

Women as Instigators of Ritual in Old Norse Society

Old Norse society embraced a worldview incorporating all aspects of life, specifically concerning the supernatural. Although greatly varied, a common denominator of the pre-Christian Scandinavian religion was the idea of a channel of communication, through which Late Iron Age men and women could connect with mystic or otherworldly beings and deities.¹ Due to the multifaceted nature of this faith-system, its surrounding rituals and customs were performed in a great variety of buildings, depositions and monuments. Overarching this system was the socially and culturally significant cult, manifested in a recurring trait of Late Iron Age Germanic societies in which the social structure of loosely knitted and autonomous groups was held together by reciprocal relationships manifested in a hall building.²

Despite little scholarly interest into women's role in the pre-Christian cult, several indicators point to a ritual discourse where a 'female footprint' is clearly visible, particularly as connections to or communicators with the supernatural. Alongside accounts of itinerant and eccentric women with special abilities, are several sources narrating a romantic archetype of high-status women instigating ritual and embodying a unifying role within the cultic hall context. By discussing selected sources where female ritual presence is evident, this essay aims to explore the realms accessible for women to instigate and perform rituals, in addition to the degree in which these explain the function of female ritual actors.

Established by the all-encompassing worldview, including both human and otherworldly notions, the channel of communication depended on a scenario established in this world but imitating characteristics of the other.³ A female presence is visibly manifested within this liminal space, recognised by both written and archaeological sources asserting a connection between high-status women and the cult. Certain written sources refer to women as religious officiants, relating a society where public sacrifices instigated by women were significant and essential in social and religious life, as an incident in *Óláfs saga helga* reports:

¹ N.Price, 'Sorcery and Circumpolar Traditions in Old Norse Belief', in S. Brink and N. Price (eds), *The Viking World* (London, 2012), 244-248: 244.

² C. Hedenstierna-Jonson, 'Social and Political Formations in the Scandinavian areas, 8th-10th century. The material perspective', *Territorio, Sociedad y Poder* 2 (2009), 89-104: 93.

³ J.P. Schjødt, 'Ideology of the Ruler in Pre-Christian Scandinavia', *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 6 (2010), 161-194: 170.

‘Þá kom hann at öðrum garði. Stóð þar húsfreyja í durum, bád hann ekki þar inn koma, segir at þau ætti álfablót’.⁴

While not isolating men from the event, a similar episode occurring in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* narrates the conduction of the sacrifice to the *dísir* by a high-status woman:

‘Eitt haust var gort dísablót mikit hjá Álf konungi, ok gekk Álfhildr at blótinu; hon var hverri konu fegri’.⁵

Although the sacrifices are scarcely documented in other written sources and certain aspects of them are likely Christian re-interpretations of pagan rites, the accentuation of female religious officiants of grand-scale sacrifices dedicated to female supernatural beings is noteworthy. Several Old Norse terms such as *blótgyðja* and *hofgyðja* appear in textual sources in connection with these women, and the term *gyðja* is assumed to be the female correspondence to the term *godi*: male chieftains with legal and sacral tasks in public life.⁶ Furthermore, toponymic and etymological research has affirmed that the word derives from the Old West-Nordic term for ‘god’, in turn demonstrating the religious function incorporated in *gyðja*.

The accuracy and reliability of the primary sources is a tricky question but a matter that must be taken into consideration. A 13th century framework of understanding has to be accounted for when discussing the written sources, as extensive studies of sagas and other stories about the Viking Age have revealed the literary works more akin ‘to historical novels’ than accurate accounts of reality.⁷ The sagas mainly take place between 800 and 1050 yet are transcribed at the earliest in the 12th century. Although most scholars would agree that the stories have a clear 13th century bias, it is generally accepted that the sagas can be useful for

⁴ L. Turberfield, *Intoxicating Women: Old Norse Drinking Culture and Women* (PhD thesis, University of Aberdeen, 2016), 202. ‘Then he went to another farm. The woman of the house stood in the doorway and told them they could not come in there, saying that they had the sacrifice to the elves there’.

⁵ *Saga Heiðrek Konungs ins Vitra*, trans. C. Tolkien (London, 1960) 67. ‘One autumn a great sacrifice to the *Dísir* was held at the house of king Álf, and Álfhild conducted the rites; she was more beautiful than any other woman’. A sacrifice to the *dísir* is held in chapter 44 of *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, where the abundance of drink is emphasised, and the familiarity of the cup-bearing motif is manipulated by the author to accentuate queen *Gunnhildr*’s mischievous nature. ‘Egil’s Saga’, trans. B. Scudder, in J. Smiley (ed.), *The Sagas of Icelanders* (London, 2005), 3-184: 67-68.

⁶ B. M. Näsström, *Blot. Tro och offer i det förkristna Norden* (Stockholm, 2002), 94.

⁷ E. Roesdahl, *The Vikings* (London, 1998), 11. However, Roesdahl approves that if read as literary works, the sagas can ‘contain as much of the reality of the Viking age as anything that can be reconstructed today’.

analysis into the society they depict as well as the society in which they were transcribed, because of their proximity in time, ideals and outlook of the world.

In archaeological terms, grave-material offer the most important source for our knowledge and understanding of female life in Late Iron Age Scandinavia. Archaeological source material should seemingly be less ambiguous in its portrayal of Old Norse society than the textual sources, as finds often ‘assert’ a presence or theory in physical rather than literary terms. Unfortunately, however, the archaeology of ritual tends to be predominantly male and/or masculine, possibly because male depositions of ritual, such as weapons, are more ‘eye-catching’ and more easily assigned the male gender than other objects to the female gender. In other words, ‘mighty men simply get more attention than mighty women’.⁸ However, rather than diminishing the role of women as ritual instigators as a result of clerical misogyny or archaeological obscurity, in turn erasing female ritual agency, ‘we should look for signs that signal a cult leader function beside the role of e.g. adult woman, mother, leader of a household, weaver, etc’,⁹ within both textual and archaeological sources.

Evident in both written and archaeological sources is the notion of the ‘symbolical’ lady with the mead-cup, who emerges as a significant figure of Old Norse ritualistic behaviour. In connection with this symbolical woman, the Old Norse term *húsfreiya* becomes relevant, denoting a female leader who managed household and economy, but who in some instances also attained cultic roles and lead religious rites during banquets and sacrifices. Rituals taking place inside a hall were closely linked with the consumption of food and drink, and heavily associated with the ritual offering of mead by a high-ranking woman. On both the *Tjängvide* and *Stora Hammars III* Gotlandic picture stones, a woman, perhaps a *húsfreiya*, is depicted bestowing an approaching male rider a drinking horn.¹⁰ Traditionally assumed to depict mythical events, the imagery is often interpreted as the arrival of *Óðinn* on *Sleipnir*, as a fallen warrior greeted by a Valkyrie at the gates of *Valhöll*, or sometimes read in connection with the Eddaic ‘mead of poetry’-episode, where *Óðinn* acquires the potent mead by seducing the giantess *Gunnlōð*:

‘Gunnlōð mér um gaf
gullnom stóli á

⁸ J. Ljungkvist, ‘Mistresses of the Cult: Evidence of Female Cult Leaders from an Archaeological perspective’, *Female Elites in Protohistoric Europe* [Internationale Tagung, 13-14.06.08] (Mainz, 2011), 251-265: 251.

⁹ Ljungkvist, ‘Mistresses of the Cult’, 262.

¹⁰ Ljungkvist, ‘Mistresses of the Cult’, 258-259.

drycc ins dýra miaðar'.¹¹

This distinct correlation between women and mead is a re-occurring theme in the Poetic Edda, particularly evident in *Lokasenna* when *Sif* pours mead into *Loki*'s drinking goblet:

‘Þá gecc Sif fram oc byrlaði Loca í hrímkálki mið oc mælti:

53. Heill ver þú nú, Loki, oc tac við hrímkalki,

fullom forns miaðar'.¹²

In *Atlakviða*, the ‘lady with the mead-cup’-trope is strategically employed by *Guðrún* to intoxicate her husband and his retinue in order to avenge the murder of her brothers:

‘33. Out went Gudrun to meet Atli

with a golden goblet to render the prince his due (...)

35. The bright-faced woman darted about, bringing drink (...)

40. Unaware, Atli had drunk himself to exhaustion’.¹³

The appearance of mead-bringing women in mythical sources is manifested physically in several small figurines depicting women with drinking horns, primarily found in graves of high-standing women dating from the 9th-11th centuries.¹⁴ The introduction of a mythical discourse connected to the cup-bearing motif has led certain scholars to draw parallels between the cup-bearing ritual and the mythic role of the *valkyrjur*, the mythological women collecting dead warriors on battlefields, bestowing through the offer of drink immortality to the slain and eternal life in *Valhøll*.¹⁵ Alongside the aforementioned notion of a ‘channel of communication’, this parallel allows an interpretation of the worldly cup-bearing woman as an epitome of the *valkyrja*, fulfilling an active and uplifted role during drinking rituals by bestowing symbolic ‘immortality’ to the people present. Through this function, the woman emerges as a ‘hostess, radiating authority and binding the people present in a community, creating a temporary fictive kin-group, and a net of alliances and dependencies of loyalty which was reinforced with every gathering and sharing of a drink’.¹⁶

¹¹ G. Neckel and H. Kuhn (eds), *Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius* (Heidelberg, 1962), 33. ‘Gunnlöð on the golden chair gave me a drink of the precious mead’.

¹² Neckel and Kuhn (eds), *Edda*, 107. Turberfield, *Intoxicating Women*, 136: ‘Then Sif went forward and poured out mead for Loki into a crystal goblet and said: Welcome, now, Loki, and take the crystal cup full of ancient mead’.

¹³ *The Poetic Edda*, trans. C. Larrington (Oxford, 2014), 209-210.

¹⁴ Ljungkvist, ‘Mistresses of the Cult’, 258.

¹⁵ Turberfield, *Intoxicating Women*, 190.

¹⁶ Turberfield, *Intoxicating Women*, 185.

Highlighting female prominence within a liminal area, women of the literary sources appear to be central in relation to ritual practices occurring within the hall building or the home but are seldom described as prominent religious officiants outside this context. An incident from *Kristnisaga* elaborates on this, stressing the different ritual spaces accessible for male and female performers: ‘Þorvaldr talaði þar trú fyrir mönnum, en Friðgerðr var meðan í hofinu ok blótaði’.¹⁷

This distinction seems to coincide with two horizontally opposed legal spaces in early Scandinavian law, between the *innangarðs*- and *útangarðs*-context,¹⁸ where women appear as ritualistic present in the former but rarely appear in the latter. The area within the farm fence seems according to the legal context to have been the ritual domain of officiating women, however, there are no indications restricting women to private informal spaces in contrast to a more authoritative and public male space. Nevertheless, female instigators of ritual are deeply associated with the ‘home’-sphere rather than the more masculine ‘outside’-sphere.

Despite an association between female instigators of ritual and the ‘home’-sphere in pre-Christian Scandinavian society, a special category of female practitioners were itinerant and not bound to a hall building or the home. Superior amongst these were the *vǫlur*, powerful sorceresses who had prophetic power and whom even *Óðinn* consulted, as narrated by the seeress of *Vǫluspá*: ‘Father of the Slain, you wished me well to declare living beings’ ancient stories, those I remember from furthest back’.¹⁹ One of the earliest known written sources relating the existence of the female shamans is from the 10th century account of the Arab traveller Ibn Fadlān, recounting a possible Scandinavian burial ceremony where a slave-girl is sacrificed alive to follow a nobleman into the afterlife:

‘When the day came that the man was to be burned and the girl with him, I went to the river where his boat was anchored. (...) Then came [an old woman whom they call] the ‘Angel of Death’ (...) she is in charge of sewing and arranging all these things, and it is she who kills the slave girls. I saw that she was a witch, thick-bodied and sinister’.²⁰

¹⁷ Turberfield, *Intoxicating Women*, 201. ‘Þorvaldr preached the faith to the people there, but meanwhile Friðgerðr was in the temple and sacrificed’.

¹⁸ Meaning literally ‘within the farm fence’, and ‘outside the farm fence’.

¹⁹ *Edda*, trans. Larrington, 4.

²⁰ Ibn Fadlān, *The Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the Far North*, ed. P. Lunde and C. Stone (London, 2012), 50-51.

The ‘Angel of Death’ has been identified as a *vǫlva*, playing a central role in the ritual’s organisation, instigation and performance. Not just mythological legends like the *vǫlva* of *Vǫluspá* or the legendary women of far-off and exotic lands, the *vǫlur* were real-life women perceived with special magical powers often sought after in times of distress. The most famous example of a *vǫlva* appears in *Eiríks saga rauða*:

‘The women now formed a circle round the platform on which Thorbjorg was seated. Gudrid recited the chant so beautifully and well that no one who was present could say he had heard a chant recited by a lovelier voice. The seeress thanked her for the chant, adding that many spirits had been drawn there now who thought it lovely to lend ear, the chant had been so admirably delivered – spirits ‘who before wished to keep their distance from us now gave us hearing. And now many things are apparent to me which earlier were hidden from me and many others’ (...) After this men approached the prophetess and inquired, each of them, about what they were most concerned to know. She was free with her information, and little indeed of what she said failed to come about’.²¹

Performed while *Þorbjörg* lies on a raised platform in the centre of the hall, the ritual is an example of a so-called *séance*, induced to establish communication with other-worldly beings, such as the spirits drawn by the chant. Dependant on the surrounding chorus of women, particularly the magic song performed by *Guðriðr*, the ritual displays the common literary connection between women and magic in the textual sources. Despite this, the seeress is clearly distinguished from the other women present, a common denominator of the *vǫlur*, who both in textual and archaeological sources stand out as different from the norm, often carrying magical staffs, dressed in clothes of great richness, and as established by grave-material, sometimes consumed mind-altering drugs like cannabis.²² Although treated with great honour and respect,²³ their itinerant status and strong connections to the otherworld(s), along with their peculiar magical powers, made them controversial characters within society.²⁴

²¹ *Eirik the Red and Other Icelandic Sagas*, trans. G. Jones (Oxford, 1999), 136-137.

²² Price, ‘Sorcery’, 245.

²³ *Eirik the Red*, trans. Jones, 134: ‘Now when she came inside every one felt bound to offer her fit and proper greetings, which she received according’.

²⁴ See for example *Hávamál* stanza 113: ‘in a witch’s arms you should never sleep’, and the protection spell against these witches in stanza 155: ‘I know a tenth one if I see witches playing up in the air; I can bring it about that they wander astray from their shapes left at home, from their minds left at home’. *Edda*, trans. Larrington, 27, 34.

Forming a ‘collective package of techniques and principles for contacting the supernatural powers and either binding or persuading them to do one’s will’,²⁵ the magic practiced by the *vǫlur* was called *seiðr*:

‘Bright One they called her, wherever she came to houses,
the seer with pleasing prophecies, she practiced spirit-magic;
she knew *seid*, *seid* she performed as she liked,
she was always a wicked woman’s favourite’.²⁶

Deeply connected to femininity and the female sex, *seiðr* was deemed unmanly and dishonourable for male performers, and the lack of a potential gender-overlap is explained in *Ynglingesaga*:

‘Óðinn was acquainted with that most powerful art known as *seiðr*, and he therefore knew a person’s fate and of the future, and also how to cause people death, or bad luck, or illness, and also how to take power or wit away from some people and give it to others. But in practicing this magic, such shame and abomination occurred that it seemed unseemly for men to deal in it and thus the art was taught to priestesses’.²⁷

A ‘prerogative of the gods’, *seiðr* embodied combined connotations of violence, sex and mind-manipulation, and despite its aggressive nature, its connotations to homosexuality deemed it dishonourable for male performers.²⁸ Some scholars even argue that the practice involved a stimulated or physical sexual act focused on the female receptive role in intercourse,²⁹ explaining the societal aversion to male practitioners of *seiðr*. The ritual’s opposition to proper ideals of masculinity has been emphasised, stressing how the manipulative nature of *seiðr* directly contrasted the embrace of outward conflict and forthright male manner

²⁵ Price, ‘Sorcery’, 246.

²⁶ *Edda*, trans. Larrington, 6.

²⁷ T. A. DuBois, *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age* (Philadelphia, 1999), 136. ‘Óðinn kunnir þá íþrótt, svá at mestr máttur fylgði, ok framði sjálfir, er seiðr heitir, en af því mátti hann vita orlög manna ok óorðna hluti, svá ok at gera mönnum bana eða óhamingju eða afl ok gefa öðrum. En þessi fjölkynngi, er framið er, fylgir svá mikil ergi, at eigi þótti karlmönnum skamlaust við at fara, ok var gyðjunum kennd sú íþrótt’.

²⁸ Price, ‘Sorcery’, 245.

²⁹ Price, ‘Sorcery’, 245. Price explains that ‘even the language used for describing the practice of magic mirrors that used to suggest the rhythm of lovemaking. If the completion of a *seiðr* ritual really did involve an actual sexual performance, with an emphasis on the woman’s physically receptive role in intercourse, then this – together with the distaff imagery of female handicrafts – may explain why it held such negative connotations for men’.

idealised in the hyper-macho understanding of masculinity in Old Norse society.³⁰ The verbal nature of the ritual therefore becomes specifically connected to women, who stereotypically practice independent agency through persuasive and aggressive speech-acts in the sagas.

Within the all-encompassing worldview of Old Norse society, elite women sometimes played prominent and visible roles as communicating and mediating agents during rituals. A clear female ritual presence is expressed in diverse sources, with high-status women and specialised prophetesses performing in liminal spaces, committing and fulfilling crucial responsibilities whilst becoming uplifted performers radiating authority. The ritual discourse manifested in the archaeological material, particularly the cup-bearing motif on small figurines and some picture stones, is further accentuated by numerous written sources relating the archaic portrayal of mead-bringing women. The extensive use of the motif and its symbolical associations allowed for the manipulation of the stereotype by *Guðrún* in *Atlakviða*, who by employing the cliché of the cup-bearing *húsfreiya* intoxicates her husband and his retinue before killing them. Enforced by the *valkyrjur*-associations, strong mythological connections behind the cup-bearing motif uplifts the female performers beyond the liminal space into ceremonial elevation. As ritual instigators, these elite women have exceptionally visible power within, but not exclusive to, the *innangarðs*-space. Furthermore, a mythical context enables a discussion of the ambiguous *vǫlur*, female shamans omnipresent in both mythological texts, sagas and the archaeological record, where they stand out as powerful but distinctive characters of society. Deemed inappropriate for men, the magic performed by these sorceresses, *seiðr*, is predominantly female in its presentation, in turn strengthening the controversy of the characters as well as empowering them.

Functioning as mediating forces between different worlds and channels of communications, the ‘mystic’ powers of officiating women were enforced by the liminality of their participatory roles, giving their speech-acts and ritual performances substantial and weighty strength. Although these rituals empowered female actors, a link can be drawn to the last line of *Vǫluspá*: ‘now she will sink’³¹ – interpreted as the sinking in rank or the ‘sliding’ back into a less powerful position once the séance or ceremony is completed. Nevertheless, female instigators of ritual are evident and characteristic in the various sources. Bestowing and carrying symbolical mead during drinking ceremonies, officiating sacrifices, initiating funeral

³⁰ DuBois, *Nordic Religions*, 137.

³¹ *Edda*, trans. Larrington, 12.

rites, communicating with otherworldly beings and deities, performing séances and foretelling the future; these women employ diverse strategies in liminal spaces. Working as officiators and performers of rites on both micro and macro levels, the extensive and archaic presence of these women in etymological, textual and archaeological sources stress an orthodox female manifestation in an otherwise multifaceted and intricate worldview.

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