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the Viking World, 24 February 2019, York, England

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The Richard Hall Symposium 2019: Women and Power in the Viking World was held on 24th February at York St John University in York, England. Scholars from a variety of disciplines gathered to discuss aspects of female agency, power, and roles in Viking society, especially topical with the recent public interest in female Vikings. The event was organised by the Jorvik Group with support from the York Archeological Trust as part of the broader theme of the 2019 Jorvik Viking Festival ‘The Untold Story of Women in the Viking Age.’

The Symposium began with introductory remarks by Chris Tuckley (The Jorvik Group) welcoming the speakers and approximately 70 attendees. Then Christine McDonnell (York Archeological Trust) shared a few words on the legacy of Richard Hall. The floor then went to the first plenary speaker, Dr Alexandra (Alex) Sandmark (University of the Highlands and the Islands) presenting on the topic ‘The Norse *thing*: an assembly of women and men.’ Sandmark challenged the tendency of scholars presenting Norse assembly sites or things (Old Norse *þing*) as exclusively male arenas, commonly describing participants as ‘chieftains,’ ‘all men,’ ‘thingmen,’ and other gendered variations. She reassessed primary sources such as the Norwegian laws of the Gulathing and Frostathing, the Icelandic *Grágás* (Grey goose laws), and the Icelandic sagas to demonstrate that groups of men and women could both take part in assemblies. However, these groups of individuals had varying degrees of access and participation based upon their social and marital status. For instance, widows and ‘ring women,’ unmarried women without close relatives to inherit

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property, were some of the groups of women who could participate in these assemblies. Although the number of women who could legally participate was a small percentage of the population, Sandmark showed that women could still influence socially within a judicial context. Overall, she demonstrated that ‘thingmen’ are not a homogenous group and we need to consider the varied experiences of individuals at things that are impacted by their social groups, changes in their lifetime, and even the assembly location.

The second plenary speaker, Professor Judith Jesch (University of Nottingham), spoke on ‘Women, War and Words: a verbal archaeology of shield-maidens.’ Jesch began to unearth the meaning and function of what Neil Price has termed the ‘textual shield maiden,’ not to be conflated with ‘literal shield maidens’ and ‘mythical valkyries’ by excavating the historical depths of the Old Norse corpus. Tracing the evolution of the Old Norse term *skjaldmær* (shield-maiden) in the *foraldarsögur* (sagas of ancient time), Jesch discovered that it is an uncommon term that is linked to Amazons and often has Eastern associations. She suggests that this is likely due to the influence of Greek and Latin texts like Virgil’s *Aeneid* on Scandinavian and Icelandic writers like Saxo in the eleventh and twelfth centuries; however, she notes *Atlakviða* might throw a wrench in this progression. Furthermore, she identifies that women described as shield-maidens often prove unsuccessful in battle and are treated negatively; potentially this is due to their perceived foreignness. These eastern elements merit more exploration and even could be analyzed in respect to the Birka Bj 581 grave. However, Jesch stresses that these ‘textual shield-maidens’ seem to have little connection to do with ‘literal shield-maidens’ whose description still needs to be determined. Indeed, what female warriors were called in Old Norse still needs to be pinned down. Additionally, there is no Old Norse cognate for the English word ‘warrior’ for men. Therefore, Jesch ended with a call for a more extensive vocabulary of warriors for both men and women going forward.

In the first half of the first special session, Dr Simon Trafford (Institute of Historical Research, University of London) presented on ‘Hypermasculinity vs Viking warrior women: pop culture Vikings and gender.’ Trafford discussed how the appetite for female warriors is fed in the internet age with a ‘perfect

storm' of influences using Birka grave Bj 581 and McLeod's 2011 article as examples. Articles featuring sexualized female warriors provide revenue for sites through 'clickbait,' academic articles are more available online through the impact initiative and open access, and 'kick-ass' female heroes in pop culture are all characteristic of a particular moment in time. Moreover, there has long been a hunger for female Vikings to counteract the extreme hypermasculinity of male Vikings who are often depicted as violent, barbarous, with restless energy and an insatiable appetite for women, food, and drink encased in a Fabio-like physique. These absurd extremes are tempting attitudes, but Trafford notes they are incompatible in modern society. Ironically, it is this hypermasculinity and feminist reaction that gets individuals interested in Vikings because of the rapid internet dissemination.

Trafford's paper was followed by another enlightening talk, given by Professor Howard Williams (University of Chester) entitled, 'Women, Death and Power in *Vikings* and the Viking Age.' He opened by challenging the 'biographical fallacy' in archeology where a furnished burial becomes equated with a personal identity. To move away from this tradition and start thinking about mortuary and commemorative practices in a broader sense, Williams unexpectedly turns to the television show *Vikings*. In this series, women are depicted in multiple death-related roles. They can be mourners, have dialogues with the dead, and even hold power from beyond the grave. Although many of these scenes are stylized, it does not mean that the general public and academics alike can start considering the ritualistic roles of women outside of the grave. Furthermore, Williams stressed the need to use anthropological and archeological methodologies of death and memory that account for a wider interpretation of reading graves as well as can consider women in roles of power, ritual, and cultural memory.

After the special session and before lunch, there was a special preview of the film, 'Viking Women: The Crying Bones' by Ash Thayer. The documentary's focus is on female reenactors and their views on the combat

sport. I cannot reveal too much about the film but can say that it will be worth watching the entire feature.

After lunch, the third plenary speaker, Dr Pragya Vohra (University of York) presented ‘Women Migrants in the Western Viking World,’ exploring how gender intersects with migration. Often the default migrant in Viking studies is male: to counteract this norm, Vohra examined the role women played in a diasporic context and discussed whether they had any agency, autonomy, or authority during the migration process. Using case studies of female settlers in *Landnámabók* (The Book of Settlements), Vohra demonstrated that even in the terse text there is evidence for these three traits; however, they depended on the individual’s situation. For instance, Þorgerðr *Ingjólfsbjörði* gained authority on her trip to Iceland because her husband died on the journey and upon arrival settled on a large estate. She is compared alongside other women in the diasporic context notably Auðr *en djúpuðga* to begin giving visibility to women in diaspora and to consider gender in changes brought about in migration.

In the fourth and final plenary, Dr Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir (Yale University) spoke on “‘Geirriðr, Get Your Gun’: Trailblazing Women in Settlement Communities.’ Friðriksdóttir closely read *Landnámabók* to uncover episodes of domestic and sexual violence against women. She noted that violence in *Landnámabók* is different from the sagas because it is not as regulated and stylized; women need to use all they have at their disposal to survive. Furthermore, she notes that women in *Landnámabók* may represent more ‘typical,’ lower-status women. She demonstrated how domestic and sexual violence can trigger mental illness or a shift in psychological state in unmarried women. For instance, a young woman named Álǫf is noted to go insane; the narrator does not delve into detail, but there is enough to convey she was assaulted in bed and developed a mental illness. Married women could face different forms of abuse. For instance, a woman was driven to hang herself when her husband swapped her for a neighbour’s wife. Another was beheaded after an argument with her husband. There are few precedents for suicide and beheading in the Old Norse corpus, but these incidents illustrate that there was savage frontier culture. On a more positive note, women still had the

opportunity to gain social power often through supernatural means. Þuríður ‘Sound-filler’ could fill a fjord with fish through witchcraft and earned social influence. Friðriksdóttir continues to explore these differing roles of women in her upcoming book, *Valkyrie: Viking Women in Life and Legend* due in 2019.

In the second special session and final presentation of the day, Dr Shannon Lewis-Simpson (Memorial University of Newfoundland) joined the conference via videolink and spoke on “‘Orð gerik drós til dýrðar: I speak words to the lady’s glory.’” Attitudes towards the “Female” “Viking” “Leader”. Lewis-Simpson questioned the meaning of these terms and asked if ‘leadership’ must be gendered. She observed that ‘leadership’ is constantly measured against the masculine warrior ideal. Yet, we do not know how the warrior as a social construct operated. She stressed that we need to start considering gender in the past and start accounting for individuals who may have presented as trans or gender non-conforming especially in the context of Birka Bj 581. Lewis-Simpson then discussed female forms of leadership considering the roles of advice givers and craftswomen to demonstrate that there can be different narratives of leadership beyond the masculine ideal.

The conference concluded with a ten-minute closing discussion featuring all speakers. This discussion provided an opportunity for audience participation and touched on topics ranging from identity to public perception of female Vikings. This open-ended dialogue was stimulating and demonstrated the amount of research still to be done on women and power.

