Viking Woman (Warrior?) at Birka and Beyond

In September 2017, researchers at Uppsala University published an article titled "A Female Viking Warrior Confirmed by Genomics."[1] This study presented the researchers' findings that the body interred in grave Bj.581 at Birka, the historic Viking Age trade settlement on the island of Björkö,[2] Sweden, was biologically female in life and not male as had been previously assumed. This new data about the sex of the body was particularly impactful because the grave and its contents, which had initially been excavated in the 1870s, had long been seen as perhaps the exemplary high-status warrior burial site.[3] One of the exceptional results of this article was the sheer amount of public coverage it received: as the team wrote in a follow-up article in 2019, their 2017 publication was covered by over one hundred and thirty international news agencies and became one of the most frequently accessed scientific papers of 2017.[4]

Writing in 2017, lead author Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson and her team used genomic evidence to argue that the skeleton at Bj.581 was a woman and cited existing scholarship to argue that the grave goods indicated that she was a warrior, complicating the gendered assumptions of previous Old Norse scholarship. The grave in question

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[1] Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson et al., "A Female Viking Warrior Confirmed by Genomics," *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 164, no. 4 (September 2017): 858.
[2] The abbreviation Bj. stands for Birka on the island of Björkö, Sweden; 581 is the identifier for this particular grave site. Bj.581 is therefore a shorthand reference for the gravesite which is the focus of the Uppsala team's analysis.
[3] See review in Michael Greshko, "Famous Viking Warrior Was a Woman, DNA Reveals," *National Geographic News*, September 12, 2017, https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2017/09/viking-warrior-woman-archaeology-spd/.
[4] Neil Price et al., "Viking Warrior Women? Reassessing Birka Chamber Grave Bj.581," *Antiquity* 93, no. 367 (2019): 182.

contained a variety of weapons as well as many other artifacts, including game pieces and the skeletal remains of two horses. At the time of excavation, these items had been interpreted as warrior grave goods, a confirmation of the warrior identity of the buried individual and therefore confirmation that the individual was of the male sex. However, given the new genomic evidence, the grave goods took on new meaning for the Uppsala team: with a different sex and unchanged grave goods, they proposed that Bj.581 provided proof of the much discussed possibility of women warriors. For the Uppsala team, the particular grave goods indicated that the buried woman could have been not just any soldier, but a woman warrior of status.[5] Synthesizing the warrior grave goods and the female sex of the interred, the Uppsala team concluded that "women, indeed, were able to be full members of male dominated spheres."[6] If true, their argument would mean a radical revision of scholarly understanding of Viking Age social order and gender roles.

Such an assertion was highly controversial in the face of decades of research which had concluded, in the face of slight textual evidence, that Viking Age women warriors alluded to in source texts were little more than a male fantasy. Some medievalists were not convinced that the available evidence was sufficient for the Uppsala team to draw these conclusions. In a blog post responding to the article, noted Old Norse literary scholar Judith Jesch argued that Hedenstierna-Jonson and her team ignored contextualizing literary evidence in favor of unilaterally interpreting genetic evidence in a way that elided the complexity of contexts that have been elucidated over

[5] Hedenstierna-Jonson et al. 858.
[6] Ibid.

generations of Old Norse scholarship.[7] As Jesch wrote, "the authors might have been better advised to keep this article to the purely scientific data, and leave the interpretation of it to other contexts which might have given them more space to reason more carefully."[8] Moreover, Jesch argued that the allure of the woman warrior remains a problematic influence in modern scholarship because it incentivizes this tendency to move quickly from evidence to an attractive conclusion. As she writes, she has "always thought (and to some extent still do[es]) that the fascination with women warriors, both in popular culture and in academic discourse, is heavily, probably too heavily, influenced by 20th- and 21st-century desires…the emotional lure of the woman warrior, especially in the Viking Age, is too strong for reasoned argument."[9] In other words, Jesch argued that the article was an example of wishful medievalism, as it selectively interpreted the facts to fit a desired notion of what the past was or should have been.

The debate over Bj.581 has not yet been resolved. Neil Price, one of the senior academics on Hedenstierna-Jonson's original article, was the first author on a 2019 response by the Uppsala team to criticisms—including Jesch's—of their 2017 article.[10] In this article, Price and the Uppsala team reiterated their previous claims, arguing that their conclusion was not a logical leap, as Jesch had characterized it; rather, it was based not only on the gravesite itself, but also on its historical and archaeological context. As they write: "the person in Bj.581 was buried in a grave full of functional weapons and war-gear (and little else), in close proximity to other burials with weapons, next to a building

[7] Judith Jesch, "Norse and Viking Ramblings: Let's Debate Female Viking Warriors Yet Again," accessed October 23, 2018, http://norseandviking.blogspot.com/2017/09/lets-debate-female-viking-warriors-yet.html.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Price et al. See page 6 of the article's supplementary materials document.

saturated with weapons, outside the gate of a fortress. Furthermore, the interment took place at a time when the hillfort and 'garrison' were at their zenith."[11] As the authors summarize, "many other interpretations of both funerary treatment and gender are possible, but Occam's razor would suggest that to reach for them as a first resort is to attempt to 'explain away' what seems to be the most obvious and logical conclusion."[12] In other words, while other interpretations of the grave goods certainly exist, and all study of Old Norse archaeology involves a certain amount of educated guesswork, the most straightforward explanation of the evidence is that the woman was a warrior. Notably, their response does not fully resolve Jesch's concern that literary evidence was not given the relative importance that it deserved in the team's weighing of literary and archaeological evidence.

The Uppsala team argued that Jesch was wrong in asserting that they had allowed modern conversations and desires around gender to influence their scholarship. Rather, they turned the focus back to their critics:

> we have not 'gone looking for' female Viking warriors...we feel no intrinsic need for there to have been a female warrior buried in the grave, nor for such individuals to have existed more widely. We simply find it interesting that this seems to have been the case. In the course of our research—and even more so after the 2017 publication—it has been enlightening to discover how many people apparently need this *not* [emph. orig.] to be so.[13]

The authors suggested that resistance to the woman Viking warrior is a function of powerful modern stereotypes. As they wrote, "[the woman Viking warrior] adjusts and

[11] Price et al. 192.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Price et al. 194.

nuances our interpretations, and challenges our stereotypes. She adds still further dimensions to our understanding of the Viking Age as a time of critical cultural transformation and social encounter."[14] The power of the woman warrior, fictional or not, to destabilize existing ideas about gender in the medieval past is precisely what makes her such a controversial figure. From the exchange between these scholars, it is clear that the figure of the Viking Age woman warrior reveals pressure points in modern society around questions of identity. Jesch and Price disagree on the interpretation of the archaeological evidence but agree that our attempts to interpret the past are intertwined with presentist desires to see—or not see—the woman from Viking Age Birka as a warrior.

Even as the Uppsala team and Jesch each seek to escape the charge of presentism, they reveal that academic knowledge production is never far from the popular desires that give shape to cultural productions representing the past. These cultural productions which engage in this kind of "medievalism"—that is, the process of reinventing, remembering, and reenacting the Middle Ages—are called "medievalist" media.[15] American popular media have a longstanding interest in discovering, rewriting, or offering alternatives to the medieval past, an interest that only seems to be increasing in the era of digital media. The 2010s have been a particularly rich period for medieval media, as some of the most popular recent medievalist works came into being during this past decade. From fantasy medieval-themed works such as HBO's hit television drama *Game of Thrones* (2012-2019) to explicitly Viking television dramas like Netflix and the BBC's joint production

[14] Ibid.
[15] For more on the history and usage of this term, see Richard J. Utz, *Medievalism: A Manifesto*, (Kalamazoo: ARC Humanities Press, 2017).

The Last Kingdom (2014-present) and the History Channel's *Vikings* (2013-2020), the Middle Ages has been ascendant in its popularity as a setting and inspiration for modern media. The image of the Viking has been a particularly prominent subset of this medievalist revival, with books, comics, TV shows, and video games including *God of War* (2018), *Norsemen* (2016-present), *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (2017), *The Last King* (2016), *How to Train Your Dragon* (2010) and its sequels, and *Thor* (2011) and its sequels all relying on and reinterpreting Viking Age material. Media engagement with the figure of the Viking is not limited to America; although this work focuses on important examples of Viking representation in American media history, the Viking has also become a figure of great importance in media produced in Scandinavian countries, Europe, and Russia.[16] This modern resurgence of popular interest in the figure of the Viking has also sparked renewed activity among particular online communities who uphold the Viking as a figure of aspirational violent white masculinity.[17]

The popular image of the Viking has emerged from a long history of scholarly work entangled with presentist desires. It is an image that has been created in part out of the absences in the historical record. While historians know relatively quite a lot about medieval Scandinavians compared to other regions in Europe, the depth and quality of scholarly understanding drops precipitously as the moment of inquiry moves further back into the Iron Age. Even the popular usage of the term "Viking" as an ethnonym referring to "Viking Age Scandinavians" is the product of centuries of medievalist misunderstandings and is generally rejected by modern scholars. "Viking" is not a

[16] Barbora Davidková, "Russian Perspectives – *Viking*," in *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies*, ed. Jürg Glauser, Pernille Hermann, Stephen Mitchell. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 933-40.
[17] I will discuss one such group, the misogynist hate group Norssk, in my conclusion.

historical ethnonym but is in fact a corruption of the original word form which translates most accurately to "pirate."[18] "Viking Age Scandinavians" is a term adopted by modern historians as an appropriate umbrella term for what was in fact a group of distinct peoples across a complex and varied historical period. For the purposes of this thesis, I use the former term to refer to the mythopoetic figure of the Viking in media, and the latter term when discussing the historical Scandinavian peoples who lived between approximately 793 and 1066 CE.[19]

Popular media representations also must decide how to interact with the range of tropes and traditions they inherit from a long history of media using the figure of the Viking as a representative for whiteness and white masculinity. In the 20th century, the image of the Viking provided Scandinavian countries reeling from civil war and the difficulties of nationalization a shared historical ancestor.[20] In Nazi Germany,[21] the Viking was deployed as a model of white purity—a somewhat ironic usage in hindsight, given that we now know that Viking settlements may typically have been populated by a

[18] The usage of "Viking" as an ethnonym has little basis, as far as historians have been able to determine, in the historical usage of the word. The word which becomes "Vikings" is first used in 8th century Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Frisian texts in a usage which best translates to 'piracy' [Old English: *wícingsceaða*, lit. 'viking-harm']. In the Scandinavian context, there are primarily two forms of the word: *víking*, which means "piracy" and *víkingr*, which means "pirate." Notice that, on its own, the historical word has no national or ethnic implications and is not capitalized, as it is not a proper noun. Where scholars have used the term "Viking" in reference to the historical people I have left their original words intact, but in my writing I follow the convention above.

[19] The first of these dates marks the year of what is generally (though not universally) considered the first Scandinavian raid on England. On June 8, 793, a vessel of Scandinavian raiders landed at the beaches near Lindisfarne in the kingdom of Northumbria and proceeded to pillage its undefended monastery. This raid is typically used as the first confirmed instance of contact between Anglo-Saxon England and Viking Age Scandinavia, though some academics believe the start of the Viking Age should be pushed to earlier in the Iron Age. The second of these dates corresponds to the Battle of Hastings, where Norman invaders pushed out the last remnants of Danish rule.

[20] See Stephen Mitchell, "Swedish Perspectives," in *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies*, edited by Jürg Glauser, Pernille Hermann, and Stephen Mitchell (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 824-833.

[21] For more on the German usages of the figure of the Viking, especially during the time of state formation, see Roland Scheel, "German Perspectives," in Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies, ed. Jürg Glauser, Pernille Hermann, and Stephen Mitchell (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 913-920.

variety of Scandinavian and non-Scandinavian ethnic groups[22]—and masculinity. Most recently, the Viking has been co-opted by far-right organizations to argue for an idealized and aspirational white supremacist and male-dominated medieval past.[23] Even as the representation of Viking Age Scandinavians in popular media today shifts towards more nuanced portrayals of a complex society of diplomats, traders, and farmers, such media representations must choose selectively to conform to or reject the familiar trope of the bearded, warlike savage.

This thesis explores the stakes and possibilities of Viking representation through a focus on *Vikings* (2013-2020), a popular and long-running series written by Michael Hirst for the History Channel and developed in part through dialogue with historians and archeologists. *Vikings* is a particularly interesting source for studying the complex intersection of presentist desires about the past, ongoing developments in the historical and archeological study of the Viking world, and the history of popular representations of the Vikings as they play out in present-day media. My work focuses on the series' representation of concepts of Viking gender and sexuality, especially as it engages ongoing debates about sex, gender, and whiteness in the present. Each chapter treats a selection of scenes from the series chosen for their relevance to the show's intervention in areas of unsettled academic debate about the role of women and possibilities of sexual expression in Viking society. In choosing to emphasize the representation of women in a variety of social roles including those of warriors and political leaders, and in choosing to

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[22] One recent study in particular stands out as proof of regional diversity in Viking Age settlements: see Maja Krzewińska et al., "Genomic and Strontium Isotope Variation Reveal Immigration Patterns in a Viking Age Town," *Current Biology* 28, no. 17 (2018): 2730-738.

[23] Some far-right groups have rebranded themselves as "alt-right" in an effort to distance their public image from extremism. It is a term which is largely synonymous with "white nationalist" or, more directly, "neo-Nazi." See George Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017) for a more in-depth discussion of the term and the ideology of the groups it describes.

emphasize sexual possibilities outside of the structure of compulsory heterosexuality, *Vikings* challenges some deeply entrenched tropes about the medieval past that have been used to support violent and repressive politics in the present. The result is a cautiously progressive political message, albeit one that is itself selectively presentist.

Michael Hirst and *Vikings*

On March 3, 2013, *Vikings* premiered on the History Channel. The series featured sweeping natural landscapes, mostly authentic set and costume design, and the bloody scenes of combat which were already the familiar hallmarks of Viking-themed media. It was a big-budget television series and one of the network's first scripted dramas. In some ways, it was not so different from other popular fantasy works which had preceded it. As Nancy Dubuc, president for entertainment and media of History Channel's parent company A&E Networks told culture critic for *The New York Times* Tom Gilbert just weeks before the show's debut, "hopefully it's very appealing to a core young male audience—I think there are some parallels to some of the video games that are being played today by young men."[24] Though she does not mention specific titles, the timing of her comment implied that she was referring to *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, an extremely popular role-playing game released in late 2011 which featured a high fantasy world clearly inspired by Viking-themed media, mythology, and sagas.[25] Based on the

[24] Tom Gilbert, "Vikings Come Ashore in a New Light," *The New York Times*, February 22, 2013, https://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/24/arts/television/vikings-struggles-come-to-life-in-history-channels-series.html.

[25] The game draws heavily on Nordic themes; from the landscape, which features snow-capped mountains, fjords, and fertile valleys evocative of Scandinavian geography, to the runic language original to the game (though highly evocative of Scandinavian runic languages) spoken by dragons but also by the player character, to the accents of voice actors, almost all of whom speak in a Scandinavian or Germanic accent.

marketing materials which accompany the series, it seems that Dubuc's comparison of the series' aesthetic to that of other popular Norse-themed media was apt; most official promotional material highlights the grim, dirty faces of bearded and tattooed white men as they fight each other on grassy, misty plains.[26]

In the same interview, however, show creator and writer Michael Hirst described his aims for the show in slightly different terms, as a project of historical recovery. Hirst states that he wanted to "tell the story [of the Vikings] from [their own] point of view, because their history was written by Christian monks, basically, whose job it was to exaggerate their violence."[27] He wanted to get past the image of "the guys who break in through the door, slash up your house and rape and pillage for no good reason" and instead to portray the complexity of Viking Age Scandinavian society,[28] with its diverse social roles including not only warriors but also explorers, traders, and settlers. As Hirst says in the first of a series of podcast episodes produced by the History Channel as a promotional effort leading up to the release of season five in November 2017: "the Vikings are not Nazis...they're democrats. That's the whole point."[29]

As Hirst acknowledges in the same interview, his aim of rehabilitating the image of the Viking to more closely resemble the historical Viking Age Scandinavians encounters the difficulty—one well known to medievalists—of the lack of textual

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For more on *Skyrim*, see Victoria Elizabeth Cooper "Fantasies of the North: Medievalism and Identity in *Skyrim*" (PhD diss., University of Leeds, 2016).

[26] "*Vikings* Pictures & Galleries," History Channel, accessed February 17, 2020, https://www.history.com/shows/vikings/pictures.

[27] Gilbert.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Liam Geraghty, "Origin and Creation," October 5, 2017, in *Vikings: The Official Podcast*, podcast, MP3 audio, 5:00-04, access courtesy of the host. Special thanks to podcast host Liam Geraghty for providing the recordings of these podcasts, which at time of writing are no longer available on the History Channel official website. Contact him and see his work at liamgeraghty.com.

sources. Hirst tells Gilbert that "[he] especially had to take liberties with 'Vikings' because no one knows for sure what happened in the Dark Ages...very little was written then."[30] Though perhaps more simplistic a characterization than most medieval scholars might phrase it, Hirst's comment is nonetheless an apt description of the central issue facing scholars of the Middle Ages, even those who focus on medieval Scandinavia:[31] there simply are not enough reliable textual and archaeological sources to make strong, definitive claims about the social world of pre-Christian Viking Age society. Unlike scholars grappling with these difficulties, however, Hirst does not pay a price for speculation or error: all that matters is that the series 'feels' realistic—and, more importantly, that it entertains. As Hirst states: "[the bottom line is] we want people to watch [the show]. A historical account of the Vikings would reach hundreds, occasionally thousands, of people. Here we've got to reach millions."[32]

Hirst is no stranger to the unique demands and possibilities of historical fiction in the context of a popular television series. Prior to his work on *Vikings*, Hirst was the head writer for the Emmy Award-winning series *The Tudors* and produced two films on Queen Elizabeth I: *Elizabeth* and *Elizabeth: The Golden Age*. In contrast to *Vikings*, *The Tudors* was not known for its historical accuracy, and was indeed criticized for its anachronistic portrayal of Tudor-era England and a lack of respect for historical fact.[33] As he tells NPR's Alex Cohen in a 2008 interview, "my first duty is to write a show that's

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[30] Gilbert.
[31] Indeed, scholars know relatively more about emotions and 'lived lives' in medieval Scandinavia than elsewhere in Europe. Despite this relative wealth of knowledge, scholars still don't know everything about these societies. As is the case with all medieval scholarship, surviving sources do not provide all of the details which would make our picture of the past completely accurate.
[32] Gilbert.
[33] See Andrew Hough, "BBC period show, The Tudors, is 'historically inaccurate', leading historian says," *The Telegraph*, August 10, 2009, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/6005582/BBC-period-show-The-Tudors-is-historically-inaccurate-leading-historian-says.html.

entertaining. I wasn't commissioned by Showtime to write a historical documentary…we wanted to get closer to the spirit of the thing, to a kind of reality."[34] In this context, it is perhaps surprising that Hirst's work on *Vikings* reflects a real engagement with academic work on the history it represents.

Vikings is distinctive among medievalist television for its degree of engagement with academic scholarship —historical, literary, and archaeological. As Hirst put it in the premiere episode of the official podcast, "I don't believe in historical accuracy, but I do want things to be as truthful as they can be."[35] As Paul Hardwick and Kate Lister write, "[Hirst's] notional distinction between accuracy and truth, although not precisely defined, has been at the heart of the show's appeal since it first aired in March 2013."[36] The show's distinctive mix of historical sources and evidence allows it to present a "truth claim" which makes its fictional narratives compelling to fans.[37]

This tension between dramatic and narrative coherence and historical fidelity is at the core of the series' engagement with the Viking past.[38] It would not be a stretch to describe *Viking* as a pastiche of sorts, a mash-up of historical narratives, anthropology,

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[34] Alex Cohen, "'The Tudors' Battles with the Truth," *NPR*, March 28, 2008, https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=89182466.
[35] Geraghty 01:30.
[36] Paul Hardwick and Kate Lister, "Introduction" in *Vikings and the Vikings: Essays on Television's History Channel Series*, ed. Paul Hardwick and Kate Lister (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2019), 3. This collection of essays was published at the end of 2019 and I was only able to consult it in the two weeks preceding the completion of this thesis; as a result, I am not able to engage with all of the ideas presented by its authors as fully as I would have liked, given adequate time, though many of them make arguments congruent with those I present in this thesis.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Justin Pollard, "Foreword" in *Vikings and the Vikings: Essays on Television's History Channel Series*, ed. Paul Hardwick and Kate Lister (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2019), 1-2. This is a tension which the producers are very much aware of. As Pollard writes, "it is true to say that this series came from academic beginnings and was guided throughout by academic input. That is not to say that the series is an academic enterprise. It is a popular show for a worldwide audience to enjoy. But in making it so we bear a responsibility to deal fairly with our material and keep as up-to-date with modern thinking as we reasonably can" (Pollard 2).

and Hollywood medievalism. Indeed, production designer Tom Conroy is quoted as saying that he "had to piece a lot of things together" when it came time to build the sets.[39] An example of how historical accuracy gave way to the production needs of a modern television series was Conroy's "improvising lighting sources for Viking homes and halls, which had no windows, making engaging photography of a strictly realistic interior setting impossible."[40] To overcome this difficulty, the production company used a combination of in-home lighting from diegetic sources such as cooking fires and torches as well as the addition of inaccurate but important openings in the wall and ceiling, adding windows to buildings which archaeologists believe would have had fully solid walls.[41] This concession was a relatively minor one, but it is nonetheless indicative of the kind of compromises necessary to bridge historical content and dramatic television.

In spite of such inaccuracies, the series can be said to bear out something like Hirst's stated commitment to "truthfulness." He draws repeatedly on modern scholarly historical knowledge about Viking Age Scandinavians—their social norms, hierarchies, priorities, and the many details of their daily lives. The narrative itself also loosely follows and even blends together the narrative material of several Viking Age sagas and engages with several major historical events in Viking Age Scandinavian history. For example, the first episodes of the show catalogue the Viking Age discovery of new technologies in shipbuilding and navigation which historians believe allowed them to possess a naval advantage over most other medieval European societies.[42] When

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[39] Gilbert.
[40] Gilbert.
[41] For more on the construction of Viking Age longhouses, see Jan-Henrik Fallgren, "Farm and Village in the Viking Age," in *The Viking World*, ed. Neil Price and Stefan Brink (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008).
[42] For more on the contemporaneous naval power struggle, see John Haywood, *Dark Age Naval Power. A Re-assessment of Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Seafaring Activity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991).

Scandinavian raiders first encounter Anglo-Saxons on a Northumbrian beach, the language barrier between them leads to distrust and ultimately to violent conflict.[43] This commitment to a "truthful" recreation of the Viking past even occasionally escaped the bounds of the show's fiction: while creating episode seven of season four, when a Viking raiding party has to move their boat across land, the production crew re-created the pulley system which brought the recreated Viking longship up out of the water and rolled it on logs they cut from the forest in which they were shooting to the river on the other side.[44] It would have been feasible, and almost certainly easier, to move the boat using modern technology, but instead the *Vikings* crew saw an opportunity to engage with the past. In contrast to typical medievalist film and television, for which history has often been little more than a setting, *Vikings* demonstrates a considerable interest in representing the historical past as it is understood by modern historians.

Vikings and Viking Age Scandinavians: The History Behind the Series

Hirst's *Vikings* is inspired by the Old Norse sagas which tell the story of King Ragnar Lothbrok [Old Norse: *Ragnarr Loðbrók*],[45] a legendary Danish king who is

[43] Hirst's decision to portray a language barrier provides an example of his ongoing effort to provide greater nuance to his depiction of the Vikings than traditional representations afforded them, even if the issue of intelligibility is still debated. Neither of the films considered in this work contain lines in a language other than modern English, while *Vikings* portrays nearly a dozen medieval languages (Pollard 1). In *Vikings*, the Norse raiders do not understand the Saxons they meet in Northumbria; the raiders speak Old Norse and the Saxons speak Old English, which creates friction between the groups. There is some debate among scholars over whether Old Norse and Old English were mutually intelligible. One saga, *The Saga of King Harald* [Old Icelandic: *Haralds saga Sigurðarsonart*], potentially demonstrates mutual intelligibility: in chapter 94 one major character, Styrkar, meets a man while traveling on a road after the Battle at Stamford Bridge. The man identifies him as Norwegian by his accent. While the man could have been from Old Norse-speaking York, the exchange is a possible example of an Anglo-Saxon speaking person being able to understand a speaker of Old Norse.

[44] Geraghty 16:10.

[45] To avoid confusion between historical materials and the *Vikings* television series, I use the English name spellings which Hirst and the History Channel use in *Vikings* plot summaries and other official materials.

supposed to have inspired the invasion of England by the so-called "Great Heathen Army" in the mid-9th century which resulted in a period of contested Viking rule of Eastern and parts of Northern England until their expulsion by Norman invaders in the early 11th century.[46] In the sagas, Ragnar is a figure of myth, the son of a Danish king Sigurd Ring [Old Norse: *Sigurðr Hringr*]. Ragnar's second marriage is to Aslaug [Old Norse: *Áslaugr*], the daughter of the famous warrior Sigurd Fafnesbane [Old Norse: *Sigurðr Fáfnisbani*]. He has four sons with her, three of whom occupy particularly important and famous roles in the sagas and Scandinavian history: Bjorn Ironsides [Old Norse: *Björn járnsíða*], Sigurd Snake-in-the-Eye [Old Norse: *Sigurðr ormr í auga*], and Ivar the Boneless [Old Norse: *Ívarr beinlausi*]. Though versions of the saga diverge on specific details, each tells how Ragnar's desire to become more famous than his sons prompts him to raid in England, where he is captured by King Ælla of Northumbria and executed by being thrown into a pit of snakes. When his sons learn of his death, they plot revenge, raising and leading the Great Heathen Army to punish Ælla and continuing throughout England.

Vikings draws on this source material, weaving together historical archeology with both legendary and historical characters from the sagas. At the opening of the series, Ragnar (Travis Fimmel) is a simple farmer who participates in the raids of the Earl of Kattegat. His wife, Lagertha (Kathryn Wynnick) [Latin: *Ladgerda/Lathgertha*] stays

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This means that the Old Norse *Ragnarr Loðbrók* becomes Ragnar Lothbrok, the Latin *Ladgerda/Lathgertha* becomes Lagertha, and so on. On the first usage of the name I show the most common Old Norse or Latin spelling of the name; I then use Hirst's spelling in subsequent references.

[46] Scholars generally believe that Ragnar Lothbrok is a fictive character who is the composite of several historical Scandinavian kings; scholars have identified a historical warrior named Huingar, described in Abbo of Fleury's *Passio Sancti Eadmundi*, who is believed to be the Ivar the Boneless described in the sagas. See Stephen Basdeo, "The Once and Future Viking," in *Vikings and the Vikings*, ed. Paul Hardwick and Kate Lister (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2019), 8.

home while he is gone to defend their farm and their two children. The first season contains little in the way of Ragnar's legendary narratives, instead focusing on establishing the historical context of the series. There are no mythical champions or world-shaking campaigns, but rather a focus on the details of diplomacy, political lineages, and military action. Ragnar's friend and shaman Floki (Gustaf Skarsgård) builds a new kind of boat which allows them to begin raiding in England, Ragnar engages with the local politics of Kattegat, and Lagertha navigates the complex gender dynamics of the medieval world.

Central to Hirst's project of reinventing the image of the Viking is a concerted effort on the part of the show to expand possibilities for diverse expressions of gender and sexuality. The series does not simply reproduce modern historians' best understanding of the historical record: in bringing the Vikings to the silver screen, Hirst reinvents traditional expectations of Viking gender and sexuality, building a pre-Christian medieval Scandinavian world which not only feels authentic but is also queerer, more complex, and more feminist than before. As one feminist online commentator notes, though she had initially imagined she wouldn't like the show—indeed, in her words, she was "certain that *Vikings* would offend [her]" —she ultimately comes to like the series, writing that "most of [her enjoyment] stems from how much [she loves] the women characters in the show. [She is] fascinated watching them navigate their world, and how they use their various strengths to their advantage."[47]

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[47] Lindsey Loree, "The History Channel's Vikings Ain't Half Bad," *F-BOM*, May 2, 2015, https://f-bom.com/2015/05/02/the-history-channels-vikings-aint-half-bad/. The feminist potential of *Vikings* has been discussed by the publisher as well as by contemporary critics. For History Channel's promotional materials, see: "The Vikings: The Original Feminists?" History Channel Official Website, accessed February 22, 2020, https://www.history.co.uk/shows/vikings/articles/the-vikings-the-original-feminists. For audience responses, see Darren Franich, "All hail Lagertha on *Vikings*," *Entertainment Weekly*, January 8, 2020. See also Regina Gurung, "'Vikings': Lagertha, the 8th-century shieldmaiden is the feminist icon of

One of the show's primary concerns is with how it represents female characters and the range of social positions available to women. As I describe in Chapter One, the first season of *Vikings* notably features a Viking shieldmaiden in the character of Lagertha. As the series continues in subsequent seasons, it begins to feature more prominent female characters, including a number of other female warriors. Battle scenes from the second season onwards featured shots not only of bearded men slashing and stabbing, but also clips of armored women with long braids clashing shields and swords. Through Lagertha and the figure of the shieldmaiden more generally, the show paints a picture of a world in which gender relations are complex and messy, and in which women characters frequently push back against the forms of male power that would constrain them.

A preoccupation with sex—who does it, how it is done, and in what contexts—pervades the series. *Vikings* utilizes sex most often as a tool to push back on heteronormative stereotypes of Viking male domination and sexual assault. In Chapter Two, I argue that *Vikings*' representation of Viking rape—and female resistance to it—demonstrates an interest in redefining Viking sexuality outside the confines of violent heteronormativity, and that this interest is indeed central to Hirst's intent with the series. Furthermore, I argue that the series' portrayal of queer sexual practices and relationships between Vikings reflects a progressive interest in queering the Middle Ages—that is, encouraging a more complex analysis of gender and sexuality during a time period traditionally thought of as repressive.

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today," *Meaww*, December 21, 2018, https://meaww.com/vikings-lagertha-8th-century-shieldmaiden-feminist-icon-of-today-season-5-katheryn-winnick.

Throughout this thesis I focus on *Vikings* because it intervenes simultaneously in scholarly debate over the Viking past and a tradition of popular representations of the Viking with implications for the present-day politics of race, sex, and gender. My method for this engagement in each chapter is to first describe an area of scholarly uncertainty about the Viking Age past. I then offer an example of a key earlier popular Viking film that shows how Viking media have traditionally represented that area of debate. Finally, I proceed to analyze key scenes from *Vikings* that show how the show intervenes in both the scholarly debate the tradition of representations. My aim is not to celebrate Hirst's show as queer or feminist cinema, but rather to show how its turn to history and the Viking Age past enables selective interventions in the politics of the present.

Ultimately, I conclude that Hirst's show intervenes in moderately progressive ways in modern debates around sex and gender. In today's media and political climate, how we represent the past has high stakes. Some groups have attempted to claim the figure of the Viking for far-right causes. In my coda, I focus on one organization, *Norskk*, which styles itself not as a hate group but as a historical one. They espouse many of the same violent misogynist and racist views as other far-right organizations, but they claim that these views are rooted not in personal feelings but in history. They peddle a narrative of Viking male dominance which is rooted in a narrative of the Viking as serial rapist and strident homophobe. This group is particularly interesting because they, too, respond to both academic debates about the Vikings as well as traditional ways of representing them; their engagement is much shallower than Hirst’s, and they are ultimately (of course) less devoted to “truthfulness” than he is. Their rejection of whatever threatens their carefully constructed pseudo-historical worldview clarifies the stakes for a show

like Hirst's which, in contrast, more carefully selects and deploys the evidence of the past.

Chapter One

The Figure of the Shieldmaiden

The history of Viking-themed media can be described in part as a history of selective reproductions and representations of the shieldmaiden. In the historical sagas, the word *skjaldmeyjar* is used for both supernatural and human female warriors—in English, both "valkyries" and "shieldmaidens"—implying a sort of legendary or mythological quality was attributed to female warriors, and thus leaving uncertain whether women warriors were meant to be understood as fictional or mythical beings themselves.[48] Indeed, it is exactly this duality—the shieldmaiden as both natural beings and supernatural forces—which makes their historical representation particularly complex. Popularized initially by Wagner's adaptation of the Old Icelandic *The Saga of the Volsungs* [Old Icelandic: *Völsunga saga*] (c. 1270 CE) alongside its Middle High German analog *The Lay of the Nibelungs* [Middle High German: *Der Nibelunge liet*] into his famous work *The Ring of the Nibelung* [German: *Der Ring des Nibelungen*], this complicated and iconic figure has personified many different interpretations of female power. In *The Saga of the Volsungs,* the main female character Brunhild [Old Norse: *Brynhildr*] is described as a cursed Valkyrie. The hero Sigurd Fafnesbane [Old Norse: *Sigurðr Fáfnisbani*] finds her on a mountain, encircled by fire: "before him was a rampart made of shields, with a warrior dressed in full armor lying on the rampart. Taking off the warrior's helmet, he discovered that this was a sleeping woman, not a man."[49] After Sigurd awakens her, he learns that,

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[48] Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 97.
[49] *The Saga of the Volsungs with the Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok*, trans. Jackson Crawford (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2017), 35.

though she is clearly dressed in warrior's garb, she cannot fight; as she tells Sigurd, she is cursed to never fight again.[50] The woman warrior in *The Saga of the Volsungs* is therefore more symbolic than literal; she exists only in an inaccessible past, never in the present.[51] The question, then, is whether such figures represent a historical reality or a rewriting of the historical record.

Despite this long history of popular fascination with Viking women warriors, it was not until the late 20th century that historians began to engage substantially with the study of Viking Age Scandinavian women. In 1991, Judith Jesch published *Viking Age Women* as an early attempt to fill this gap.[52] Jesch characterizes the "irredeemably male" image of the Viking in popular culture as the natural consequence of the military association; "historically, women have had little opportunity to participate in war, murder, rape and robbery; such activities have usually been the prerogative of members of the male sex. If a 'viking' is a marauding pagan warrior, then a 'viking woman' is logically impossible."[53] Writing in 1996, Jenny Jochens came to a similar conclusion about the rigidity of Old Norse gender roles. In *Old Norse Images of Women*, she states that in the Old Norse context, "biology *was* [emph. original] destiny in the nordic perception of gender; men were endowed with physical qualities—which women lacked—for leadership in war and in society."[54]

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[50] *The Saga of the Volsungs* 36. In *The Lay of the Nibelungs*, a much more explicit – and shocking – relationship between femininity and warriorhood is present. Brunhild, in this story, is a fierce warrior queen with supernatural strength. All of her fighting skill and supernatural abilities leave her, however, when Sigurd helps his lord Gunnar rape her on their wedding night – thereby making explicit the link between a woman's virginity and her ability to participate in the "men's work" of war, as well as the ability of male rape to rob a woman of her power.

[51] For a more in-depth discussion of the complex and fascinating character of Brynhild, see Theodore Murdock Andersson, *The Legend of Brynhild* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1980).

[52] Judith Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell, 1991), 3.

[53] Jesch, *Women*, 1.

[54] Jochens, *Images,* 111.

Both Jochens and Jesch use these conclusions about the Viking social world to cast a skeptical eye on the persistent representation of women warriors in saga texts. After conducting a wide survey of the sagas and legends told about shieldmaidens, Jochens finds that "the maiden warriors and maiden kings who engaged in war were invariably overcome, defeated, or even killed by their male adversaries despite their impressive initial actions."[55] Jochens argues that the women warriors described in the sagas and other narrative texts of the era were not representatives of a forgotten or hidden past in which women took to the battlefield alongside men, but rather existed to "[teach] listeners and readers that gender roles should be obeyed and that transgressors would be punished."[56] For Jesch likewise, the image of the woman warrior in Old Norse texts does not imply that these figures existed historically, but that male authors conjured them up as part of a way of maintaining existing strict gendered hierarchies of power.[57]

In broad strokes, Jochens and Jesch present a viewpoint among Old Norse scholars which holds that a binary gender system was in fact part of Viking society even before the intervention of Christian missionaries, and that that system was, practically speaking, impermeable; biological men were social men, biological women were social women, and each sex came with a set of possibilities and expectations which were strictly defined. Both scholars come to the conclusion that the image of the woman warrior in both her secular and legendary manifestations was imaginary rather than historical, created by men rather than inspired by real women. As Jesch writes in her conclusion, "there is no doubt that women were treated 'as women' [as opposed to a gender-neutral

[55] Jochens, *Images*, 106.
[56] Jochens, *Images*, 112.
[57] Jesch, *Women*, 180.

'as people'] and suffered the perils of hard work, child-birth, male violence and slavery."[58] Jesch follows this historical statement with an observation turned towards the present: "the first three of these are hard to document from the available evidence, but are still the lot of many women around the world today."[59] In a critical move not uncommon in second-wave feminist historical scholarship, she frames the Viking past as evidence of an exploitative sex/gender system with deep historical roots.[60]

Jesch's 1991 *Old Norse Images of Women* was followed two years later by Carol J. Clover's seminal article "Regardless of Sex," which builds on Jesch's work to suggest that gender roles in Old Norse society were perhaps less rigid than Jesch originally argued. As Clover writes:

> The case could be made, particularly on the basis of the mythic narratives, that Norse femaleness was a more complicated business than [Thomas] Laquer's model [described in his book *Making Sex*] would have it, but the general notion, that sexual difference used to be less a wall than a permeable membrane, has a great deal of explanatory force in a world in which a physical woman could become a social man, a physical man could (and sooner or later did) become a social woman, and the originary god, Odinn himself, played both sides of the street.[61]

Clover was among the first to argue that the Old Norse concept of gender, even if structured around a binary, was permeable. Her description of a kind of navigation between male and female social roles, though not directly contradictory to Jesch and Jochens, certainly leaves open possibilities for gender expression and perhaps even

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[58] Jesch, *Women*, 208
[59] Jesch, *Women*, 208.
[60] For a formative example, see Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (Monthly Review Press, 1975), 157-210.
[61] Carol J. Clover, "Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe," *Representations* 136, no. 44 (Autumn 1993): 18-9.

identity outside of the strict binary of male and female gender roles. Where Jesch and Jochens ultimately conclude that women in Viking society had relatively few, strictly defined roles available to them, Clover argues that gender was not in fact destiny, that men and women at different stages in their lives would occupy different social roles both respective to and irrespective of their biological sex.

Clover is particularly invested in critiquing Jesch's vision of strongly defined and enforced gender roles, or what Clover calls the "standard story of separate spheres." Clover suggests this is the default, presentist way academics have understood gender in Viking and Scandinavian cultures: "woman's [sphere]...is the world [within the household], where she is in charge of child care, cooking, serving, and tasks having to do with milk and wool. Man's is the world beyond: the world of fishing, agriculture, herding, travel, trade, politics, and law."[62] Clover argues that this way of engaging with the medieval past makes two core assumptions: first, that these spheres were kept distinct enough that they could be disentangled and independently identified in the first place; and second, that gender roles were both binary and fixed to a single one of these spheres. Clover goes on to make the case that neither of these assumptions are correct; that domestic and non-domestic spheres frequently crossed over and blurred into one another, and that male and female gender roles were somewhat fluid.[63]

Clover's views on the subject would later be further expanded, nuanced, and challenged by Johanna Friðriksdóttir in *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words,*

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[62] Clover 2-3.

[63] Or, at the very least, that to the extent a social binary did exist, "the fault line runs not between males and females per se, but between able-bodied men (and exceptional women) on one hand and, on the other, a kind of rainbow coalition of everyone else (most women, children, slaves, and old, disabled, or otherwise disenfranchised men)" (Clover 13).

and Power.[64] Friðriksdóttir argues, among other relevant points, that women in the sagas "venture out of the traditional female sphere" either as rulers or fighters – but usually not both.[65] She argues further, based on Judith Butler's theory of performativity, that some sagas show "that…biological women…can break out of the confinements of their traditional female role and 'become' men for all intents and purposes, to perform a masculine role…[even though] this behavior must eventually come to an end."[66] Friðriksdóttir does not entirely agree with Clover's argument, but likewise finds a possibility for complex and fluid gender roles.[67]

The debate over the forms of gender expression available to Viking men and women is still unresolved,[68] and the question of whether Viking Age women were historically able to take on roles as warriors is particularly disputed. Notably, as discussed in the introduction, Jesch has continued to argue for the rigidity and restrictiveness of Viking gender roles, even as more recent scholars such as Friðriksdóttir have leaned on the possibility of women serving as warriors and leaders.

Most popular representations of the female Viking warrior confirm an understanding of male dominance, but the ways they do so vary, and depend on active

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[64] Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words, and Power. (*New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). Friðriksdóttir's newest book, *Valkyrie: The Women of the Viking World*, is scheduled for release on April 2nd, 2020, and therefore I was not able to incorporate its work into this thesis.

[65] Friðriksdóttir 113. Friðriksdóttir also argues later that several sagas featuring the figure of the maiden-king can be read as a sort of "proto-feminist message" (Friðriksdóttir 127). She specifically treats *The Saga of Nitida* [Old Norse: *Nítíða saga*], noting that it presents "a remarkable idealized world without any male authority figures, perhaps a proto-feminist utopia, where the only male close to her…obeys her every command" (Friðriksdóttir 127).

[66] Ibid 115.

[67] Ibid 133.

[68] Jochens writes that the image of Viking women warriors has held an enduring appeal for scholars and non-academics alike because "the most impressive figures [of women warriors] appear only in pagan settings and they were therefore thought to reflect a social reality more ancient and different than on the Christian Continent" (Jochens, *Images*, 11).

choices to adapt, suppress, or selectively deploy a complex body of evidence and attendant scholarly debate. The medieval female warrior in popular media tends to manifest in one of two ways, both of which ultimately confirm sexist gender hierarchies. In the first and more common of the two, the shieldmaiden character only exists only to reveal her own inadequacy; although her initial actions may be impressive, she ultimately becomes a damsel in distress in need of male rescue. The second paradigm is that of the exceptional woman warrior: even though she is a fierce warrior who can stand toe-to-toe with her male comrades, she exists on her own. The woman warrior stands as an exception who proves the rule, a lone woman warrior whose behavior is abnormal for her gender—a fact which is often commented on by her male comrades.[69]

Vikings treats the shieldmaiden differently. Shield-maidens are common characters in the show, appearing both as leading figures in its developing plot and as background characters. They are represented not as atypical or exceptional but rather as a familiar norm. Shield-maidens in *Vikings* also occupy a multiplicity of social niches and roles, inhabiting diverse forms of social power. Shield-maidens do not exist only in their capacity as warriors on the battlefield; they are also administrators and rulers, significant actors in diverse parts of life even outside the martial sphere. *Vikings* does not allege that the presence of shieldmaidens meant that Viking society was equal; in fact, the series focuses in particular ways on the unique obstacles and dangers faced by women during this part of medieval history. Rather, by showing shieldmaidens as both powerful fighters

[69] An example of this in popular media is Brienne of Tarth (Gwendoline Christie) in HBO's popular fantasy drama *Game of Thrones* (2012), who is the sole female knight in the entire fictional five kingdoms. Her gender is often a topic of conversation among men who interact with her, who usually express confusion or outright derision at her unique combination of gender identity and occupation. For more on this subject, see Yvonne Tasker and Lindsay Steenberg, "Women Warriors from Chivalry to Vengeance," in *Women of Ice and Fire: Gender, Game of Thrones, and Multiple Media Engagements*, ed. Anne Gjelsvik and Rikke Schubart (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 171-92.

and competent leaders, and by showing that they exist as a common feature of life rather than only as exceptional women rising above others, the series reclaims the medieval past as a space of contested and diverse gender roles.

"Men of Might": *The Viking* (1928)

Twentieth-century representations of the shieldmaiden have often confirmed rather than challenged modern expectations about gender and gender inequality. One clear example of this tradition which *Vikings* defines itself against appears in the formative early 1928 film *The Viking* directed by Roy William Neill.[70] This film dramatizes a supposed Viking voyage from Iceland to what is now Newport, Rhode Island, via Greenland, ultimately acting out the nationalist myth that it was early Vikings, not Spaniards or Englishmen, who were the first Europeans to visit—and, in the film, Christianize—North America.[71] The film marked an important moment in film history, as it was the first to be made entirely in Technicolor Process 3 and the first film to be released with synchronized recorded music and sound effects.[72] The film, which is based on the novel "The Thrall of Leif the Lucky,"[73] dramatizes the story of Leif Ericsson's

[70] *The Viking*, directed by Roy William Neill (USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1928).
[71] The film drew on pseudo-historical theories first popularized through Carl Christian Rafn, *Antiquitates Americanae* (Hafniae [Copenhagen]: Societas Regia Antiquariorum Septentrionalium [Royal Society of Northern Antiquities], 1837. For a detailed overview of the figure of the Viking in American popular and political culture, see Stephen Mitchell, "U.S. Perspectives," in *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies*, edited by Jürg Glauser, Pernille Hermann, and Stephen Mitchell (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 866-875.
[72] H. T. Kalmus, "Technicolor Adventures in Cinemaland," *Journal of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers* 31, no. 6 (1938): 564-85. Kalmus writes, "[*The Viking*] was the first to be synchronized with music and sound effect" (Kalmus 573).
[73] Ottilie A. Liljencrantz, *The Thrall of Leif the Lucky: A Story of Viking Days* (Boston: Maynard & Small, 1906).

supposed historical voyage from Scandinavian shores to the far-off land of "Vinland," or North America.[74] It begins in the traditional style of silent films, with a series of white-on-black intertitles (see Figure 1-1) outlining the setting and context in which the film takes place. Throughout the film, several defining characteristics of the idealized Vikings are emphasized, two of which are outlined in the intertitles which open the film: first, that the Vikings are representatives of white European culture, and indeed predate "any white man" on the American shore; second, that they were bloodthirsty and ruthlessly violent, "men of might, who laughed in the teeth of the tempest, and leaped [sic] into battle with a song" who "plunder[ed and] ravag[ed]," terrifying the world.[75] From the outset,

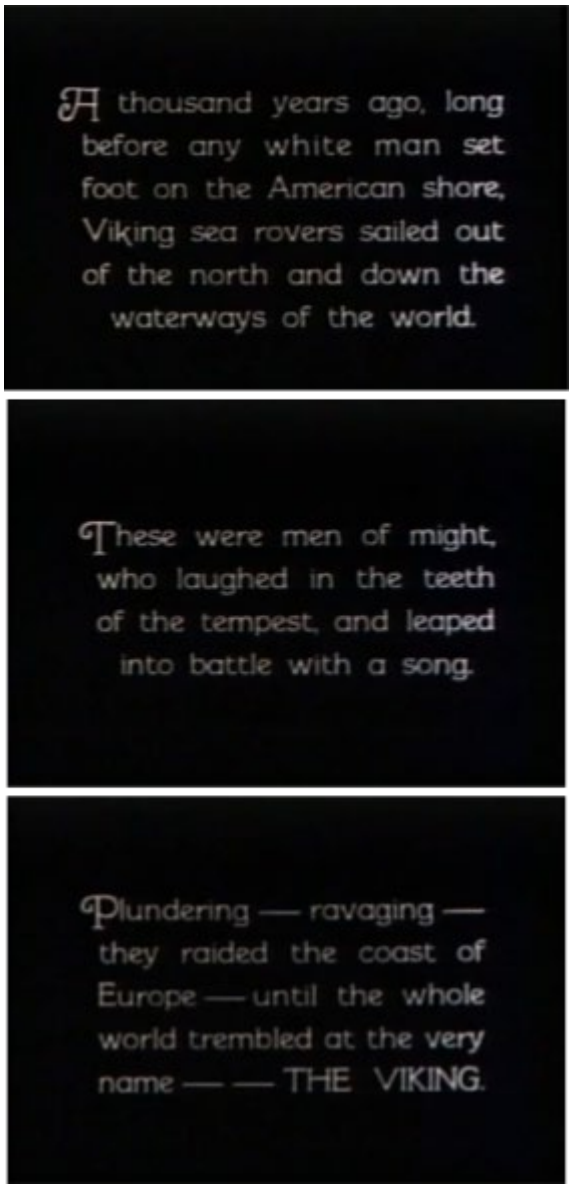

Figure 1-1: The first three intertitles shown at the beginning of the film (01:32-58).

[74] The idea that Viking Age Scandinavians somehow reached land occupied by the modern United States is largely a settled debate among scholars. As Ford Burley writes, "in point of fact there is no credible evidence that Norse sailors ever made it to land occupied by the present United States of America. Even if they had made it as far as Maine (let alone Florida, as some early 20th-century scholars suggested), the sagas tell of their being chased off by the native inhabitants ('*Skraelings*') after picking a fight they cannot possibly win. In no sense could the Vinland narrative support a claim to white history of land ownership in North America, except perhaps as squatters forcibly evicted for acts of violence against their landlords" (Richard Ford Burley, "Ambiguous Images: 'Vikingness,' North American White Nationalism and the Threat of Appropriation" in *Vikings and the Vikings: Essays on Television's History Channel Series*, ed. Paul Hardwick and Kate Lister (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2019), 210-1).

[75] *The Viking* 01:58.

then, it is clear who is Viking and who is not: the Viking is a white, aggressive male—specifically "men" of might, a word that subsumes yet also erases the woman warrior Helga (Pauline Starke) who is portrayed in the film.

The question raised by Helga's presence within the film is whether she will breach the clearly drawn gender-based segregation between civilians and warriors. Described as "an orphan of noble blood—living the life of a Viking sea rover under the protection of the famous Leif Ericsson, her dead father's comrade,"[76] she commands a good amount of respect in the small encampment to which Alwin (LeRoy Mason), the Saxon prince and main character of the film, is taken as a captive. It is clear from that she commands—at least in theory—some respect, even if only due to her status as the daughter of a famous war chief.

Figure 1-2: Helga Nilsson in full shieldmaiden regalia laying on the ground after falling ungracefully from her horse (08:06).

Our introduction to this supposed "sea rover," however, is her ungraceful fall from a horse amid a circle of other Vikings who proceed to laugh uproariously as she fumbles to get back to her feet (see Figure 1-2). Later, after a power struggle with Alwin over him riding her horse, the male Vikings laugh at her inability to control him. They stop when she turns and glares at them, but the point has already been made.[77] These are only two of the many moments where Helga's

[76] *The Viking* 08:49.
[77] *The Viking* 17:25. Another example of this undercutting of female power through comedic response to female action occurs earlier at 15:28, where one Viking woman pushes her husband to the ground after they

seeming power as a woman warrior—dressed as she is in armor and a helmet reminiscent of Wagner's iconic Valkyries—is undermined by her inability to follow through on 'Viking-like' actions, and by her reception among other Vikings. As the film makes clear, the shieldmaiden exists not to actually disturb male-female hierarchies, but to confirm their necessity.

The film shows that Helga is not only subordinate to the powerful male warriors of her society, but even to relatively powerless male slaves. In a particularly humiliating moment, when Helga is goaded into disciplining Alwin, he wrests her whip from her hand (see Figure 1-3). Were it not for the intercession of a passing Viking, he may have even begun to attack her. The purpose of the scene—to remove Helga's agency, and to make clear the power dynamic between the Viking woman and the Viking man[78]—becomes even clearer as the next scenes play out. After Alwin disobeys her, Leif Ericsson (Donald Crisp) buys him from Helga. Now that Alwin is no longer her slave, Helga almost immediately falls in love with him. At no point does she participate in the fighting; her part as a warrior has been played, and now all that is left is to play the part of the woman. By the time the credits roll, the archetype of the female Viking has been

Figure 1-3: Helga strikes Alwin; he grabs her hand and takes the whip from her hands (24:29).

become engaged in an altercation over the female English slave he has brought her. The Vikings around them laugh uproariously.

[78] Though Alwin is Anglo-Saxon on his mother's side and lives as a Saxon, his father is Ragnar; therefore Alwin is, to use the terminology of the film, a Viking as well as a Saxon.

clearly defined: though she may possess status and even command fear or respect from her peers initially, her ultimate role is to serve as a prize for the men around her, a rebel in need of domestication whose pushback against systems of oppression fades into complacency once she has settled into a committed relationship.[79] In this way, *The Viking* shows that an unequal position between men and women serves as a marker for the feeling of historical authenticity of the film itself.

Lagertha: Woman, Warrior, Leader

Vikings challenges such earlier representations of the shieldmaiden in choosing to make women warriors central and leading rather than peripheral characters in its story, and in attributing to them an ability and desire to challenge gender inequalities. The key figure for the show is Lagertha,[80] a character who appears only in Saxo Grammaticus' *History of the Danes* [Latin: *Gesta Danorum*],[81] which mixes the popular Norse legend with Danish chronicle history. Saxo's version uses many of the same characters and shares many of the same narrative beats but focuses more on Ragnar's raiding and colonization of the Northern European world. The most significant borrowing from his work in *Vikings* is the character of Lagertha, a legendary shieldmaiden who does not

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[79] This particular treatment of the woman warrior evokes the historical image of the medieval virginal shieldmaiden queen, the "maiden king." As Erick Wahlgren writes in his 1938 dissertation "The Maiden King in Iceland," "the story of the Maiden King fit[s] into a fairly well defined pattern: a woman, young, unmarried, and accomplished, rules a country, and rejects suitors for her hand. A young and talented hero of royal birth sets out to win her and has difficult in doing so. In the end they are united. Before this happy consummation, however, each has demonstrated skill and ingenuity in outwitting the other" (Erik Wahlgren, "The Maiden King in Iceland" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1938), 25).

[80] Saxo Grammaticus uses Latin forms of the Old Norse names. To avoid confusion, per my earlier footnote, I am choosing to use the modern (e.g. Hirst's spelling on *Vikings*) form of their names.

[81] Saxo Grammaticus, *The History of the Danes*, trans. Peter Fisher and Hilda Ellis Davidson (Cambridge [Eng.]: Totowa, N.J.: D.S. Brewer; Rowman and Littlefield, 1979). Within his *History of the Danes*, Saxo retells the older Norse story of *The Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok*. Of the number of sagas and tales which describe the story of Ragnar Lothbrok, his is the only one in which Lagertha appears.

appear in other versions of Ragnar's story. Saxo describes Lagertha as one of a number of women captured by Frø, king of Sweden, in a conflict with a Norwegian king. Ragnar, on a quest for vengeance, arrived at the camp where the women are kept and freed them. The women then "began to dress themselves as men and flock[ed] in eagerness to his camp, vowing that they would put death before dishonor. The man who had come to revenge the humiliation offered to these women [Ragnar] felt no shame in borrowing their help against the cause of their disgrace."[82] Lagertha is singled out from among the group by Saxo: "among these was Lathgertha, a skilled female fighter, who bore a man's temper in a girl's body; with locks flowing loose over her shoulders she would do battle in the forefront of the most valiant warriors. Everyone marvelled [sic] at her matchless feats, for the hair flying down her back made it clear that she was a woman."[83] This passage offers one of the most detailed and extensive literary descriptions of a Viking Age female fighter in contemporaneous literature.[84]

From the beginning of the series, Lagertha is represented in a manner consistent with Saxo's descriptions. Though she was not rescued by Ragnar from a rival king, her exploits as a warrior are well known; she is referred to throughout the first season as a famous shieldmaiden. While Saxo's work recognizes her as a ferocious fighter, Hirst takes it a step further; from the third season onwards, Lagertha is a leader of troops, men and women. Lagertha embodies the image of Saxo's capable shieldmaiden—long, blonde hair, beautiful features, and deadly in combat. But she also proves an able diplomat and

[82] Saxo 280.
[83] Ibid.
[84] Saxo also famously described a community of women warriors who were "forgetful of their true selves." These women, rather than performing more typically feminine tasks, which Saxo clearly thinks they should have, instead learned to fight and maintained fierce independence. See Saxo 212.

stateswoman, navigating the dangerous political waters of pre-Christian Scandinavian rulership with grace and cunning.

In Saxo's work, Lagertha and Ragnar are married after her impressive performance in battle alongside him. Ragnar later divorces her and marries another woman; Lagertha still loves him despite their divorce and comes to his aid later in the saga after murdering her second husband and taking over his land and forces. The broad strokes of this narrative are brought into *Vikings*: Ragnar and Lagertha divorce, and she does later come to his aid after marrying, then murdering and taking land and title from her second, abusive husband, the Jarl of Hedeby.[85] However, in Hirst's version of the story, Lagertha exercises her legal right to divorce her husband when he suggests marrying Aslaug at the beginning of the second season.[86] The rest of the story plays out largely as written—Ragnar goes on to marry another woman, Lagertha becomes a powerful leader, and ultimately comes to his aid against his foes—but Hirst yet again flips the power dynamic of the original narrative to place Lagertha in a position of power.

Hirst's Lagertha is a force to be reckoned with. Her very existence rebukes the history of representing shieldmaidens as lesser than their male contemporaries. Indeed, Lagertha's narrative arc through *Vikings* may be understood as a sort of visual enactment of Carol Clover's argument against the traditional narrative of the "separate spheres."

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[85] This also happens (though not so graphically, nor with the added detail of her second husband being abusive) in Saxo's version of the story: "that night [Lagertha] stuck a dart, which she had concealed beneath her gown, into her husband's throat, thereby seizing for herself his whole title and sovereignty. This woman, of the haughtiest temperament, found it pleasanter to govern her realm alone than share the fortunes of a husband" (Saxo 283).

[86] For more on the legal rights of women in the Viking Age, including their right to divorce, see Auður G. Magnúsdóttir, "Women and Sexual Politics," in *The Viking World*, ed. Neil Price and Stefan Brink (New York: Routledge, 2008), 40-48.

Lagertha occupies the narrative role of a mother, leader, warrior, and politician; she moves fluidly between these roles, often embodying more than one at a time.

Lagertha's prowess on the battlefield is an integral part of her character throughout the series. A shot from Season 4, Episode 13 (see Figure 1-4) shows Lagertha leading a troop of soldiers; in this moment, she leads a troop of soldiers, both men and women, in a battle to retake the historically important town of Kattegat. This close-up

Figure 1-4: Lagertha (center) gives the order for her soldiers to attack (Vikings S4E13, "Two Journeys." 36:34).

shows Lagertha with her sword drawn and flanked by warriors both male and female shortly before she leads her troops in a quick and efficient, though certainly bloody, takeover of Kattegat. She is shown wearing the same armor as all of her soldiers; as Lagertha will fight as well rather than leading from behind, she needs just as much protection. Her dress is not sexualized; her armor is meant to protect, not to titillate. She and her warriors do not wear helmets, which allows her long blond hair to spill over her

shoulders, clearly identifying her as a woman.[87] Through such visual images, the show works to create an image of female power.

In representing Lagertha this way, the show draws on historical evidence for how a Viking woman warrior might have appeared while also appealing to female viewers' desires to see themselves reflected in these images of historical female power. One notable way it does this in the above scene is through Lagertha's eye makeup. There is some historical evidence to suggest that male and female Viking Age Scandinavians did in fact use eye makeup, perhaps even on the battlefield.[88] In this instance, though, Lagertha's makeup necessarily evokes familiar modern styles associated with the vamp, goth, or femme fatale—icons of threatening female power. In this way, the show walks a fine line, refusing to desexualize Lagertha as a woman warrior but also resisting overt sexualizations that would objectify her as an object of pleasure for the male gaze.[89]

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[87] In *Vikings*, only women wear their hair in braids which fall in a way that displays the length of the hair from the front. Most men on the show have short hair or are shaven with tattoos on their scalps. Men who do have long hair wear usually wear it in a single long, tight braid and shave the rest of their hair. Their long hair is kept under tight control and kept away from the face and shoulders, whereas the long hair of women is often braided in a way that allows it to fall about their face and shoulders.

[88] Arab diplomat Ibrahim ibn Yacoub al-Tartushi's original writings have disappeared, but they are known by their quotations in other works. Here, he describes life in Hedeby, making special note of the issue of divorce as noted earlier, as well as noting the usage of eye makeup by both men and women: "…he relates that women have the right to declare themselves divorced; they part with their husbands whenever they like. They also have there an artificial make-up for the eyes; when they use it their beauty never fades, but increases in both man and woman" (Gwyn Jones, *A History of the Vikings* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 177).

[89] Saxo Grammaticus, in book seven of *The History of the Danes*, writes that "there were once women in Denmark who dressed themselves to look like men and spent almost every minute cultivating soldiers' skills…they courted military celebrity so earnestly that you would have guessed they had unsexed themselves" (Saxo Grammaticus 212). While Saxo is likely writing about sex not in terms of sex appeal or feminine appearance but in terms of social roles and acceptable activity, it is an interesting comparison to draw between *Vikings* and the sources it draws inspiration from—that while Hirst's series celebrates women warriors as women, Saxo distances women who are warriors from their gender identity.

These issues resurface in a different form in a later scene when Lagertha addresses the conquered people of Kattegat dressed not in armor but a long fur dress (see Figure 1-5). Lagertha's costume change offers an illustration of the fluid mobility of gender and social roles that Clover has emphasized, as Lagertha moves from the

Figure 1-5: Lagertha (center) addresses the people of Kattegat after conquering the town. She is flanked by her lover Astrid (left) and her advisor Torvi (Georgia Hirst, right) both of whom are in full armor (Vikings S4E16, "Crossings." 08:16).

battlefield to a sphere of governance in which she is still identifiably female. Lagertha has shed the physical appearance of the shieldmaiden in favor of more traditionally feminine clothing; her cloak seems more ceremonial than practical, and the fabric reaching down to her feet would hinder easy movement in battle. Yet even in more traditionally feminine dress, Lagertha occupies a position of power. She stands centrally in the shot on top of a podium and addresses her troops and conquered subjects. And, indeed, the woman standing around her, projections of her power, still wear the clothing of warriors.

Katherine J. Lewis has written about this scene and other like it as emblematic of the show's insistence on the performativity of gender. As Lewis puts it,

> within *Vikings* one does not necessarily have to be male to do masculinity...the performative nature of female masculinity is indicated by appearance, with Lagertha, Torvi and other wearing distinctive warrior garb, hair styles and makeup when they fight, and conventional women's clothes within a domestic context. This underlines the sense that they are 'putting on' masculinity.[90]

If masculinity is understood as what one does—and, in this case, how one looks doing it—then gender is revealed as a social construct rather than biological category.[91] Even in this domestic context, the women are not passive; by maintaining their power and agency across such contextual shifts, Hirst works to deconstruct the idea that such power and agency are inherently male traits.

In the early seasons of the show, Lagertha does not play a central role in the action, and is indeed at risk of following the old 'exception-that-proves-the-rule' trope of the singular shieldmaiden; until the finale of the first season, she is the only woman warrior. Even at that early point, the show has a clear interest in showing that she can defeat men—thereby pushing back on a false narrative of medieval female passivity in the face of systematic oppression and sexual abuse. Yet her position as sole female warrior whose power is proven through narrowly avoiding sexual assault—twice, once at home in the first episode and again on the raid in episode three—is problematic.[92]

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[90] Katherine J. Lewis, "'What does a man do?': Representing and Performing Masculinity" in *Vikings and the Vikings* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2019), 67.

[91] Lewis is likely drawing on Judith Butler's famous *Gender Trouble*. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York: Routledge, 1999).

[92] As Kate Lister and Paul Hardwick write, Lagertha's abilities in the first season take on a disturbing feeling of "contemporary girl-power framed in a medieval world of sex as rape…[by] presenting Lagertha as a woman who can fight off sexual assault (several times)…Vikings is at risk of tacitly suggesting that those women who are the victims of sexual violence are weak and just not trying hard enough to not be raped" (Kate Lister and Paul Hardwick, "'Have you done this sort of thing before?': Sexual Violence and

Over the course of the series, however, Lagertha's role broadens significantly, as does her centrality to the plot. By the later seasons, a number of significant plot lines largely constellate around her. While many of the characters introduced in the first season have subsequently disappeared, Lagertha is one of the few characters to play a major role in every season. Over time, she becomes more than a token female warrior; she trains other women warriors, takes power for herself, and ultimately becomes perhaps the most iconic character on *Vikings*. From the second season on, the series only increases its variety and intensity of female representation, as women begin to show up on and off the battlefield in new and interesting ways. Lagertha does not embody the sole female warrior, an exception to the rule; rather, she becomes the most famous of many, a female warrior unique not for her gender but for her skill and fame. As Lewis writes, "the extent to which the show seriously attempts to dismantle gendered hierarchies is debatable."[93] Even so, Hirst's shieldmaiden offers a model of female power which extends across, but is not limited to, the typically male domain of the battlefield, thereby expanding the contemporary definition of Viking and thus powerfully complicates a narrative of female passivity in the face of patriarchy and expands the range of possibilities available to medieval women. The result is to render women Vikings, against Jesch, no longer "logically impossible" but perhaps even a requirement of a 'truthful' Viking world.

Historical Revision in *Vikings"* in *Vikings and the Vikings: Essays on Television's History Channel Series*, ed. Paul Hardwick and Kate Lister (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2019), 123-4). I will discuss the show's representation of sexual violence in the following chapter.

[93] Lewis 73.

A Community of Shieldmaidens

At the end of the first season, Hirst introduces another major literary and historical figure from the Scandinavian sagas: the princess Aslaug (Alyssa Sutherland). Within the saga tradition of Ragnar Lodbrok, Aslaug is his second wife, the daughter of Sigurd Fafnesbane, and a powerful seer.[94] In the saga, a freshly widowed Ragnar meets her somewhat by accident while voyaging across the seas. While docked before the final leg of their journey, several of Ragnar's men go inland and discover a small farm, where there is a beautiful girl. They return to Ragnar and tell him of her beauty; Ragnar is intrigued and sends them back to her with a riddle: she must come to him "neither naked nor clad, and neither fasting nor fed; she shall not come alone, yet no man shall attend her."[95] She makes her way to his ship dressed in a fishnet, takes a bit of a leek in front of him, and takes along an old dog. Impressed by her intelligence and stunned by her beauty, Ragnar asks her to marry him. She refuses, saying that he should go to finish his quest first. Ragnar goes off to faraway lands, succeeds in his quest, and returns, whereupon Aslaug agrees to his proposal and they are wed.

Vikings' Ragnar is inspired by history but revised for present day audiences; the series' presentation of Aslaug is no different. The basic structure of their meeting is largely the same: in the final episode of the first season, Ragnar and his men make camp while waiting for a response from the local jarl who they have been sent to parlay with. While scouting the area, a few of Ragnar's men spot a beautiful woman bathing. Rather

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[94] Aslaug is the daughter of Sigurd Fafnesbane and the warrior woman Brynhild; the saga from which they originate, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, is described briefly earlier in this chapter.
[95] Margaret Schlauch, *The Saga of the Volsungs; The Saga of Ragnar Lodbrok Together with The Lay of Kraka* (New York: AMS Press, 1978). 201.

than escape without reproach as occurs in the saga, however, the men are confronted by Aslaug's shieldmaiden attendants, who emerge from the trees and hold the men until Aslaug can gather herself. When she does, in yet another deviation from the source material, she sends them to Ragnar with a demand for an apology. Ragnar responds by giving her the same riddle which he gives her in the saga; but this time, when she proves her intelligence, he does not propose marriage; instead, he apologizes for the behavior of his men, as she requested.[96] Ragnar falls in love with her and, in the season two premiere, proposes to marry her—making her his second wife.

Hirst's re-imagining of this scene foregrounds female power and a reassertion of female agency in two ways; first, by slightly changing the social circumstances and power dynamics of her interactions with Ragnar, and second, by emphasizing the presence of shieldmaidens in the world beyond named characters. By giving Aslaug guards, and making those guards female, *Vikings* adapts the source materials into an opportunity to emphasize a particular kind of female community and solidarity which coheres around the figure of the shieldmaiden. It is a solidarity which does not require military participation—Aslaug herself is not a warrior, but rather a *völva* or seer—but rather coheres around female identity. Hirst's introduction of this network of female support also reclaims what was a scene of female passivity and exploitation—Aslaug, when vulnerable, became an object of desire for Ragnar—into a reassertion of female agency; she is no longer an object of desire, but a woman worthy of desire. Aslaug's shieldmaiden guards protect her and demand accountability from the men who violated her privacy; the exchange between Aslaug and Ragnar becomes not a test of Aslaug's

[96] *Vikings*, "All Change," Season 1, Episode 9, dir. Ken Girotti. writ. Michael Hirst. (History Channel: April 28, 2013), 14:05-17:00 and 17:35-19:17.

intelligence by Ragnar, but a flirtatious competition. The power dynamic between them is less clear than it is in the sagas: while Aslaug is still coming to Ragnar at his request and still answering his riddle, it is ultimately Ragnar who bends to her demand that he make amends for his men's behavior. Indeed, Aslaug aggressively pursues Ragnar, making multiple references to their fate as a married couple. It is unclear, when they ultimately have sex and get married, whether Ragnar is getting his way or Aslaug is getting hers. This layer of complexity is Hirst's entire point in revising their exchange, and indeed his project throughout *Vikings*: to complicate what could be perceived as a simple story of male domination and female subservience.

Chapter Two

Viking Sex Beyond Rape

The Viking in popular culture traditionally represents a very particular kind of masculinity and structure of gender relations. Viking men are large, strong, and often bearded; they take up visual and aural space, moving aggressively around the set and speaking loudly and gruffly. Most importantly, they are violent and aggressive, particularly towards women. As Erika Ruth Sigurdson, Shannon Weber, Carol Clover, and others have written, the figure of the Viking represents a very particular kind of masculinity associated with sexual violence.[97] As Sigurdson put it, "the image of Viking rape is one that is firmly ensconced in our modern imagination. On film, in romance novels, and in a range of modern media, burly Viking warlords rape women inside the wreckage of their burning villages."[98] As she describes, "the figure of the Viking often represents a very specific form of masculinity, one that encompasses notions of violence, dominance, and other aggressive traits...it is not surprising that they should also come to be associated with the domination of women, and with the extreme blurring of the lines between consensual sex and rape that constitutes modern rape culture."[99] In other words, sexual violence and compulsory heterosexuality are not distinct aspects of the Viking identity; rather, part of the performance of Viking heterosexuality is the act of sexual violence. While most re-imaginings of the Viking take this particular combination of

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[97] Erika Ruth Sigurdson. "Violence and Historical Authenticity: Rape (and Pillage) in Popular Viking Fiction." *Scandinavian Studies* 86, no. 3 (2014): 249. Shannon Weber, "White Supremacy's Old Gods," *Public Eye; Somerville*, Winter 2018, 11-16. Clover "Regardless of Sex." Here and throughout the thesis, I use the term "sexual violence" to refer to rape, sexual abuse, and sexual assault. For more on the term, see "Key Terms and Phrases," RAINN, https://www.rainn.org/articles/key-terms-and-phrases (retrieved 22 February 2020).
[98] Sigurdson 249.
[99] Sigurdson 250.

sexual violence and compulsory heterosexuality to far extremes—there is a reason that "rape and pillage" is so often associated with descriptions of Viking activity—it is unclear to what extent Viking Age Scandinavian society bore out these popular expectations.[100]

The question of Viking sexual assault and rape implies a more general question of Viking Age sexuality. If Viking sex was not always rape, then what was it? And, if it was perhaps closer to modern sex in its complexity than traditional representations have allowed, what sort of sexual identities could have existed? The evidence is complex and must be considered from multiple angles.

Jochens argues that, based on the legal and narrative texts which have survived, many of which emphasize at least the appearance of female consent in sexual encounters, "thirteenth-century authors viewed male sexual violence as a serious problem for their pagan ancestors."[101] Whether or not sexual violence was normalized in Viking Age Scandinavian society is a thorny and in many ways unknowable question. Jochens argues further that 13th century authors demonstrated retrospective disapproval of their ancestors' actions through their writing of sagas which link acts of sexual violence to bloody conflicts which usually end poorly for the assaulter.[102] Sexual violence begins

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[100] For more on the term "compulsory heterosexuality," see the article from which the modern term originates: Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs* 5, no. 4 (1980): 631-60.

[101] Jochens, *Images*, 364.

[102] Jochens, after analyzing a number of sagas, posits that most characters who engage in the behavior of the "illicit love visit" – a narrative trope where a man visits a woman without the permission of her family, and usually persuades her through force or guile to have sex with him –were either killed early in the story or, in cases where the girl's family was of sufficient social stature, the father would pursue legal prosecution, setting off a chain of violence which often lasted years (Jochens, *Images*, 368). Jochens cites as evidence the Icelandic sagas *Kormáks saga*, *Droplaugarsona saga*, *Eyrbyggja saga*, and *Njáls saga*. Two additional examples of this trend which Jochens does not cite but nevertheless bear out her theory are *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* and *Hrólfs saga kraka*. I have included references to each work in the bibliography to this thesis.

with the woman and spills over to the family; though this certainly reflects an attitude towards women as objects or property, it also shows that sexual violence disrupted communities and had rippling consequences throughout the larger world.

As Sigurdson has emphasized, however, the representation of sexual violence in literature is in negative terms. As she writes, "while rape exists in Old Norse literature, it is rarely glorified…when we get glimpses of sexual violence, as in the illicit love visit, or female slavery, Old Norse sources tend to describe these situations matter-of-factly, and with a greater focus on the social consequences of male sexual aggression than on the sexualized rape scene itself."[103] Sigurdson's claim in opposition to the leading scholar of rape in the Viking invasions—Jane Tibbets Schulenberg,[104] who argues that women expected and feared rape at the hands of violent invaders—leans on the scholarship of Janet Nelson and Simon Coupland,[105] whose analysis of Frankish annals show that "while eighth-century writers were quick to denounce the various crimes of Viking invaders, very few of those largely monastic writers commented on rape in the invasions—to the point that even modern scholarship has considered it possible that rape was simply not a part of Viking invasions."[106]

The arguments presented by Jochens, Clover, and Sigurdson in texts spanning almost twenty years of scholarship is indicative of the evolving conversation around Viking sexuality which continues to take place in Old Norse academic circles. In

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[103] Sigurdson 254.
[104] Jane Tibbets Schulenburg, "The Heroics of Virginity: Brides of Christ and Sacrificial Mutilation," in *Women in the Middle Ages and Renaissance: Literary and Historical Perspectives*, ed. Mary Beth Rose (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 29-72. Jane Tibbets Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society, ca. 500—1100* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
[105] Janet Nelson, "The Frankish Empire," in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*, ed. Peter Sawyer (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1997), 19-47. Simon Coupland, "The Vikings on the Continent in Myth and History," *History* 88, no. 290 (April 2003): 186-203.
[106] Sigurdson 253.

simplified terms, we can see a general trend across scholarship; from a belief that rape and sexual violence was an intrinsic part of Viking culture to a belief that, in contrast to popular cultural preconceptions, rape and sexual violence were not only looked down upon by Vikings but were relatively uncommon acts. What remains constant throughout the debate is an understanding that the idea of Viking sexuality is intrinsically tied to this question of degree and reception of sexual violence; one cannot talk about Viking sexuality without discussing Viking sexual violence, and vice versa.[107]

A similar debate surrounds the attitudes of pre-Christian Vikings towards homosexuality, though the debate is more of degree and reception rather than existence. Sexual and romantic activity in the sagas is—at least overtly—heteronormative. Marriage in the so-called contemporary sagas—the set of 13th-century prose works which portray contemporaneous Christian society in Iceland and Norway—was always between men and women.[108] There are no overt representations of what we would recognize in modern terms as lesbian sex or romance; though male to female crossdressing is sometimes represented, such cases usually reaffirm heteronormativity and often include scenes of sexual violence.[109]

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[107] Indeed, as Lister and Hardwick write, "without primary evidence, we simply do not know how Viking society understood sexual violence, or the extent to which it was part—whether accepted or not—of Viking culture. Yet, viewers of *Vikings* [referring to comments made by viewers early in the series' run] still demand sexual violence as part of what they understand to be an authentic representation of Norse culture" (Lister and Hardwick 116).

[108] Though these sources do not usually portray overt violence against women, they do reveal a society which rejected Christian sexual mores, with men engaging in open concubinage and taking multiple sexual partners ("The Illicit Love Visit: An Archaeology of Old Norse Sexuality," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 1, no. 3 (1991): 360).

[109] Jenny Jochens, "The Illicit Love Visit," 357–92. Jochens argues that the "illicit love visit," which is sometimes achieved by the male disguising himself as a woman to gain entry to the women's quarters where his target is kept cloistered away, describes a certain threat and often act of sexual violence. There were laws which punished women for cross-dressing as men and vice-versa. "The *Gragas* condemns this type of transgressive behavior explicitly for both men and women: 'If women deviate so far from custom that they wear men's clothes or adopt any male practices for the sake of being different, and also if men adopt any female practices, of whatever kind, then the punishment will be lesser outlawry [banishment], for

Queer sexual practices between men have a richer presence in Old Norse texts and laws but are described in derogatory terms. One medieval Scandinavian law which prohibits homosexuality is believed to have been added to the famous set of laws known as the Grey Goose Laws [Icelandic: *Grágás*] in 1164. The law describes how "if two men enjoy the pleasures of the flesh and are accused and convicted of it, they shall both suffer permanent outlawry."[110] This law cannot, on its own, tell scholars much about how pre-Christian Viking Age Scandinavians treated queer male sex. By the time this law was passed, the Vikings had been Christianized for almost a century; and, as with all laws, it is unknown to what extent the law was actually enforced. The very existence of this law demonstrates the presence of practices we could anachronistically call homosexual, but offers little concrete evidence in terms of how such practices were actually understood in lived lives. Another law, which describes the legal recourse for a man accused of homosexual sex, offers another hint towards the reception of similar sexual practices. The law begins with the phrase, "if a man hears in poetry words of a kind for which a man has the right to kill—that he is womanish or has been buggered [—then he may take action]… [Old Icelandic: Ef m*að*r heyr*ir* iscalldscap orð þ*at* e*r* m*að*r a vígt vm. at h*ann* se ragr e*ða* stroðeN…]."[111] It matters not whether or not the sex was consensual or even whether or not sex was actually had; what matters, legally speaking, is that others have

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whomever does this. [Old Icelandic: Ef konor ge*r*az sva af siða at þaer ga*n*ga ikarlfǫtom e*ða* hve*r*ngi carla sið er þær hafa f*yrir* breytne sac*ir oc* sva carlar þ*eir* er kueNa sið hafa huer*n*ge veg er þ*at* er. þa v*arðar* þat f*iorbaugs* G*ar*ð. huaR*om* se*m* þ*at* ge*r*a']'" (William Layher, "Caught Between Worlds: Gendering the Maiden Warrior in Old Norse," in *Women and Medieval Epic*, ed. Sara S. Poor and Jana K. Schulman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2007), 185-6). This law seems to apply mostly in the cases of permanent cross-dressing – not the temporary sort seen in the "illicit love visits" enabled by crossdressing, where the man dons woman's clothes only temporarily, as a disguise.

[110] Kari Ellen Gade, "Homosexuality and Rape of Males in Old Norse Law and Literature," *Scandinavian Studies* 58, no. 2 (1986): 124.

[111] Vilhjálmur Finsen, *Grágás Islændernes Lovbog i Fristatens Tid* (Copenhagen: Brødrene Berlings Bogtrykkeri, 1852), 183-4.

been told it happened; and, as the law states, such an accusation apparently poses a serious enough social risk to the man in question that he may legally pursue a deadly restitution.

Though the laws can be interpreted in different ways, it seems clear that this law makes a distinction between sex as a matter of private life and sex as a matter of public discourse. While penetrative queer male sex is certainly not thought of positively, it is the sharing of such behaviors in the public sphere which is met with strong condemnation and punishment. The problem of sources again makes it difficult to make a fuller argument about the broader Viking Age society; while male queer sexual practice is always described in legal and narrative sources in negative terms, the kinds of sources we have available to us provide only limited access to the historical prevalence of, as well as the competing social ideas that may have circulated around, queer sexual practices.

Indeed, it is telling of how little we know for sure about this part of Viking Age society that some of our clearest indications of social attitudes towards queer male sexual practices are pieces of runic graffiti and other informal texts. These artifacts, though fragmentary, add nuance to our understanding of how homosexuality may have been received in its contemporary context. One fragment of runic graffiti recovered from the Old Town neighborhood in Oslo, Sweden records a derogatory message which reads in part that "Óli(‘s rear) is unwiped and fucked in the anus…[Old Norwegian: *Óli er óskeyndr ok stroðinn í rassinn*]."[112] However fragmentary and ephemeral, the graffito

[112] *Samnordisk Runtextdatabas*. ed. Lennart Elmevik, Lena Peterson and Henrik Williams (Institutionen för nordiska språk, Uppsala universitet, 1993): Item N A322 M. It is particularly useful to compare this graffito to one about heterosexual sex which is a matter for charm magic. This latter item reads: "you [ostensibly the target of the charm] will fuck Rannveig the Red [a woman's name]. It will be bigger than a man's prick and smaller than a horse's prick [Old Norwegian: *Rannveig *Rauðu skaltu streða [alt. serða] Þat sé meira enn mannsreðr ok minna enn hestreðr*]" (Item N B28 M in *Samnordisk Runtextdatabas*).

points to a more complex world of sexuality and sexual practices than the laws' prohibitions can represent.

Reading between the lines of the evidence, scholars today accept that homosexual practices were a part of at least pre-Christianization Viking Age Scandinavian society and were likely not viewed as punishable within the law before, and perhaps even after, the 12th century.[113] Even so, popular images of the Viking have continued to represent a token heterosexual rapist; as Sigurdson has emphasized, present-day Viking representations often deploy scenes of male-on-female rape as a means of conjuring a sense of historical authenticity itself, that "we [the audience] are in 'brutal and mysterious' times."[114] Hirst's *Vikings* stands in stark contrast to this version of Viking sexuality. While the vision of the Viking past painted by Hirst is by no means a feminist utopia, it does work to undo the narrative of passive female oppression peddled by previous works, while also providing space for a broader sense of Viking sexuality that includes potential queer identities. In dismantling the falsehood of the Viking as especially aggressive sexual predator and loosening the strict compulsive heterosexuality which the figure of the Viking is often used to perform, Hirst constructs a Viking world which allows for a more nuanced understanding of Viking sex and sexuality—which, while perhaps more progressive than some scholars are willing to accept, more accurately presents the complexity of the past as described in present-day scholarly debates.

[113] Gade 135.
[114] Sigurdson 252.

"I want her to fight me tooth and nail": Richard Fleischer's *The Vikings* (1958)

A key example of the Viking as heterosexual rapist can be found in Richard Fleischer's *The Vikings* (1958), one of the best-known films featuring the Vikings. Fleischer's film offers a dramatic tale inspired by the events of *The Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok* [Old Norse: *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*], the same source that is the primary basis for Hirst's *Vikings*. In adapting the historical record, the film invents both characters and plot, but maintains and extends the cultural trend of the Viking as misogynist and rapist to its logical extreme.[115] In other words, *The Vikings* portrays a Viking world where the aspirational Viking is defined by his desire and attempts to rape women.[116]

The film starred Kirk Douglas, who was a very popular actor throughout the "Golden Age" of the film industry. A "cleft-chinned, steely-eyed, and virile star of international cinema,"[117] the actor is best known today for his role in the 1960 film *Spartacus* as the titular Roman gladiator but has acting credits for almost a hundred different roles across film and television. *The Vikings* received mixed responses from critics, including a derisive review from *The New York Times* critic Bosley Crowther, who takes issue with the film's over-the-top portrayal of the Viking past:

> there isn't much doubt that Kirk Douglas, who personally produced this giant charade, as well as plays the Number One boozer and bruiser on the Norsemen team, set out to make the goldarndest [sic] wide-screen and color action film that is physically possible within the confines of ancient castles, grotesque rowboats and bushy beards…there is plenty of action

[115] Kathleen Coyne Kelly, "The Trope of the Scopic in *The Vikings* (1958)," in *The Vikings on Film: Essays on Depictions of the Nordic Middle Ages*, ed. Kevin J. Harty (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland, 2011), 15.
[116] Sigurdson 249.
[117] IMDb. "Kirk Douglas." Accessed January 10, 2020. http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000018/.

> and the scenery occasionally is superb—just like a lot of Westerns. It's strictly a Norse opera, in two words.[118]

Here, Crowther identifies how *The Vikings* uses the medieval past not as a chance to explore a historical story, but as a chance to expand upon a historical media tradition of a mythical medieval masculinity which is bounded by the trappings of a historical setting but tied inextricably through recognizable actors and accents to a national American past. Crowther invokes the American epic form of the Western, but also alludes to the German and Nazi usages of the Vikings through his invocation of the "Norse opera." Crowther here aptly diagnoses the link between the film's fantastic masculinity and its appeal to a mythos of national destiny.

Despite excoriation from critics like Crowther, the film became a box-office hit in America and abroad in the United Kingdoms, earning over seven million dollars in rentals in the US and Canada and the same overseas for a combined estimated total of fifteen million dollars.[119] This success was due in part to the film's sensational violence and misogyny. The long back-and-forth conversation between producer Jerry Bresler and director of the Production Code Administration Geoffrey M. Shurlock resulted in a film which in many ways—notably in its depiction of sex, violence, and rape—skirted dangerously close to the edge of what was allowed in 1950s Hollywood. The film pushed the boundaries of what was acceptable on the false grounds established by Bresler that "their research" required various scenes of almost comedic extremism. As Kelly writes, "in [the] case of *The Vikings* (1958), the alterity of the Viking Age furnishes the pretext

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[118] Bosley Crowther, "Norse Opera," *The New York Times*, June 12, 1958, https://www.nytimes.com/1958/06/12/archives/norse-opera.html.
[119] "Kirk Douglas: Actor-Tycoon," *Variety*, October 1, 1958, 3. "Some of the Top UA Grossers," *Variety*, June 24, 1959, 12.

for representations of violence and sex, and this very alterity serves as the discursive grounds for testing the limits of the PCA Code."[120] In other words, the sensational misogyny of *The Vikings* is not incidental to its setting, but is explicitly the purpose of the film. Bresler and others wanted to make a sensational film that pushed the boundaries of acceptable content; their version of the Viking Age was simply what enabled this goal.

From the outset of the film, this definitional relationship between the Viking identity and male sexual violence against women is foregrounded. After a short introductory sequence where a low-toned narrator speaks over a series of still shots of Old Norse-themed tapestries, giving a vaguely historical orientation to the time period and Viking subjects—who, according to the film's introduction, "exploited their skill as shipbuilders to spread a reign of terror then unequaled in violence and brutality in all the records of history"[121]—the first staged scenes of the film are of death and rape. King Ragnar (Ernest Bergnine) murders the king of Northumbria and rapes his wife, Queen Enid (Maxine Audley), who becomes pregnant as a result of the assault. What is particularly interesting about this scene is not only its presence at the beginning of the film—setting the tone for the rest of the film and establishing a clear correlation between Viking and rape—but also how quickly it is over. Within fifteen seconds of the first staged shot, the king is dead and Ragnar is entering the queen's tent, and as the screen fades to black we hear her scream. Another fifteen seconds later, the grieving and assaulted queen has been collected by Northumbrian soldiers, time has passed, and Enid stands in full royal garb at King Ælla's (Frank Thring) coronation.[122] Forty-five seconds

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[120] Kelly 15.
[121] Richard Fleischer, *The Vikings,* Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer, 1958. 00:20-02:09.
[122] As Sigurdson writes, this powerful scene "provides powerful visual confirmation of the raping, pillaging Viking, and indeed, positions the act of rape as central to the Viking raid" (Sigurdson 251).

later, her son by the rape has grown to a man and she has faded into obscurity. Her trauma is not treated as the extremely serious and disturbing assault which it is, but as a simple, even insignificant plot device unworthy of being acknowledged, let alone resolved. Enid has no role in this film other than to be raped—to establish the threat and danger of Vikings—and then to give birth to the protagonist.

Perhaps even more than this compressed, violent opening to the film, however, another scene towards its beginning reveals the way in which *The Vikings* objectifies female characters. One of the most iconic scenes of the film hinges around defining the specific kind of violent masculinity the film advances.[123] Einar (Kirk Douglas), son of King Ragnar, is shown intervening in a game involving throwing axes at a woman who has been accused of adultery. As Ragnar explains to Lord Egbert (James Donald), a treasonous Northumbrian working with the Vikings in exchange for protection, a man who accuses his wife of being unfaithful pins her three braids to a wooden circle, her head sticking through a hole in the center of the planks. The man who has accused her begins throwing axes at her while she is bound and unable to move. If she is killed, the claim is true. If the axes sever her braids, she is exonerated. And if the man throws three axes without either happening, Ragnar gleefully relays, he will be killed himself. Here, violence and the threat of sexual violence is clearly intertwined; the idea of male domination through that violence is normalized as a standard part of society, even a method of legal resolution. The final rule—that men who can't throw correctly are

[123] In a pithy phrase, Katherine J. Lewis writes that the Vikings in popular media are the "poster boys of toxic masculinity" (Katherine J Lewis, "'What does a man do?': Representing and Performing Masculinity," in *Vikings and the Vikings: Essays on Television's History Channel Series*, ed. Paul Hardwick and Kate Lister (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2019), 68.)

removed from society—confirms the central role of violence in the definition of the male Viking self.

It does not take long for it to become apparent that the woman accused of adultery

Figure 2-1: Einar throws three axes to cut the three braids of the accused woman (The Vikings 26:27).

is, in fact, the one seen sleeping with Einar towards the beginning of the film. Her husband throws two axes at her, both of which miss, though not without eliciting terrified squeals from the girl and roars of laughter and applause from the crowd. Einar, sickened by the man's ineptitude, or perhaps meaning to save the woman he has endangered, takes the axe from the man and severs all three of the woman's braids with three careful throws (see Figure 2-1).

This scene is particularly illustrative when taken as a whole; the axe-throwing creates a clear relationship between the man as accuser and doer of violence and the woman as accused and receiver of violence, but the trappings of the scene extend the sphere of domesticity and lack of agency to the larger society. It is, in a recently popularized turn of phrase, a rape culture.[124] Through the entrenched systems of

[124] "Unlearning Rape Culture," Harvard University Office of Sexual Assault Prevention & Response, accessed 23 February 2020, https://osapr.harvard.edu/unlearning-rape-culture. Per Harvard's Office of Sexual Assault Prevention & Response: "Rape culture promotes sexual objectification and coercion, lack of agency over one's body, and dismissal of feminine-presenting or gender nonconforming individuals as not 'fully human.'"

patriarchy and misogyny which suffuse this society, Viking women are denied equality in their lives as well as before the law. There are many women in this scene, but none of them are of the same standing as their male peers. While the large, bearded men laugh and drink and eat, the women dutifully scoop ale from a large pot into carved drinking horns and distribute them throughout the hall. It seems that the only time a woman is

Figure 2-2: Einar (center) pushes a woman onto the table, fills her mouth with ale, and violently kisses her. A second woman watches from the side, laughing and smiling (The Vikings 28:13).

allowed to participate in the revelry is when forcibly brought in, as is the case both for the unfortunate woman who is the target of the axe-throwing debacle and for the woman who Einar forces down on a table and violently kisses her in celebration of his successful endeavor to emasculate the other man while performing violence towards the accused woman (see Figure 2-2).

Fleischer and other members of the production team have maintained that their intention with the film was to adhere as closely as possible to historical realism. And yet, as Kelly describes, in one interview Fleischer "relates with relish the story behind the scene in which the young married woman with whom Einar had been having an affair

loses her braids. Fleischer says proudly, 'We invented this game,' thus contradicting all that he has said before about how meticulously authentic *The Vikings* was."[125] Sigurdson concurs with Kelly, writing that under Fleischer's direction the film "unites [supposed historical accuracy and the envelope-pushing levels of 'sex and violence' in *The Vikings*] in its portrayal of rape and violence against women."[126] Fleischer's *The Vikings* portrays rape as a central part of Viking sexuality: Fleischer's Einar tells his father, Ragnar, "do you think with this face I want the kind of wife who would let me touch her? I want her to fight me tooth and nail; the first time I take her, and the last." Ragnar responds with pride, telling Einar, "you are my son."[127] Although Einar is certainly the villain of Fleischer's story, the film returns frequently to this idea of sexual assault as central to the Viking way of life.

Viking Sex Beyond Assault

It is in the reproduction of and divergence from these popular narratives that *Vikings* works to construct a new image of Viking gender and sexuality. One particularly worthwhile example of this is *Vikings*' representation of a trial over an accusation of sexual assault—a scene whose historical authenticity is all the more apparent in contrast to the "trial" of the 1958 film. *Vikings*, too, portrays a trial; however, the trial in season one, episode four exists not to prove the endemic nature and enduring power of Viking hypermasculinity, but to display the legal complexity of actual Viking culture. The result is not to say that women were protected in Viking society, but rather to show how Viking

[125] Kelly 15.
[126] Sigurdson 251.
[127] *The Vikings* 44:26-44:41.

women might have worked within the law (as well as outside of it) to resist sexual violence and systems of male domination.

The background for the trial scene is a raid on England in which Lagertha accompanies a party's attack on a small Northumbrian town. She is certainly a part of the "pillage" half of the traditional "rape and pillage" associated with Viking raids, as she goes through the streets with her fellow warriors searching for plunder. In the course of the sack of the town, though, she sees another Viking warrior—Knut [Old Norse: *Knútr*]—attempting to rape a Saxon woman. This part of the scene is shot very close; the camera is inches from both Knut and the Saxon woman's faces, focusing on Knut's bared teeth and the woman's blood-covered forehead and anguished expression. Knut stands above her, but the camera is positioned longitudinally to both characters—neither is given an overt position of dominance or submission from the camera angle, only from the activity of the scene. Lagertha refuses to sit idly by, stepping in from the street and confronting him. "Knut!" she shouts, stepping through the open doorway. "Leave her alone!"[128] When he ignores her and continues his assault, Lagertha draws her sword, stabbing him from behind. Knut assaults her and attempts to undress her while she is disoriented. Here, the camera has shifted; rather than an observer from the side, the camera shifts between orthogonal perspectives of Lagertha and Knut, by turns displaying a slightly low-angle shot of Knut and a slightly high-angle shot of Lagertha, both shot from over the shoulder of the other character. Traditionally, this kind of cinematography is used to suggest a power dynamic—in this case, that Knut is more powerful than Lagertha. This makes Lagertha's ultimate victory both more surprising and more

[128] *Vikings*, "Trial," Season 1, Episode 4, dir. Ciaran Donnelly, writ. Michael Hirst, (History Channel: March 24, 2013), 11:04.

impactful; Lagertha recovers from her disorientation and uses Knut's distraction against him, drawing his own knife and stabbing him dead. As he dies, Lagertha switches their position; now she is atop him, pressing his body into the table as he spasms. His hand goes to her throat, but it is too late; with a final twist of the knife, he dies.

After the raid is over and Ragnar discovers that Knut is dead, he is upset—Knut was Earl Haraldson's cousin and spy in their ranks, and his death will surely result in punishment. Ragnar and Lagertha exchange the following lines:

> Ragnar: Where is Knut?
> Lagertha: I killed him.
> R: You. Killed him.
> L: He raped a Saxon woman and then he tried to rape me.
> R: Did anyone else see it happen? [Lagertha shakes her head] That's a pity.[129]

Ragnar's disappointment provides a clear moment where Hirst emphasizes that the characters are thinking about the law; Ragnar's reaction signals to the audience that, had there been witnesses, an attempted rape would have been legal grounds for murder. Without witnesses, though, the legal ground becomes murkier, particularly given the rocky relationship between Ragnar and Knut's jarl. Ragnar's concern proves well founded; when the raiding party returns to Kattegat, his employer demands to know what has happened to him. Ragnar, perhaps in an effort to shield his wife, takes responsibility, saying that he killed Knut when he saw him attempting to rape Lagertha. Knut's jarl has him arrested, and he is put on trial. The show's portrayal of the trial provides an excellent example of the type and degree of historical engagement which informs Hirst's

[129] *Vikings*, "Trial," 12:20-45. Transcriptions are my own.

engagement with historical Viking materials and the scholarly discussion of them, with real effects on the series' representation of the Viking relationship to sexual violence.

Icelandic law codices are explicit in naming rape as one of few offenses which could be punished by death.[130] One law in particular which is often cited when comparing Viking gender politics to other medieval societies is one which explicitly forbids the rape of a free woman; this law, as Jochens describes, "inflicts severe punishments on males who commit [violence and rape against a woman] and differentiates penalties for stealing kisses, sleeping with, and impregnating women on whom they have no sexual rights."[131] This was more likely reflective of an understanding of women as the property of their families more than a progressive belief in egalitarianism between sexes; nonetheless, it presents a more active stance in the realm of women's legal rights than most other medieval European societies.[132]

Hirst uses the trial of Ragnar Lothbrok to highlight this aspect of Viking culture which is often ignored in popular representations of Viking Age Scandinavians. During the trial, Lagertha quickly reassumes responsibility for Knut's death. In response to Lagertha's testimony that she killed Knut, Earl Haraldson scoffs. "Ragnar is lying, and you are so under his thumb that he has persuaded you to lie for him...You [Lagertha] didn't kill my brother. Look at you, how could you? *He* [Ragnar] killed my brother."[133] There is a clearly gendered dimension to his dismissal—his implication is that Lagertha,

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[130] Jochens, "The Illicit Love Visit," 359.
[131] Ibid.
[132] The codices also contain a number of other pseudo-feminist laws: women could also divorce their husbands and inherit land and wealth. If the woman received a dowry as part of a marriage which she later left, the dowry was hers to keep. Per Jochens, "the [legal] text does not...construe sexual crimes as affecting the women as individuals but, rather, their families who controlled their sexual and reproductive capabilities" (ibid).
[133] *Vikings*, "Trial," 34:15-36 and 35:10-4.

as a woman, could not have killed Knut, a man; only Ragnar, a man, could have reasonably done so, despite the fact that Lagertha is a renowned shieldmaiden. But here, too, lie clear traces of historical truth; Ragnar and Lagertha, as a married couple, cannot testify in service of the other. It is only when Ragnar's brother Rollo steps in, falsely giving testimony and legally verifying Lagertha's claims, that the trial is ended. To paraphrase Rollo, Lagertha's claim that she killed Knut in response to an attempted rape absolves her of any legal punishment. The trial then ends in favor of Ragnar and Lagertha.

It is this direct challenge to traditional ideas about Viking behavior which makes apparent one of *Vikings*' major intentions to reset the historical record on the figure of the Viking. Hirst's Viking Age is one where women are not the passive victims they are portrayed to be in Fleischer's 1958 film, but a world where women have the ability to fight back both within and outside of the law against male oppression and sexual violence.

Vikings represents a world in which sexual violence is commonplace, but it invites its viewers to join in a moral condemnation of such acts that is shared with the world of the show: rape is performed almost exclusively by villains and is understood as a villainous act.[134] Moreover, although the show represents a number of scenes of sexual violence, as the show progresses over seasons it increasingly resists representing rape as an incidental opportunity to titillate its viewers, rather emphasizing both the seriousness of the crime and the responses of women to the threat of sexual violence.[135] The series

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[134] "Sexual violence…is introduced as an indicator of the distinction between good men and bad men: 'good' Vikings don't rape, only the bad ones do" (Lister and Hardwick 120).

[135] How medievalist and other television shows represent sexual violence has been a topic of active discussion in recent online and feminist culture. For an overview of modern perspectives, see the following:

departs from *The Vikings* and other popular Viking representations by choosing to portray the Viking Age not as a time when patriarchy reigned unchallenged and women were totally dominated, but rather a time when, despite the presence and power of patriarchal structures of power and oppression, women contested those structures of power. In this way, the series de-homogenizes the past, rejecting the binary narrative often associated with historical retrospective—that the present is enlightened in the face of an entirely backwards past or vice versa—to suggest that the Viking Age, in its complexity, was not unlike the present. This approach neither idealizes nor villainizes the past.

"Join Us, Priest": Queering the Vikings

Moving away from the "rape and pillage" paradigm of earlier media, Hirst works to build a more fluid and, indeed, more queer understanding of Viking sexual customs and practices. In the episode preceding Lagertha's trial,[136] Hirst begins what will turn out to be a seasons-long project to disturb the traditional view of the Vikings as an aggressively heteronormative people. After Ragnar's successful raid on the monastery at Lindisfarne in the second episode of the first season, he takes one of the monks as a slave: Athelstan (George Blagden), who learned to speak Old Norse doing missionary work. When Ragnar returns home in the following episode, bringing Athelstan with him, they reach an uneasy peace. That night, when Ragnar and Lagertha are having sex,

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Maureen Ryan, "The Progress and Pitfalls of Television's Treatment of Rape," *Variety*, December 6, 2016, https://variety.com/2016/tv/features/rape-tv-television-sweet-vicious-jessica-jones-game-of-thrones-1201934910/. Zeba Blay, "How Feminist TV Became The New Normal," *The Huffington Post*, June 18, 2015, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/how-feminist-tv-became-the-new-normal_n_7567898. Sonia Saraiya, "Rape of *Thrones,*" *AV Club*, April 20, 2014, https://tv.avclub.com/rape-of-thrones-1798267897.

[136] *Vikings*, "Dispossessed," Season 1, Episode 3, dir. Johan Renck, writ. Michael Hirst (History Channel: March 17, 2013).

Athelstan is in the next room, wide awake, murmuring prayers under his breath. Suddenly, Ragnar and Lagertha duck into the room in states of almost complete undress. Ragnar is nude from at least the waist up—though the camera angle would seem to imply that he is fully nude—while Lagertha covers herself with a blanket (see Figure 2-3).

Figure 2-3: Lagertha and Ragnar invite Athelstan (in profile, to right of camera) to sleep with them (Vikings S1E3, "Dispossessed." 21:38).

Both stare at Athelstan with undisguised interest. Lagertha smirks down at him, while Ragnar's face is the picture of nervous desire, with his brows slightly raised and his lips parted. All three members of the exchange are lit by soft, orange light from the low fires burning in the home. The heavy silence is broken by Ragnar whispering, somewhat tripping over the words, "Athelstan, we want to ask you something." Athelstan looks at him, confused. Lagertha, still smirking, clarifies. "Come join us, priest." Ragnar immediately follows up, jerking his head towards their bed. "Come on." What is initially Lagertha's suggestion becomes an invitation from both of them. When Athelstan declines, Ragnar moves to lay down beside him, his head against Athelstan's shoulder, as

Lagertha draws the blankets up her legs. Athelstan looks away. Ragnar, after watching her, asks the priest, "wouldn't you like to?" Athelstan responds uncertainly: "it would be a sin." Ragnar immediately counters, asking, "who would know?" After they exchange a few more words, and Lagertha begins to more overtly seduce him, drawing the blanket further up her leg, Athelstan turns away and resumes his prayer. Ragnar exchanges a disappointed look with Lagertha before murmuring, "go to sleep, then...with your God" to the priest before he gets up from beside the priest and leaves to the next room, where he and Lagertha return to bed—presumably to continue having sex.[137]

This scene serves a number of purposes for Hirst. It continues to establish Ragnar as a curious sort, part of Hirst's effort to remold the image of the Viking as explorer; it establishes a clash of faith between the Christian world and the pagan one. But perhaps most interestingly, it insinuates that the Vikings were accepting of and even invited—even if only in private—potentially queer forms of sex and sex acts. To be sure, the exchange between Ragnar and Athelstan is mediated by the presence and active participation of Lagertha, making the encounter arguably homosocial as well as homosexual.[138] The way this scene is staged, however, suggests that Ragnar is proposing a sexual encounter with himself as well as his wife.

Ragnar and Lagertha's invitation of Athelstan into their bed, and apparent disappointment when he refuses, indicates that the world of *Vikings* is one where different kinds of queer sexual practices, if not overtly accepted, were a part of private

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[137] *Vikings*, "Dispossessed," 21:20-22:50.

[138] The series features several scenes where a man invites other men to have sex with his wife. In most of those cases, however, this invitation is not genuine but used as a test of loyalty. To accept the offer is to fail the test, and in most cases to be punished with death by the conniving husband who has used his wife's sexuality as a tool to gauge the loyalty of his male followers.

life. Ragnar's repeated attempts to convince Athelstan to reject his celibacy and join them plays a part in Hirst's ultimate goal of softening the image of the Vikings. Of course, the homoerotic suggestions of this scene are tempered in certain ways. Given that Athelstan refuses the threesome offer, the show does not actually show male homosexual sex.

Though the show's representation of queerness in this scene is ultimately only insinuative, in later seasons it goes further in directly representing female homosexuality. After Lagertha assumes control of Hedeby from her abusive second husband, it is revealed that she is in a lesbian relationship with Astrid (Josefin Asplund), one of her shieldmaidens and trusted advisors.[139] Astrid's first appearance is with Lagertha on the training grounds, each attempting to best the other—Lagertha ultimately wins, but narrowly. When next we see them, it is through Ragnar's eyes as he visits their court asking for assistance for one last raid on Paris. Later, the show represents Lagertha and Astrid having sex. This is the first and only moment in the series thus far where overtly homosexual sex is shown on screen. Lagertha and Astrid's relationship is certainly not a focus of the season, but it receives enough screen time to be impossible to ignore. Hirst's *Vikings*, by placing a major female protagonist in a queer relationship with another woman, rejects strictly defined notions of "proper" Viking sexuality in favor of a meditation on what a queerer, more nuanced Viking past might have existed between the lines of recorded history.

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[139] *Vikings*, "The Outsider," Season 4, Episode 11, dir. Daniel Grou, writ. Michael Hirst (History Channel: November 30, 2016).

Coda

"Be a Viking. Be a Man.": Far Right Responses to the Shieldmaiden

Michael Hirst's *Vikings* works to portray a more nuanced—though certainly not entirely accurate or academic—view of the Viking Age, particularly as it relates to issues of sexuality and gender. Far right groups have similarly engaged with scholarship which attempts to reform the image of the Viking; rather than embracing this scholarship as Hirst does, far right groups vocally combat efforts by scholars and authors to diversify and add nuance to the traditional image of the Viking. In this brief coda, I will explore the methodology and perspective of one such group which calls itself "Norskk," after the Old Norse word for "Norse," as a means of clarifying the stakes of Hirst's revisionary approach to the representation of Vikings.

The origins and actual operating purpose of Norskk are unclear; though the site claims to be based in Oslo, Norway, all of its content is in English with a distinctive American style of writing. In an effort to further sell the guise of authenticity, the site re-routes ".ca.," ".is," ".no,"[140] and other Scandinavian domains to a welcome page in that country's language that links to the English homepage. The site appears to serve two purposes: in one sense, it is a forum and meeting place for members of the far right to express their misogynist, racist, and nationalist sentiments. On the other, it appears to be something of a snake oil scam: the site peddles "natural herbal remedies" and beard care products; under the "Heal" and "Care" tabs on their homepage, the site invites visitors to purchase "100% natural viking care & health products."[141] Whether or not the group

[140] These are, respectively, the domain names for Canada, Iceland, and Norway.
[141] "Norskk Homepage," Norskk, accessed March 7, 2019, https://norskk.com/.

actually operates offline as a far right neo-Viking group, it is clear that they are targeting a largely American audience predisposed to particular misogynistic worldviews through its appeal to a particular vision of the medieval past in which women are submissive tools whose only value is in sexual and domestic servitude to men. Indeed, one page of the site, "Be a Man," presents a series of images which are clearly meant to be informational, providing advice for the visitor to the site who wishes to live by Norskk's idea of the Viking way. The items disparage women, modern feminism, and political liberals; the top of the page reads: "Be A Viking. Be A Man." This phrase, just as *The Viking*'s introductory intertitles did in 1928, definitionally erases any possibility of a female Viking.[142]

Norskk's misogynist understanding of the past resists the change in historical thinking which is at the core of the Uppsala team's revisionary take on Bj.581. Jesch stipulates in her response to the Uppsala team's 2017 article that she believes modern feminist desires play a role in undermining the objectivity of scholarly engagement with the figure of the Viking woman warrior. In their own response to the Uppsala team's work, Norskk appropriates Jesch's critique not to push towards a more considered understanding of the evidence, but to protect their own revision of the past. In one blog post titled "The Myth of Shield Maidens," Norskk plagiarizes Jesch's writings to argue unequivocally that women warriors could never have existed. In a representative quote, Norskk writes that the Bj.581 study "is fundamentally flawed from a technical, historical,

[142] "Be a Man," Norskk, accessed February 29, 2020, https://norskk.com/be-a-man-list.

cultural, and biological aspect, and her conclusions simply have no scientific or factual basis."[143]

The Norskk homepage uses the image of a man's bare torso covered in dirt and a Viking helmet drawn in blood across his chest to claim a particular vision of the past as a space of violent gender inequity (see Figure 3-1). Norskk describes their goal: to "share

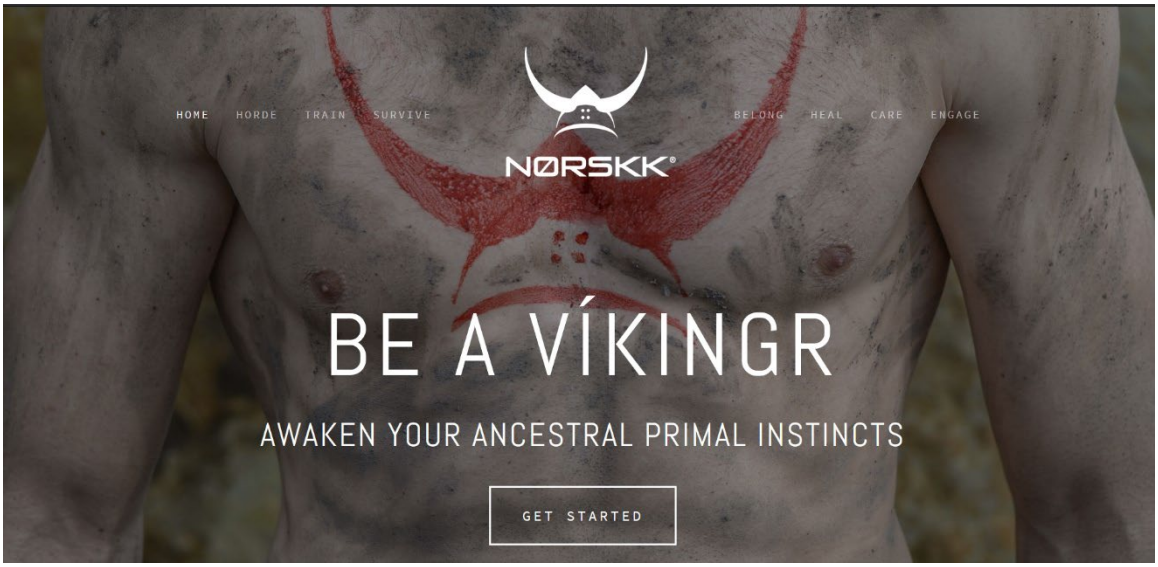

Figure 3-1: Norskk's homepage.

our ancestral traditions, our skills, and our wisdom to make you a true Vikingr [Viking]."[144] What exactly it means to be a "true Viking" becomes rapidly apparent. Under a tab on the website labeled "Viking Facts," Norskk has amassed dozens of original images, each declaring in bold text an aspect of Viking culture which the group holds to be central and, most importantly, historical. Each image consists of a phrase written in large text identifying and defining this supposedly historical aspect of Viking culture and a smaller line beneath it which read "FACTS. NOT REVISIONISM.

[143] "Shield Maidens – The Myth of Shield Maidens," Norskk, accessed October 23, 2018, https://norskk.com/shield-maidens.
[144] "Norskk Homepage."

#VIKINGFACTS."[145] Even as they claim the mantle of historical "facts," Norskk constructs a medieval lineage based on assumption and desire. Using Old Norse

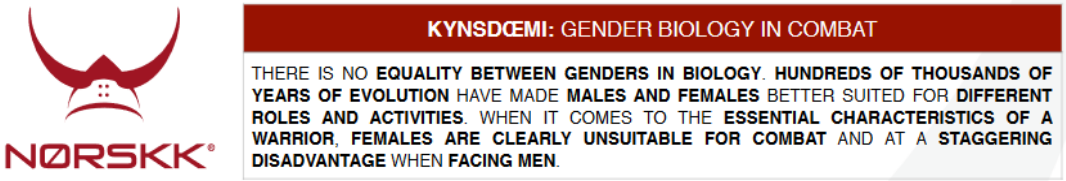

Figure 3-2. Above Top: the full image for "KYNSDŒMI: GENDER BIOLOGY IN COMBAT." Above Bottom: Header text, made larger for legibility.

vocabulary and creating an overall aesthetic which plays on established ideas about who the Vikings were, Norskk invokes precisely the older popular image of the Viking that Hirst's show had sought to displace: aggressive, hyper-masculine, and violent.

Norskk's image of medieval rape culture is both explanatory and aspirational, validating alt-right belief in the biological superiority of men over women while providing a model for them to imitate as modern misogynists. As Norskk writes in

[145] "Viking Facts," Norskk, accessed March 7, 2019, https://norskk.com/viking-facts-list.

another promotional image titled "KYNSDŒMI: GENDER BIOLOGY IN COMBAT," "there is no equality between genders in biology...when it comes to the essential characteristics of a warrior, females are clearly unsuitable for combat and at a staggering disadvantage when facing men [frequent bold emphasis removed]"[146] (see Figure 3-2). This argument clearly establishes Norskk's misogyny as both explicitly violent and deeply fragile. Norskk has entwined their masculine identity with the ability to treat women however they wish, and specifically a mandate on violence.

Norskk makes their position on the question of the Viking rapist explicitly clear. In an image created ostensibly to respond to emerging arguments that Vikings were not the serial rapists that they have historically been assumed to be, Norskk ties the act of rape to the Viking identity. As they write in a "meme"-style image evidently intended as a kind of easily sharable informational poster, "rape was part of Viking culture [bold emphasis and capitalization removed]" (see Figure 3-3). The bolding of the words "rape" and "Viking" make the message crystal clear: to be a Viking is to rape. In this way, they uncomfortably endorse sexual violence in the present. In a particularly offensive gesture, a spatter

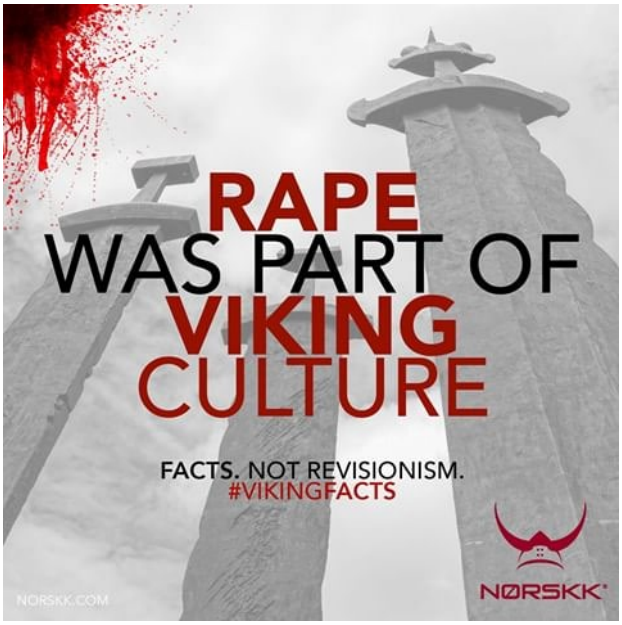

Figure 3-3: Norskk's *"Rape was part of Viking Culture." Notice the "Facts. Not Revisionism. #VIKINGFACTS" tagline in the bottom part of the image.*

[146] "KYNSDŒMI," NORSKK, accessed March 7, 2019, http://norskk.is/bytta/hirdmadr/menn/kynsdoemi.pdf.

of blood decorates the top left of the image, concretizing the abstract violence of their language.

While Norskk finds scholarship suggesting an egalitarian Viking army so transgressive that they must respond, they embrace the ahistorical identity of the Viking as abnormally aggressive and sexually violent with relish. This lack of consistency makes clear that their reasons for opposing the woman warrior have little to do with historical accuracy and everything to do with maintaining an idealized, male-dominated past. For these communities, the medieval past represents the ability for white men to act however they wish towards women and a socially and physically enforced inability for women to stop them. Misogyny is not symptomatic or incidental to the alt-right's continued preoccupation with the medieval: it is central to its appeal.

When scholars like the Uppsala team suggest that Viking women could pick up blades and fight alongside men, the assumptions supporting the misogynistic worldview of groups such as Norskk come under assault. The debate over the role of women in medieval societies such as those of the Viking Age Scandinavians operates not only in the academic arena, but also within the public sphere. It is in the latter of these spaces where Hirst and Norskk's ideas clash, and where the public imagination is engaged in a battle for "truthfulness." It is on this public intellectual battlefield where it will be decided whether we are still in search of Viking women warriors, or if we will choose not to find them at all.

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