



# Gender Diversity and its Societal Place in Medieval Scandinavia

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## ABSTRACT

Medieval Scandinavian literature held a trope that bent the gendered actions and presentations of its characters, which in turn changed their social standing within their stories: the more masculine the action or presentation, the higher the individual ascended. Furthermore, homophobia and transphobia have been prevalent within academia for decades, which has resulted in the overlook of queer characters within medieval literature. Countering these historic attitudes, this paper finds evidence of possible gender diversity and deviation within medieval Scandinavian life in both literary and archaeological evidence. This preliminary study inspects the Poetic and Prose Eddas, selected Icelandic Family Sagas, and archaeological burials deemed diversionary from gendered expectations. I find that there was, in fact, gender deviation within these sources and, by extension, everyday life in medieval Scandinavia.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Medieval Scandinavian society highly valued masculinity and its attributed social actions, and the deviation from peak masculinity in any sphere resulted in social demotion. Men and women were expected to exhibit specific gendered actions; men were encouraged and expected to maintain Type A (highly masculine) reputations and presentations, while women were expected to exhibit Type B (less masculine) presentations. Fortunately, the social hierarchy could not whole cloth suppress such a diversion of classical roles. To illustrate, Type B men and Type A women were prevalent throughout the literature sampled in this paper. Because Type B men were considered scandalous within their society, they were more documented than Type A women, who experienced a rise in status and power for their ascent into masculinity. This system was based entirely on the amount of masculinity a person exhibited and did not rely

entirely on anatomical sex; anybody could ascend to Type A status or descend to Type B.

The praise of masculine exploits was a throughline in medieval Scandinavia;<sup>56</sup> proven in part by Carol Clover's Single-Sex Scale, which was created specifically to aid in modern readers' understanding of how masculinity and gender played roles in the medieval Icelandic life relayed within the Family Sagas.<sup>57</sup> This scale illustrated a social existence along a single line, ranging from the most masculine individual to the most unmasculine. In this paper, I utilize the word "unmasculine" not to demonize femininity, nor to erase it, but rather to avoid perpetuating the idea that masculinity and femininity are antithetical to one another. Masculine traits, as defined by Clover, were as follows: headship of household and martial activities, participation in law, an adeptness at poetry (specifically skaldic poetry), and the ability to handle affairs outside the home.<sup>58</sup> These traits, exemplified to both extremes

<sup>56</sup> Traditionally, this time period is approximately between the years of 500 C.E. and 1500 C.E. in Europe. This paper will not cover that extent of time, focusing on the years between approximately 900 C.E. and 1300 C.E. at a stretch.

<sup>57</sup> Carol J. Clover, "Regardless of Sex: Women, Men, and Power in Early Northern Europe," *Speculum*, 1993.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

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within the Family Sagas, were part of a formula tailored to encompass the issue of gender and its relationship to social status. Such rules for ascending and descending the social ladder were applicable to both men and women, who would have otherwise been confined to their sex assigned at birth. In this paper, Clover's scale was also applied to select Norse myths to analyze their characters, power dynamics, and societal norms of their contemporary culture.

Clover's scale and its use in Norse literature harkened to a highly contemporary, yet semi-modern understanding of the flexibility of gender and the use of expression to indicate identity. It is, of course, impossible to map modern conceptions of gender onto medieval characters and personalities. However, in analyzing the individuals and the relationship of their genders to society, one can more easily ascertain where gender divergence appeared and what it meant for those who exhibited it. In order to gain an adequate understanding of the enculturated idea of gender within medieval Scandinavia, one must begin with the surviving literature, foremostly in the myths of the *Poetic and Prose Eddas* and the Family Sagas of Iceland.

In this paper, I look at only a selection of Family Sagas, Eddic stories and their characters for a cursory introduction to the subject with the objective of arguing for a more in-depth view of Norse culture that encompasses minority voices in contemporary literature. I will then apply some of the understanding and knowledge gained through this analysis to two archaeological sites where Clover's aforementioned scale may give material evidence of gender diversity.

## 2. QUEER THEORY AND PREMODERN SOURCES

When interpreting medieval sources, one must take any and all nuances within such texts into account. Challenging conventional thought is integral to the continued (and improved)

understanding and study of premodern documents. In their article *Applying Gender and Queer Theory to Premodern Sources*, Ash Geissinger pointed out that "Gender theory challenges the presumption that gender categories such as 'man' or 'woman' exist outside of specific historical circumstances, cultural contexts, and power relations."<sup>59</sup> Our modern concepts of "men" and "women" are not the same as those held in many of the cultures we have studied over time. It is important to not only reconstruct how contemporary peoples defined gender but also how modern audiences interpret gender in sources written outside of their own cultural context.

While Geissinger's article specifically discussed the intersection of gender with the Quran and early Islamic texts, their work illustrated the necessity to apply similar methods of analysis to other premodern documents. If the nuances of different cultural interpretations of gender and its performance in premodern sources are ignored vital cultural context has been lost.

Medieval European cultures were in constant contact with a network that stretched across and beyond the Eurasian continent and influenced both material culture and contemporary thought at all levels of society. The cross-cultural comparison illustrated here is an essential component of any medieval discussion, especially a discussion about medieval conceptions of gender and its diversity. The intercultural nature of the medieval world meant that ideas were regularly imported through trade or warfare. Unfortunately, up until recently, academics were reluctant to integrate this worldview into their studies and obviated their study of history by ignoring the history of neighbors, or, by extension, the neighbors of the neighbors. In this paper, this willful and blatant disregard for the interdisciplinary nature of medieval studies requires will be referred to as "disciplinary

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

blindness.”

Unfortunately, the existence of academic disciplinary blinders reaches medieval academia, and scholars of one subject are loath to extend their thinking to other fields of study. Academia is not unaware of the concept of non-normative gender expressions in premodern documents and the application of their blinders, unfortunately, result in “several factors interact[ing] in order to produce the appearance of a ‘straightened tradition.’”<sup>60</sup> This can be extremely detrimental, as its use created a precedent that the non-normative gender expressions cannot and should not be seriously investigated in history, which is still present in academic culture today. This is a serious problem that must be addressed and investigated, especially within medieval literature, to both enfranchise new scholarship and allow for more diverse stories to be told through historical frameworks.

One such blinder is the intersection of history and modern queer theory. While queer theory itself is a modern invention, one can test its weight and accuracy by comparing it to historical events, people, and cultures. Judith Butler’s book *Gender Trouble* defined gender as “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.”<sup>61</sup> Here, Butler described a bipartite structure of gender: that of the individual and that of the society as a whole. On the individual scale, if one acted repeatedly as a woman within a society, then that person was labeled “woman” by another person within said society. The secondary part of Butler’s theory relied upon the society to define what its occupants interpreted as acts for “men” and “women.”

While Butler’s theory was not a perfectly accurate illustration of how gender worked in

medieval Scandinavia, it was certainly a good place to start. The Old Norse titles of “men” and “women” were more fixed in anatomy than we use the terms to mean today; however, they used something akin to Clover’s scale as a type of secondary gender within society.

Since its conception, Carol Clover’s model continues to adequately interpret the ways in which a person’s presentation of masculinity affected their social standing in Old Norse society. Clover argued that Old Norse life was likely structured by the notions of an “*inngarðr*” (inside the home) and “*utgarðr*” (outside the home) dichotomy. Those categorized as *inngarðr* tended to domestic chores, raised children, spun fabric and thread, made clothing, helped keep up with finances, and would be considered on the “receiving” portion of sexual encounters.<sup>62</sup> These tasks were considered less masculine than those of their *utgarðr* counterparts. Inhabitants of *utgarðr* roles were responsible for animal husbandry, trade, legal matters, warfare, and were considered the “givers” in sexual relationships. In relation to the social hierarchy, a person who performed *utgarðr* activities was placed above those engaging in *inngarðr* activities. Clover writes,

This inside/outside distinction is formulated in the laws and seems to represent an ideal state of affairs. It is no surprise, given its binary quality [...] that modern speculations on underlying notions of gender in Norse culture should be similarly dichotomous.<sup>63</sup>

Clover made an extremely poignant interpretation: according to Norse (and indeed, our modern) culture, the “ideal” state of affairs was solidified through a dichotomous structure. Of course, that does not mean that there was no deviation from that dichotomy. On the contrary, this paper aims to highlight a porousness in the social structure outlined in medieval

<sup>60</sup> Ash Geissinger, “Applying gender and queer theory to pre-modern sources 1,” *The Routledge Handbook of Islam and Gender*, Routledge, 2020, p. 104.

<sup>61</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, New York, Routledge, 1990,

pp. 43-44.

<sup>62</sup> The words used to describe a “bottom” in male homosexual relationships are as follows: *ergi*, *ragr*, *argr*, and *sorðinn*.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

Scandinavian literature.

While the *inngarðr* and *utgarðr* realms were usually spaces inhabited by women and men respectively, there were several recorded events of atypical categorization. In fact, as Clover continued, women were documented to have had significant power through multiple avenues. She wrote, “[Government] was in principle a male matter, but in practice, if we are to believe the sagas, women could insinuate themselves at almost every level of the process.”<sup>64</sup> This obvious deviation from the previously described “ideal model” served as a precedent for this research.

In keeping with Butler’s theory, Clover noted, “The modern distinction between sex (biological: the reproductive apparatus) and gender (acquired traits: masculinity and femininity) seems oddly inapposite to the Norse material.”<sup>65</sup> Men and women could either ascend or descend through social ranks by exhibiting behaviors that were associated with the other category. In this system, there were two statuses in society that shall be denoted here as Type A (generally *utgarðr* individuals), “able-bodied men (and the exceptional woman),” and Type B (generally *inngarðr* individuals), who Clover described as “a kind of rainbow coalition of everyone else (most women, children, slaves, and old, disabled, or otherwise disenfranchised men).”<sup>66</sup> Men, especially Type A men, were the most respected.

However, if men were slandered in the process of *nið*, their social status decreased dramatically. Clover wrote that

the *nið* taunts figure the insultee as a female and in so doing suggest that the category “man” is, if anything, even more mutable than the category “not man.” For if a woman’s ascent into the masculine took some doing, the man’s descent into the feminine was just one

real or imagined away.<sup>67</sup>

The intention of the *nið* was always to lower the status of the insultee, usually through the comparison to a *ragr*—which implied that the subject of the *nið* took the submissive role in a male homosexual relationship, something demonized by the large majority of contemporary society. Homosexuality itself, while not demonized, was, at best, a grey area to many at the time: being the “aggressive” or “giving” party of the relationship was tolerated, while the “submissive” or “receiving” party would be ridiculed for their lack of agency.<sup>68</sup>

Butler touched on this phenomenon in *Gender Trouble*; she wrote, “Disavowed male homosexuality culminates in a heightened or consolidated masculinity, one which maintains the feminine as the unthinkable and unnamable.”<sup>69</sup> Because the essential part of a *nið* was an accusation that one received of sexual penetration, an *argr/ragr*, it ostracized a formerly Type A man to the Type B label, lowered him in society and questioned his masculinity.

Gender is a highly enculturated concept, and it therefore must be understood from the vantage point of the culture being studied. If, as Butler posits, gender is nothing more than the presentation and performance of an individual within the culture that they live, it follows that an individual can change the cultural perception of their gender by altering their presentation in infinite creative ways. However, deviation from a cultural idea of “normalcy” when it came to gender and its presentation was not accepted with open arms in medieval Scandinavia. In order to gain some understanding of how gender was received, one must see how unique gender expressions were articulated in medieval sources, both within texts and archaeological formats.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>68</sup>This was portrayed in a scene from *Njal’s Saga*, which will be described in the “Sagas” section. *Njal’s Saga*, London, Penguin Books, 2001, p. 210.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

One such text that likely presented Old Norse societal norms was the poem *Lokasenna* in the *Poetic Edda* reflected a desire to exclude the un-masculine.<sup>70</sup> In it, Loki insulted Odin by comparing him to a woman and linked him to the practice of *seið* magic, an art supposed to be practiced only by women.<sup>71</sup> Other insults Loki hurled towards male gods included calling them cowards, weak, untrustworthy, or otherwise degraded them by highlighting past unmasculine activities. This is the opposite of what Loki did when insulting female goddesses in the same poem; there, he accused them of being promiscuous or unwomanly rather than comparing them to men. This highlights how highly this society valued masculinity; the comparison of a woman to a man would have been the height of a compliment due to masculinity and would thereby imply she had a higher social rank.

Women could ascend the ranks of society by inhabiting the “masculine” roles typically ascribed to men. This inhabitation of Type A spheres created increased social mobility for women. Clover wrote, “Although the woman who for whatever reason plays life like a man is occasionally deplored by the medieval author, she is more commonly admired—sometimes grudgingly, but often just flatly.”<sup>72</sup> Women could actively become more “masculine” in order to gain social status and power. There was even a term of prestige given to women who used their social credit in order to better themselves: *drengr*. According to Clover, *drengr* women were “conventionally held up as the very soul of masculine excellence in Norse culture.”<sup>73</sup> This role was typically ascribed to women who had ascended to Type A status in certain areas of their lives.<sup>74</sup> In inhabiting the *drengr* role, women could become as powerful as their male counterparts via participation in *utgarðr*

activities.

The best way to illustrate a woman’s ability to heighten her social position was demonstrated in the *Gesta Danorum*, a compendium of knowledge that covered both an iteration of Norse myth<sup>75</sup> and episodes of early Danish history written between 1185 and 1222. In it, Saxo Grammaticus described the scene of a group of women who trained as fighters and warriors in Denmark.

There were once women in Denmark who dressed themselves to look like men and spent almost every minute cultivating soldiers’ skills; they did not want the sinews of their valour to lose tautness and be infected by self-indulgence. Loathing a dainty style of living, they would harden body and mind with toil and endurance, rejecting the fickle pliancy of girls and compelling their womanish spirits to act with a virile ruthlessness. They courted military celebrity so earnestly that you would have guessed they had *unsexed* themselves. Those especially who had forceful personalities or were tall and elegant embarked on this way of life. As if they were forgetful of their true selves they put roughness before allure, aimed at conflicts instead of kisses, tasted blood not lips, sought the clash of arms rather than the arm’s embrace, fitted to weapons hands which should have been weaving, desired not the couch but the kill, and those they could have appeased with looks they attacked with lances.<sup>76</sup> (DAN 7.6.8)

Based on his descriptions of events, this practice was something exemplary to both Saxo’s

<sup>70</sup> Carolyne Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 238-263.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 248.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>74</sup> Such a person would be Bergþóra, who is discussed more in depth in the “Sagas” section.

<sup>75</sup> I refer to “Norse myth” rather than “Norse mythology”

partially because it’s less of a mouthful, but partially because there are practitioners of Norse Paganism, and referring to it as mythology may be offensive to some. One would not refer to the stories in a holy book like the bible as “biblical mythology” within academia, and therefore I am attempting to extend the same respect to the practitioners of heathenry.  
<sup>76</sup> Hilda Davidson & Peter Fisher, *Gesta Danorum*, Cambridge, 1996, 7.6.8. Italics my own.

contemporary audience and to himself. The original Latin of the previous quotation included the word “*exuisse*.”<sup>77</sup> The translators, Hilda Ellis Davidson and Peter Fisher, have interpreted this to mean “*unsexed*” (DAN 7.6.8). This translation is somewhat problematic, as the Latin word *exuisse* means “to draw out/take off/pull off/put off,” and indicated that womanhood could be intentionally cast off in favor of other, more “respectable” performances of gender.<sup>78</sup> One could even posit that the women described here had not so much as “unsexed themselves” as they had “reassigned themselves,” suggesting that gender itself was something mutable. The women Grammaticus described were not demonized in the *Gesta Danorum*. In fact, they were admired for their ruthlessness and martial discipline. Applied to this situation, Clover’s model indicates that these martial women were more masculine, and were, therefore, regarded as socially as high, if not higher, than their male counterparts.

Even if there were exceptions, there was still a structural dislike for obvious deviation from the set pattern of gender distinctions. The Grágás law codes formatted the recommended punishment for cross-dressing: “[If in order to be different a woman dresses in men’s clothes or cuts her hair short... or carries weapons, the penalty is lesser outlawry... The same is prescribed for men if they dress in women’s clothing.]”<sup>79</sup> Old Norse society was hardly a friendly place for gender deviation, especially if these laws were actively enforced. However, evidence of gender diversity can be found in the existence of these laws. Without gender diversity, it would not have made sense to create such restrictive regulations around an individual’s presentation.

Despite their motives for composition, the

texts outlined in this essay were stories and therefore reflect their authors’ biases and were not entirely reflective of the reality in which they were created. Moreover, all the works sampled in this paper were written by individuals who belonged to the social in-group with a goal to promote the said in-group; stories written by and about diverse individuals would have been more repressed in comparison. While Clover’s scale was tailor-made to analyze Icelandic Family Sagas, it was not designed to apply to all of medieval Icelandic society or even to all of its literature. Here, it was used here as an initial step to understanding how medieval Icelandic society structured itself in relation to gender.

### 3. MYTH

The *Eddas* were likely the most prominent and popular sources of Norse myths in post-Christianization Scandinavia and held several enlightening examples of gender-diverse characters, including Loki’s regular shape-shifting and transvestitism and Odin’s use of unmasculine magic. Both of these characters and their circumstances of deviation from the norm illustrated not only the existence of gender diversity but also its institution in Norse mysticism and, as a reflection, in its society.

In “Thrym’s Poem,” Loki dressed as Freya’s handmaiden to aid Thor, reluctantly dressed as Freya, in the recovery of his hammer, one instance of a literary trend that used Loki as either a diversion or unmasculine comic relief. John Lindow wrote, “Not infrequently Loki sacrifices his honor (or worse) to help the *æsir*,<sup>80</sup> [...] Similarly, dressing as the handmaiden of Freyja [...] would leave him open to charges of effeminacy.”<sup>81</sup> In myth, Loki frequently made himself out to be an *argr* and, unlike Thor, did

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. (this is the exact same quote and citation as above)

<sup>78</sup> Gregory Crane, “Latin Word Study Tool,” Perseus Digital Library, Tufts University, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=exuisse&la=la#lexicon>. I use the word “respectable” here in reference to the societal attitude at the time, not because I believe that women are not respectable in society.

<sup>79</sup> James Frankki, “Cross-Dressing in the Poetic Edda: Mic

Muno *Æsir Argan Kalla*,” University of Illinois Press, 2012, pp. 427-8.

<sup>80</sup> The *Æsir* are a group of gods headed by Odin. The boundaries between them and the Vanir, another camp of gods whom they are associated with, are blurry at best.

<sup>81</sup> John Lindow, *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs*, Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 217-19.

not recover the masculinity he lost in doing so.

Throughout Thrym's Poem, while Thor was referred to as "Sif's husband" while in drag, Loki was referenced in this passage: "The very shrewd *maid* sat before him, *she* found an answer to the giant's speech."<sup>82</sup> Loki was assigned a feminine role as a way to enforce his status as a Type B individual despite his (albeit flexible) biological sex.<sup>83</sup> This abasement was mirrored in other stories: in one, Loki transformed into a mare and gave birth to Sleipnir, and in another, he tied his genitals to the beard of a goat and fell into Skaði's lap, screaming in pain. Loki's taboo behavior was even hinted at during the story of Baldur's death, where he may have transformed into an old woman who refused to weep for Baldur. James Frankki elaborated that

The best examples [of *argr*] in the Poetic Edda have to do with the character of Loki, who is labeled with the epithet *argr* no fewer than three times in Lokasenna, most prominently in reference to his birthing of the horse Sleipnir by the stallion Svaðilfari, for bearing children, and for milking cows — all feminine behaviors and activities.<sup>84</sup>

These Type B behaviors were compelling in regard to an individual's societal gender perception, especially as the insult slung was a *nið*, a legal insult only resolved by either a submission to the insult or by a violent retaliation.<sup>85</sup> To regain his status, Thor pushed against his fellow Æsir when the plan to regain his hammer in drag was proposed staged a massacre when his task was done. Loki did the exact opposite and not only followed through with the plans wholeheartedly but never retaliated, which essentially proved himself to be *ergi*. In fact, because of this lack of motivation to gain a Type A status, Loki broke the mold set out by the single-sex system in the first place.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 271. Italics my own.

<sup>83</sup> It is important to say that Loki is the only character who switches pronouns when being depicted doing an *ergi* activity.

His acceptance of Type B status was nothing short of fascinating for his role as both an instigator and solver of problems for the gods.

Loki's compliance to the routine self-abasement in plans of his own (and those of others) made him fall outside of the gender system present within contemporary Norse literature. According to von Schnurbein,

Loki's magical capacities, especially his shape- and gender-shifting abilities, consign him to a liminal position between fundamental opposites. These attributes make Loki into the "intermediary par excellence" — a function that renders him indispensable to the gods, but at the same time leads to their demise.<sup>86</sup>

Loki's success in these plots was necessary for the Æsir's overall success. Without him, they would not be as grand as they did; yet Loki was not a Type A individual—he was definitely Type B. As such, he was effectively exiled to the "lower" section of society. And tellingly, he did not dispute this—in fact, he appeared to wish to draw the rest of the Æsir down with him, as was evident with the nature of the insults he leveled at other gods during "Loki's Quarrel." Loki also did something similar with the goddesses he confronted in the same poem; he insisted that they were no better than himself with regard to societal taboo.

Remember that in Clover's scale, masculinity was regarded as one of the most important pieces of a person's personality and presentation. The lack of masculinity and its associated activities indicated that someone was, in effect, less than a man. Loki's purpose in "Loki's Quarrel" is to insist that the assembled gods are lesser men than the humans who exceed them in masculinity.

In "Loki's Quarrel," Loki accused Odin of

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 429.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>86</sup> Stefanie von Schnurbein, "The Function of Loki in Snorri Sturluson's 'Edda,'" University of Chicago Press, 2000, p. 115.

practicing *seiðr*, something that, as previously explained, put one on the edge of masculinity outside the realm of Type A status. Loki's insult to Odin was as follows:

But you, they say, practiced seid on Samsey,  
and you beat on the drum as seeresses do,  
in the likeness of a wizard you journeyed over mankind,  
and that I thought the hallmark of a pervert.<sup>87</sup>

The word "pervert" here is translated from the Norse *argos*, a derivation of *argr*, which was not only a mistranslation but also a classic example of medievalists' exclusion of sexuality and gender deviance from their work. The original Norse phrasing of the final line was thus: "ok hugða ek þat argos aðal."<sup>88</sup> A more apt translation of this word would be the modern slur, "faggot." Despite this obvious *nið*, Odin somehow maintained his status as the head of the pantheon<sup>89</sup> despite his use of *seiðr*. Of course, there was always doubt about Odin's use of *seiðr* and its relationship to his gender and/or societal standing. According to Jens Peter Schjöldt,

As far as I can see there were very strict rules concerning what belonged to the masculine sphere and what belonged to the female sphere and I can see nothing to suggest that anything like 'a third gender' was seen as positive. [...] here is no indication that Odin should be seen as queer. He did perform *seiðr* because he had to, but there is not the slightest piece of evidence that he had any queer sexuality.<sup>90</sup>

While Schjöldt was correct in his understanding

of Norse gender and its associations with society, modern queer theory is especially important to apply to Odin. He deviated from nearly every known contemporary norm with reference to men practicing magic, and, more importantly, he was not demonized for it.<sup>91</sup>

Odin specifically practiced *seiðr*, and according to the *Poetic Edda*, was responsible for teaching it to the other gods. *Seiðr* and magic itself were something intricately associated with Odin, despite their unequivocal unmasculine tint. Neil Price weighed in by writing, "Snorri focuses his description of *seiðr* on Óðinn as its master, with its human practitioners in a secondary role."<sup>92</sup> This was problematic for Odin's social standing as, according to Price, "There is in fact considerable circumstantial evidence to suggest that the rituals involved either literal or simulated sexual actions, in which the various kinds of staff played a major role as a phallic substitute or symbol. Firstly, the staffs themselves have phallic epithets."<sup>93</sup> While contemporarily, such displayed sexuality may not have been as taboo as it would today, the use of phallic elements would have made the position taken up by men likely interpreted as *ragr*, which would thereby lower their societal standing.

Odin's connection to magic was one ingrained in his character and personality. In "The Seeress' Prophecy," Odin summoned and interrogated a seeress, a magical act by a magical god.<sup>94</sup> In "Sayings of the High One," Odin listed the eighteen spells he knew, and specifically stated that "I know those spells which a ruler's wife doesn't know, / nor any man's son."<sup>95</sup> This implication that Odin knew forbidden, mystical magic would have raised questions about his societal gender.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 248.

<sup>88</sup> Karl Holdebrand, *Die Lieder Der Älteren Edda (Sæmundar Edda)*, Paderborn : F. Schöningh, 1876, p. 38.

<sup>89</sup> This is assuming that Odin was not an invention to displace Thor from the place other gods of thunder have at the head of their respective pantheons.

<sup>90</sup> "Myth and Old Norse Religion: An Interview with Jens Peter Schjöldt," *Journal of Medieval Norse Studies*, 2018, p. 173.

<sup>91</sup> There is also something to be said about Schjöldt's denial of such an obviously queer figure that I will not go into here, as that would require both speculation and light teasing.

<sup>92</sup> Neil Price, *The Viking Way: Magic and Mind in Late Iron Age Scandinavia*, Oxbow Books, 2019, p. 206.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 539.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., pp. 75-94.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., pp. 75-94.



Furthermore, Odin was known to magically change his appearance to disguise himself, as attested to in “Vafthruthnir’s Sayings,”<sup>96</sup> where Odin assumed the identity of Gagnrad to test Vafthruthnir and gain information, and “Harbard’s song,” where Odin used the pseudonym Harbard to trick Thor as he attempted to cross a river.<sup>97</sup> It is indeed impossible to separate Odin from magic, and, by extension, *seiðr*.

Through everything, Odin was the god of victory and the most common head of the pantheon.<sup>98</sup> Yet, he never needed to redeem himself from his unmasculine exploits. The evidence provided suggests that Odin did not conform to the socially constructed gender system; he may have even existed in a gender category of his own, which would arguably have made him one of the most genderqueer gods in the Norse pantheon.

Loki and Odin both had a complicated relationship with Norse gender and societal norms. Loki routinely debased himself, made himself the butt of jokes, the undignified solution to a problem, a scapegoat, and a figure reviled by the Æsir. In contrast, Odin, a figure inextricably blended with the taboo subject of magic and *seiðr*, was elevated within Norse society, a figure sometimes approached as one of the most masculine of the Æsir. Their magical prowess seems to be somewhat different, as well. According to Kevin Wanner,

It is true that Ódinn and Loki do not exhibit identical powers or habits of transformation. To some extent, it is appropriate to view Loki as the greater master of metamorphosis and Ódinn as the master of disguise. In other words, while Loki’s transformations are usually physical, Ódinn’s often involve just changes of outfit or sometimes just

changes of name rather than of form.<sup>99</sup>

This differentiation was an important one in regard to their gender and societal function. Loki, ever the deviant figure of Asgard, physically transformed himself into women (also, notably, female nonhuman creatures) in many of the myths. Odin, on the other hand, only did so once, when he took the form of a female physician in an obscure myth in the *Gesta Danorum*, and he did not receive the same societal demotion Loki did.<sup>100</sup> The centrality of Loki’s deviation from the Norse ideals of gender made his subversion impossible to ignore. Meanwhile, Odin’s gender deviation is on the periphery, either it was only discovered at the ends of the story, like in “Vafthruthnir’s Sayings,” or was only implied, like in “Harbard’s Song,” which made it easier for other Æsir to ignore his scandalous activities. His magical workings seemed to help the Æsir more than hinder them, and he was never used as a scapegoat in problems faced by the Æsir.

Through the Eddic corpus, there were multiple instances where Loki and Odin broke the mold of the single-sex system that was so pronounced in contemporary Norse society. This deviation from the expected norm created the image of a person who has wholly divorced themselves from their assigned place in society. This was expressed through proximity to magic/*seiðr*, transvestitism, and shape-changing.

Loki continually abased himself but never even attempted to claim a place among the rest of the Type A Æsir; instead, he appeared resigned to his Type B categorization. Odin, on the other hand, was able to maintain his Type A status *despite* his participation in a multitude of activities that would get anyone else labeled a *ragr*. This dynamic is particularly fascinating, as it either indicated that the other Æsir did not

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., pp. 147-168.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., pp. 205-224.

<sup>98</sup> There are some stories where Thor or even Frey appear to be the head of the pantheon, but Odin appears most commonly in this place.

<sup>99</sup> Kevin J. Wanner, “Cunning Intelligence in Norse Myth: Loki, Ódinn, and the Limits of Sovereignty.” The University of Chicago Press, 2009, p. 218.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 219.

care to demote Odin to a Type B standing or that he simply existed in a category of his own in regard to the nonconformance of gender. Moreover, Loki's tendency to fully transform when he assumed the shapes of other genders, may have placed him lower on Clover's scale than Odin's superficial disguises. However, it would then make sense for Odin have also lost social standing due to his proximity to *seiðr*. If nothing else, Odin's lack of conformance to any model of gender or behavior was evidence that myth and its multitude of personalities indeed had gender diversity. In both a modern and medieval sense, Loki and Odin expressed their genders unconventionally. In a contemporary setting, Odin would have been the most scandalous god in Norse myth; however, due to his specific style of non-conformance, he was elevated by his unmasculine exploits.

It is important to recognize that these myths may have strayed far from their original patterns, as they were only written down in the form known today after the advent of Christianity and monastic learning; therefore, they were inherently filtered through a Christian and monastic lens. These sources also took shape over the course of hundreds of years. They were not originally set in stone, nor were they perfect representations of the contemporary culture they had their roots in. Yet, they still contained aspects of that culture. Now, for a more accurate picture of the everyday life of contemporary people and their gender expressions, we must turn to the Icelandic Family Sagas.

#### 4. SAGAS

Unlike the Eddic corpus, the Icelandic Family Sagas were written relatively contemporaneously (within a span of about 100 years in Iceland) and detailed the important figures of their society through a few select families.

The single-sex system was part of the reason these sagas are so long-lasting and unique, as it both drove the central figures to great heights and served as some of their ruins. Historical individuals, such as Thord and Guðmund the Powerful, fit right in as perfect examples of *ragr/argr* characters within these sagas despite their exaggeration. Meanwhile, characters like Egil, who failed to reclaim his Type A status as he aged, and Njal, who never retaliated against *niðs*, appeared to deviate from the single-sex system laid out in the Sagas. For context, "[T]he Icelandic Gragas establishes [...] full outlawry (exile for life) for the utterance of any of the words *ragr*, *stroðinn*, or *sorðinn*. Indeed, for these three words, one has the right to kill."<sup>101</sup> In Gisli's Saga, the protagonist's uncle, also called Gisli, overheard another character commission a *trenið*, a wooden carving of an act of homosexuality used to demean the people depicted, of himself and another character. In retaliation, Gisli "came through the trees, and he answers: 'your men will have something more useful than that to do; you can look here at a man who is not afraid to fight you.'"<sup>102</sup> In this instance, even the commission of a *trenið* is enough to legally allow for a battle.<sup>103</sup> This established the standard practice for an accusation of a supposed *ragr*: battle it out, contest it in court, and do anything to either discredit the accuser or make them pay for their insult. The insult, even if based in falsehood, had a real, detrimental effect on a contemporary individual's societal standing and reputation, which was of the utmost importance in the minds of contemporary Norse peoples.

This phenomenon was also seen in "The Sayings of the High One," a story in the *Poetic Edda* likely created as a guide to proper behavior in society. Larrington's translation described, "Cattle die, kinsmen die, / the self must also die; / but the glory of reputation never dies, / for the man who can get himself a good one. / Cattle die, kinsmen die, / the self must also die; / I know one

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>102</sup> Gisli's Saga, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1963, pp. 3-4.

<sup>103</sup> This is exactly what happens in Gisli's Saga- Uncle Gisli's opponent, Skeggi, left the fight with a new wooden leg. Ibid., p. 17.

thing which never dies: / the reputation of each dead man.”<sup>104</sup> In other words: if a reputation was tainted by an insult, the insultee had to fix it, or it remained stained forever.

This was especially incriminating when, in *Gisli's Saga*, Gisli's thrall<sup>105</sup> was introduced. “Gisli had a thrall whose name was Thord, and he was nicknamed the coward. The thrall stayed in the house, but Gisli, and nearly all the other men, went to see to the haystacks.”<sup>106</sup> Thord was introduced as a man of strange habits; he lived and preferred to work inside the domicile, something otherwise relegated to women and others unable to do physically demanding labor. He further lived up to his nickname when, after the mysterious murder of a household member, he refused to remove the weapon out of Vestein's death-wound, which essentially gave up all rights to avenge the death. *Gisli's Saga* elaborated, “It was said then that whoever pulled the weapon from a wound would be bound to take revenge; it was called secret manslaughter and not murder when the weapon was left in a death wound. Thord was so fearful of corpses that he did not dare go near one.”<sup>107</sup> According to *Gisli's Saga*, Thord was the archetypal Type B man, who, like Loki, did not dispute his place in society, and instead accepted it and not did not conduct the work that he would rather not do.

In Norse society, cowards, especially cowards who resided in domestic spaces, were seen as less masculine and therefore more “Type B” than their counterparts. Thord's lack of motivation to move up the social ladder placed him in a position that was atypical of saga literature, even deviant in relation to contemporary gender norms.

However, because Thord was not a prominent character in *Gisli's Saga*, his deviation has often been overlooked in the larger narrative by both contemporary and modern audiences. Harder to overlook, however, was the more

popular character of Guðmund the Powerful, who appeared in both *Ljosvetninga Saga* and the *Saga of the Peoples of Laxardal*. In *Laxdaldasaga*, Guðmund was portrayed as a respectable member of Norse society. When he extended an offer of friendship to Bolli Bollardson, “Bolli answered that he would certainly accept this honor from a man such as him and promised to make the journey [to the feast].”<sup>108</sup> In the *Ljosvetninga Saga*, however, he was illustrated in a much less respectful light.

Thorlaug, Guðmund's wife, was indirectly insulted by another powerful noblewoman through an insult to her husband's masculinity. The saga relayed, “‘You would indeed be well married if there were general agreement about your husband's manliness,’ said Geirlaug.”<sup>109</sup> This insult, no matter how politely phrased, was a grievous one. Even a reference to the “manliness” of an otherwise Type A character is an insulting, devastating blow to the recipient's reputation. In a failed attempt to save her husband's reputation from more undue attack, Thorlaug feigned illness. When Guðmund learned of Thorlaug's deception on the road back to their home, he understood the gravity of her actions; by leaving the hall after such an insult, especially since he did not demand a battle in retribution, Guðmund admitted that the accusation of unmanliness was true. He told Thorlaug as much on the road: “‘I think now that it would have been better if I had prevailed and we hadn't left,’ he said. ‘That would have given less grounds for gossip.’”<sup>110</sup> The inclusion of this scene in *Ljosvetninga Saga* illustrates what should *not* be done when one insulted in such a way. Gossip, as it was so labeled, was dangerous in Saga literature and, given Guðmund's hasty exit, is ultimately detrimental to the characters' reputations in the saga.

Despite the period of relative peace directly after this event, it later came out that neither party forgot (nor indeed forgave) the insult to

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 116-7.

<sup>105</sup> A thrall is a slave

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 17-8.

<sup>108</sup> *The Saga of the People of Laxardal and Bolli Bollason's Tale*, London, Penguin Publishing, 2008, p. 182.

<sup>109</sup> *Ljosvetninga Saga*, p. 165.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.

Guðmund's masculinity. At a Thing session<sup>111</sup>, Thorir called for a duel to determine Guðmund's masculinity:

I know that you blame me alone for saying what many say, though others are no less implicated, namely that I have called you an effeminate pervert. I now wish to test whether that is true or not, so I am challenging you to single combat to be held in three days on the islet in Oxar River where duels used to be fought. Let the two of us do battle according to the ancient laws. Before that encounter is over, I suspect the doubts will be removed about whether you have an altogether manly disposition or whether, as I have mentioned before and a great many have already stated, you are not a man.<sup>112</sup>

This was no mere duel: Thorir and Guðmund battled for Guðmund's reputation and continued respect within the social community. At the end of the duel, Guðmund prevailed, exiled Thorir and killed Thorir's son Thorkell in combat, acts justified under contemporary regulations that surrounded the word used (*argr/ragr*).

Guðmund's reputation for peacocking about his wealth and power (assets which were insinuated to have been an indication of homosexual and homosocial activities) negatively impacted his reputation, his position in society, and, by extension, his perceived gender in *Ljosvetningasaga*. Meanwhile the same character in *Laxdalasaga*, his social standing never suffered in this way, and was indeed highly

regarded there.

A situation similar to Guðmund's *Ljosvetningasaga* character assassination unfolded in *Egil's Saga* with the character of Kveldulf and his grandson Egil. Kveldulf's behavior became erratic and violent after sunset, which earned him his name and even the insinuation that he may have been a werewolf. His reputation, and perhaps the characteristics of those taboo behaviors portrayed by Kveldulf, were passed to Egil.

Both in terms of general Saga scholarship and gender deviation within Icelandic Sagas, Egil was one of the most intriguing Saga protagonists. He was well-known for his possible shapeshifting abilities, bloodlust, and insanity; the latter two were considered highly masculine when performed in the correct situations. Egil's shapeshifting may have indeed recalled a section of *The Saga of the Volsungs* when Volsung and his uncle shapeshifted into wolves to learn and to become more masculine.<sup>113</sup> Yet despite this parallel, Egil's transformations were considered by others to be an inconvenience—even a slight against his bid for masculinity—despite the perceived masculinity of his aforementioned viciousness both on and off the battlefield. The bid for masculinity in Egil's story may well have been undercut by his inability to collaborate with others within a society that valued the cordial relationships between neighbors.

While most Type A protagonists died heroically in battle, destined for Odin's Hall in Valhöl rather than the dishonor of old age, Egil deviated from this path. He was too skilled in

<sup>111</sup> The Thing was a regular meeting of people in Iceland and served as a place for people to pursue court cases, change laws, and air grievances against neighbors, family members, and acquaintances.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., pp. 182-3. Thorir's speech in the original Norse is as follows: "því at ek veit, at þú kennir mér þat einum, er margir mæla - ok eru þó eigi aðrir minna af valdir -, at ek hafa mælt ragliga við þik. Vil ek þat nú reyna, hvárt þetta er sannmæli eða eigi, því at ek vil skora á þik til hólmgöngu, at þú komir á þriggja náttu fresti í hólmi þann, er liggr hér í Øxará, er menn hafa áðr vanir verit á hólmi at ganga, ok berjumsk þar tveir, svá sem forn lög liggja til. Ætla ek, áðr en þeim fundi lúki, at færask skal af tvímælit, hvárt sannara er, at þú sér maðr

snjallr ok vel hugaðr, eða sé hinn veg, sem vér höfum áðr orðum til komit ok allmargir hafa sagt fyrir oss, at þú sér eigi snjallr."

I emphasize the word "ragliga" because it is a conjugation of *ragr*, one of the words used in *niðing*, and one of the words that permits lethal retaliation. The translators here have changed the meaning to be "pervert," a precedent following the eddic scrap displayed in the previous section.

Original Norse from: *Ljosvetninga Saga* (Gutenberg: Ríkisprentsmiðjan Gutenberg, 1959), pp. 39-40.

<sup>113</sup> *Saga of the Volsungs*, London, Penguin Books, 2000, pp. 106-115.

combat, too strong to be felled heroically during a battle; in a sense, he was too masculine (or perhaps masculine in the wrong areas) for the ideal held in contemporary Iceland.

Egil's social demotion from a semi-Type A hero to a Type B man took place near the end of the story, when he, in the grips of old age, was prodded about and mocked by the women of the house he resided in, a stark contrast to his previously feared status as a warrior and Type A hero. *Egil's Saga* relayed, "The cook said it was astonishing for a man who had been as great as Egil to lie around under people's feet and stop them going about their work."<sup>114</sup> In this portion of the saga, Egil not only bemoaned the situation he was in,<sup>115</sup> but those around him mocked him for his newfound impotence. He was entirely dependent upon others, and in the words of Clover, "unswordworthy"<sup>116</sup>—a characterization that any classical Norse hero would have striven to avoid.

Egil attempted to regain his masculine status, enabled by Clover's single-sex system, but ultimately failed, as described here:

One evening when everyone was going to bed at Mosfell, Egil called on two of Grim's slaves. He told them to fetch a horse, 'because I want to go to bathe at the pool'. When he was ready he went out, taking his chests of silver with him. He mounted the horse, crossed the hayfields to the slope that begins there and disappeared. In the morning, when all the people got up, they saw Egil wandering around on the hill east of the farm, leading a horse behind him. They went over to him and brought him home. But neither of the slaves nor the chests of treasure ever returned, and there are many theories about where

Egil hid his treasure.<sup>117</sup>

Egil set out to bury treasure and killed the slaves that escorted him there. His bid to regain masculinity through violence backfired only made himself appear more bizarre and outlandish,<sup>118</sup> which undermined his claim.

His descent in social gender was both fascinating in regard to looking at gender in Family Sagas and also profoundly sad. *Egil's Saga* describes, "One day Egil was walking out doors alongside the wall when he stumbled and fell. / Some women saw this, laughed at him and said, 'You're completely finished, Egil, now that you fall over of your own accord.'"<sup>119</sup> At this point in the story, Egil's recognized gender had fully changed from someone in a Type A-adjacent position worthy of fear (as respect is not the correct word for what Egil inspired) to a Type B man who held lower respect than Type B women due to his inability to perform Type A activities.

*Egil's Saga* stood out as unique due to its protagonist's movement from a Type A categorization under Clover's single-sex system to a Type B over the course of the narrative. A Type B protagonist was unusual in Icelandic Family Sagas, to say the least. However, there was at least one other account of a Type B Saga protagonist whose classification is referenced throughout the text.

*Njal's Saga* portrayed Njal as a quintessential example of a non-Type A protagonist. He was unable to grow a beard<sup>120</sup>—a fact strange enough to be noted in his introductory paragraph—and was extremely well-versed in the law. He was noted as being an older man,<sup>121</sup> which sorted him directly into the Type B category. Another factor that compounded this Type B assignment was the fact that *Njal's Saga* never depicts Njal in a situation where he took up arms to spill the

<sup>114</sup> *Egil's Saga*, London, Penguin Books, 2002, p. 201.

<sup>115</sup> *Egil's Saga* presents three separate verses about Egil aging and being disappointed by it, 58, 59, and 60.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.

<sup>118</sup> Egil is pushed from society due to his inability to work well with others. While violence is a masculine trait, it was also

important in Norse society to know *when* to exercise violence and when to exercise restraint, something Egil has an inability to do.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201.

<sup>120</sup> *Njal's Saga*, London, Penguin Books, 2001, p. 57.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

blood of another person. Njal was able to fulfill neither the aesthetic nor the physical activity required of a Type A man in Medieval Iceland. Despite this, Njal was still a central character from whom other characters sought advice, and he held a place in society that gave him prestige. This added a layer of nuance to the context of contemporary gender and social status. Njal, despite his non-normative acts and appearance, was highly regarded by those he interacted with due to his ability to exhibit at least one Type A trait: his participation in law. Unfortunately, his lack of other traditional Type A attributes caused his ostracization within his community.

Some of Njal's social demonization were exhibited in the mockeries he underwent throughout the saga, each *nið* gave more insight into how a person like Njal was expected to behave. Hallgerd urged Thrain Sigfusson to kill Thord Freed-man's son, saying, "Who will avenge it? Not that old beardless fellow."<sup>122</sup> With this insult, she called Njal, the only old, beardless man in the saga, less than a man, which invoked not only his lack of facial hair as evidence but also his age.

Moreover, Njal was not immune from insult within his own household. When women from Bergþorshvol (Njal's home) go to Hlidarendi, they say that "[Njal has been] working hard—at sitting"<sup>123</sup> after they are asked about his activities by the lady of Hlidarendi. There was even a devastating *flyting* performed at a Thing session where Njal, his sons, and their opponent, Flosi, insulted each other to determine who was more masculine.<sup>124</sup> When charged to pay compensation to Snorri and Flosi for the killing of Hoskuld, Njal gave a silk robe and boots anonymously as the setup to insult Flosi. When Flosi found the robe, he became enraged, and when asked who he believed gave it, "Flosi spoke: 'If you want to know then I'll tell you what I think—it's my guess that your father gave it, Old Beardless, for there are many who can't tell by looking at him whether he's a man or a

woman."<sup>125</sup>

Throughout the saga, Njal never disputed the rumors or insults directed his way; instead, he chose to brush them off and continued on his way. This response made him less favorably regarded in some senses; however, his reputation as a just lawspeaker and a sound advisor was strengthened by his lack of disputes among those who attempted to undermine him.

One must not forget, however, that Njal was a pillar of his community, despite the mockery of his peers. He was even introduced in the saga this way: "He was so well versed in the law that he had no equal, and he was so wise and prophetic, sound of advice and well-intentioned, and whatever course he counseled turned out well."<sup>126</sup> For someone so insulted by the people surrounding him, Njal was surprisingly well-respected. This was indicative of his subversive status in both society and in the gendered makeup of Saga literature. He was, for all intents and purposes, a Type B protagonist with a single Type A trait (lawspeaking)—a protagonist in this saga despite the emasculation he suffered. While this position does not instantly make Njal queer in the modern sense, his acceptance of his role as a Type B man in this society is imperative to understand the reading. The fact that Njal maintained an adequate enough reputation in his social circle is evidence that Clover's scale could be subverted and bent by certain characters. Despite all his unmasculine characteristics, Njal was still considered worthy of respect in masculine spheres.

An integral part of queerness is the active subverting of the norms of the predominant culture—the act of being unapologetically oneself despite those norms. Njal, with his one Type A trait of lawspeaking, defied the expected social trend through his saga to contend with the norms of the time, thereby queerly expressed himself in a rather tight culture.

which I highly recommend giving a read.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., p. 210.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>124</sup> This scene is reminiscent of Lokasenna in the Poetic Edda,

Unlike their male counterparts, there is unfortunately scant information about gender non-conforming women in the sagas sampled in this paper; however, there are a few examples. Bergþora, Njal's wife, was first mentioned in the same chapter in which Njal is introduced. While she was not a central character in the saga, she still held significant power for a woman in the genre of the Family Saga. She owned the property she and Njal lived on, as illustrated by her name being part of the name of the hall itself: "Bergþorshvol," and was even mentioned as a "*drengr goðr ok nokkut skaphorð*," translated as "a good *drengr*, but somewhat harsh-natured" by Clover.<sup>127</sup> This recalled the social fluidity allowed by the single-sex model in contemporary Icelandic society. Bergþora ascended the ranks of Clover's scale to achieve the rank of *drengr*, which entitled her to the (approximate) level of respect given to a Type A man despite her biological sex. As such, Njal and Bergþora diverted the expected power relationship of a married couple. Bergþora held the rights to the property, while Njal simply lived there.

Njal and Bergþora's relationship is a fascinating commentary on a complicated societal perception of a Type B man with an extremely competent, Type A wife. It may be that this sort of companionship was not as unusual as *Njal's Saga* attempted to portray, but the inclusion of this dynamic allowed for the queering of relationships within old Norse society—especially in Iceland, where the Family Sagas take place. Its inclusion in this saga brought up two possibilities: either this relationship dynamic was abnormal enough to appear in the story because of its uniqueness, or this was a semi-standard arrangement within contemporary society. Either possibility could have lent itself to the feasibility of these relationships, even if they were uncommon.

Another important *drengr* character is that of Breeches-Auð, who was described in the *Saga of*

*the Peoples of Laxardal* as a woman who "often dressed in breeches, with a codpiece and long leggings."<sup>128</sup> Her husband, Thord, was advised to divorce her on the grounds that she was cross-dressing (as it possibly was an indication of homosexuality, as the Penguin Edition's notes suggested<sup>129</sup>). When she learned of the divorce, she spoke a piece of skaldic verse to illustrate her displeasure. In Icelandic Saga literature, only the most masculine of characters created and recited poetry. It was noteworthy that a woman, even a *drengr* like Auð, engaged in this craft.

Auð, despite her anatomy and assigned station, ascended the ranks of society to become a *drengr*, and she acted the part, too. Arguably, she was one of the most masculine women to appear in the Family Sagas; she was certainly the most masculine to appear in the small sample of tales collected for this paper. However, her inclusion was important, as the association she had with the main action of *the Saga of the Peoples of Laxardal* appeared to be one that required her presence. Her actions and presentation as a gender (and perhaps sexually) diverse character indicated that, even during her time, queer identities existed and sometimes resulted in powerful positions in society.

Auð appeared even more masculine when, after her divorce with Thord was ratified, she rode to his house after nightfall and stabbed him in retaliation. When she entered the house, she was described thusly: "She entered the bed closet, where he slept on his back facing upwards. She woke Thord, but he only turned over on his side when he saw some *man* had come in."<sup>130</sup> Thord's confusion over Auð's gender due to her presentation indicated, that in this moment, her societal status increased. What is more, the blasé way that Auð was described as a man may indicate that the identification of masculinity in Auð's presentation have been routine.

Moreover, in stabbing Thord, Auð

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>128</sup> The Saga of the People of Laxardal, London, Penguin Classics, 2008, p. 70.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., p. 195.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., p. 72. Italics my own.

perpetuated the cyclical violence usually reserved for men. Auð, in a sense, inhabited all the spaces of Type A men during her appearance in *Laxdaelasaga*. She maintained her identity as a high-powered character, both with her strength and with her attire and attitude, acts that would have likely placed her firmly under a queer umbrella today.

Auð was not the only well-respected woman in Icelandic Family Sagas, but she was one of the most prominent, especially for her use of men's clothing and masculine characteristics, with which she deliberately broke away from what was expected of women. Unfortunately, there was little evidence of Auð outside of this saga, and her appearance in it is brief.

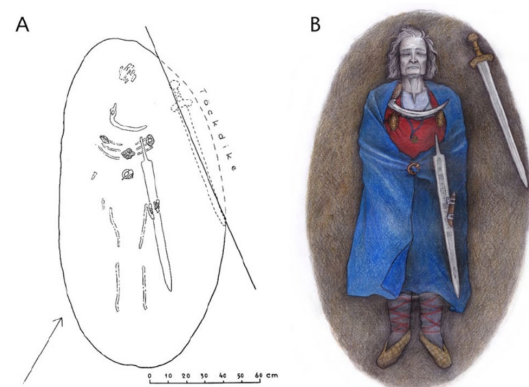
The Icelandic Family Sagas were written down around 200 years after their events took place to preserve the oral tales of Iceland's history. In the time they were passed around orally, they were likely shaped by each person they came into contact with, before they were written down for posterity's sake. Much like *The Eddas*, the characters described in the Family Sagas were written with a monastic lens and therefore may have been altered to fit into a Christian worldview. These sagas were not purely historical, yet they allowed us to peer into the past, albeit through a slightly tinted window.

## 5. ARCHAEOLOGY

In 1938, the Sutton Hoo burial site, a Viking-age ship burial laden with weapons and gold (known colloquially as the Beowulf Horde), was discovered in England.<sup>131</sup> This single discovery led archaeologists to excavate a flood of semi-contemporaneous burials and cremated remains in the vicinity. Common pieces in the Sutton Hoo mounds included shield-bosses, knives, and spears. Mound 1 also contained a helmet and a mail coat.<sup>132</sup> Based on other material found in and surrounding Mound 1, it was inferred that the person buried there was a

high-status individual, but no osteological data remained due to previous grave looting.<sup>133</sup> Despite this, today, Mound 1 is still considered the go-to Viking burial example of a high-class male individual due to the prevalence of gold, armor, and weapons, something that archaeologists now expect when looking for possible evidence of gender at a Viking-age site.

Because of the close relationship between buried individuals and the material culture they were entombed with, it follows that gender deviation would appear in archaeological graves, especially if the buried person was different from the "ideal" individual in society. The material culture associated with males in such Viking-age graves includes martial gear like swords, shields, and armor. Females are generally found buried near their household goods like jars, textiles, and keys.



**Figure 1:** the intersex individual in Suontaka Vesitorninmäki, Finland.

However, artifacts found in graves may also bring to light how people in society differed. A possible example of gender deviation in archaeological records was recently uncovered just outside of Scandinavia: in Suontaka Vesitorninmäki, Finland (see Fig. 1 for a reconstruction). Of course, Finland is not part of Scandinavia, but it this burial contained very similar material culture and would have likely been involved with Scandinavian culture and norms at the time. The implications of this individual's burial are enlightening for our

<sup>131</sup> Martin Carver, *Sutton Hoo: Burial Ground of Kings?*, British Museum Press, 1998, pp. 173-4.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 180-3.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.



furthered understanding of gender and its presentation through medieval history.<sup>134</sup>

The descendent was buried with feminine clothing and a single (likely ceremonial) sword blade. Most tellingly, the grave contained, among other artifacts, one bronze-hilted sword, one hiltless sword blade, and two turtle brooches.<sup>135</sup> Based on the presence of the turtle brooches, the individual was likely buried in feminine garb, which was indicative of either the gender attributed to the individual by society or the gender the individual was most closely connected to during their life. Without the inclusion of the two swords, this would appear to be an individual who, despite their chromosomes, would have been perceived by society to be a woman (or woman-adjacent).

Radiocarbon dating placed the burial between 1040 and 1174 CE, around the latter half of the events of the Icelandic Family Sagas, and chromosomal analysis on a bone fragment from this individual found that they had XXY chromosomes, an intersex condition known as Klinefelter's Syndrome. Klinefelter's is characterized by primary sexual characteristics of XY individuals alongside gynecomastia (enlargement of breast tissue) post-puberty, weak bones, a small penis and testicles, and a low sex drive.<sup>136</sup> The Suontaka individual would have been biologically male, yet they would have exhibited abnormal secondary sex characteristics. In this case, the individual was buried not according to their anatomical sex of male, but as a woman.

As attested to by Ulla Moilanen *et al.*, swords are not often found in female-associated graves; they indicated a warrior or ceremonial status often not attributed to women in archaeological

contexts. This abnormal find makes the swords' prominent place in this grave integral to understanding the individual's place in society.<sup>137</sup> In medieval European archaeology, the existence of a sword intermixed with jewelry (which is attributed to contemporary women in this context) is often assumed to be a burial that contains (or contained) multiple individuals in one place, even if only one body was recovered there.<sup>138</sup> In this case, the hilted sword described was buried next to—but not entirely associated with—the remains, prompting the question of whether this sword was interred in the location at a later date. If, as the evidence suggests, the hilted sword was intentionally placed near this individual *after* the initial date of their internment, it could indicate they had a ritualistic or societal importance. Such an occurrence could lend credibility to the notion that the individual interred was of high status within their community or could have possibly been involved with magical practice in the area.<sup>139</sup>

However, as the hilted sword was likely not buried at the same time the individual was interred, it is of less importance to the focus of this paper than its hiltless counterpart. On this subject, Moilanen continues,

The placement of the hiltless sword is... significant, as swords placed directly on the body may be interpreted as strong symbols of identity and personhood. The hiltless sword does not bear evidence of battle damage, and the handle has been removed as if to make it unusable, or less violent and genderless if the traditional perspective on the symbolism of swords is

<sup>134</sup> Ulla Moilanen et al. "A Woman with a Sword? – Weapon Grave at Suontaka Vesitorninmäki, Finland." *European Journal of Archaeology*, 2021. p. 47.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.; "Klinefelter syndrome," Mayo Clinic, Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research, Sept. 21, 2019, accessed 6 May 2022.

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/klinefelter-syndrome/symptoms-causes/syc-20353949>.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53. For more information on the possibility of magic being involved in this burial, please read Moilanen's article cited originally- they discuss very more on the possibility that the Suontaka individual could have been involved in local religious practices. For an even more enlightening situation, please read in tandem with Price's book cited above.

followed.<sup>140</sup>

Archaeologists and researchers have postulated upon what this placement may mean, some occasionally proposing a magical intent, and others that it may have been as a symbol of lost or unusable masculinity.<sup>141</sup> I am personally of the opinion that the hiltless sword, based on its positioning, engravings, and cost that it would have required, acted as a type of positive *nið*: a declaration that *despite* this individual's biological unconformity, they made the best of their situation and became the person they were meant to be. In early modern rural Finland, clothing was associated heavily with anatomical sex, and the fact that this person was buried in feminine clothing indicated that this particular individual was more closely associated with their gender presentation than they were with their anatomical sex.<sup>142</sup> The use of cultural material, like clothing and grave goods, to indicate the interred's gender or role in society provides evidence for (possibly accepted) gender deviation in an area in very close contact with Scandinavia during the Middle Ages.

The Suontaka individual was richly ornamented at the time of their burial, which may have attested to their high social standing. However, they were also presented in clothing that would have been socially contrary to their anatomical sex. If they did dress this way during their life, how did the discord between their anatomy and social presentation change their social standing? How did this impact their social perception, and by extension, their burial? These are questions that are yet to be answered, partially due to the limitations of archaeology, and partially because there has been an active erasure of queer lives and existence by historians.

In archaeology, researchers are unable to see

the individuals as they lived—they can only be seen as they were buried or preserved. Due to the randomness of preservation and shifting funeral styles over thousands of years,<sup>143</sup> much has been lost to time. It is impossible to infer what someone was like during their lifetime solely based on the circumstances of their burial or preservation. Moreover, the dead cannot bury themselves; others must prepare them for their journeys into their afterlife, and that may mean that the remains are altered—both literally, through funeral activities like burning, and superficially, by changing the clothing and items associated with the deceased during or prior to funerary rites. Often, the individual's burial (or other funeral rites) indicated their social standing, who they were, and their occupation via grave goods, positioning, and attire, but they are only given to us by third parties in the distant past. We cannot learn everything about the person being studied only by their graves. I would argue that given the wealth of the goods retrieved from the grave, especially the hiltless sword blade and the turtle brooches, the Suontaka individual was likely a gender-diverse individual in an area with gender norms similar to that of medieval Scandinavia.

However, as pointed out in Moilanen's article, "[archaeological] graves may not tell us about the gender systems of the past per se, but rather about the assumptions of the modern people making the interpretations."<sup>144</sup> It would be amys to map modern ideas of gender, society, and their mixings onto the societies of the past. Graves, however, can be used to analyze how nonconformist communities are perceived in the context of their own culture.<sup>145</sup> As Judith Butler argues, gender is a performance, and there is no one "right" way to perform it.<sup>146</sup> This goes for other societies, too: gender is not set in stone, and the language used

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>143</sup> For more information on the shifting of Scandinavian funerary practices during the Viking age, please read Hilda Roderick Ellis, "The Road to Hel," New York City, Greenwood Press, 1968.

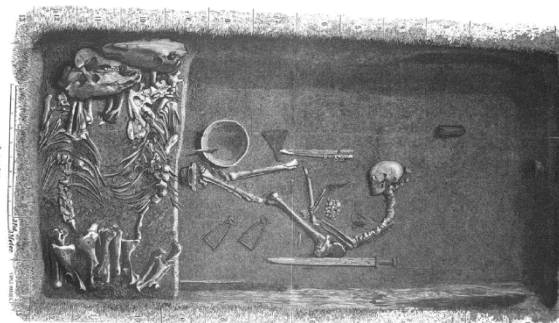
<sup>144</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>145</sup> For more information on how the presence of beads in archaeological contexts influenced how researchers interpreted the contents of their finds please read Joanne O'Sullivan, "Strung Along: Re-evaluating Gendered Views of Viking-Age Beads," *Medieval Archaeology*, 2015.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

to describe it changes throughout time and space.

Another example of possible gender deviation is grave Bj 581 in Birka, Sweden. Contemporary Birka was a trading hub for the medieval Scandinavian world and had ties to the Ural Mountains, the Caliphate, and the Byzantine Empire.<sup>147</sup> Grave Bj 581 was a large, well-furnished chamber containing one skeleton dating between the 8th and 10th Centuries.<sup>148</sup> Based on their positioning, the individual was likely sitting in a chair upon inhumation.<sup>149</sup> Their burial chamber contained a sword, an axe, a spear, armor-piercing arrows, a battle knife, two shields, two horses (one mare and one stallion), and a full set of gaming pieces—all objects heavily associated with high-ranking and supposedly “masculine” activities.<sup>150</sup> When the skeleton was analyzed, however, osteological markers pointed to the individual being female, which conflicted with the going assumption that the interred individual was male based on their grave goods.<sup>151</sup> Genomic sequencing later confirmed that the individual interred, in fact, had XX chromosomes.<sup>152</sup>



**Figure 2:** Grave of BJ-581.

Bj 581’s skeleton did not exhibit any signs of peri or postmortem trauma that could have led to their death, which followed a trend of decreased osteological trauma in medieval Scandinavia as a whole.<sup>153</sup> While it is possible that the deceased participated in warfare or

warrior-like activities without incurring osteological markings, the inclusion of weapons in Bj 581 may be a reference to social status rather than to military prowess.<sup>154</sup>

Soft tissue and fibers do not preserve well in the areas where both the Suokotana individual and Bj 581 were found, so the physical clothing both were wearing is not obvious. Based on the Suontaka grave’s use of turtle brooches, it was plausible to infer that the individual was wearing an apron dress—a garment that was fastened at the shoulder/pectoral area using turtle brooches to hold the dress on the body—indicating a difference between their anatomy and their gender presentation. Bj 581’s clothing is much more difficult to pin down, as no evidence of a belt buckle, brooch, or any other metal accouterment was found. Without such vital evidence, it is impossible to imagine what they were wearing when they were interred.

## 6. CONCLUSION

As more knowledge and awareness about gender diversity is spread in the modern era, it is important to acknowledge that gender diversity is as old as time itself. Of course, it is also important to understand that contemporaneity is key. Modern terms and concepts do not perfectly map onto the past, but the broad strokes are still there, ingrained in both literature and material culture. In medieval Scandinavia, gender deviation made itself most apparent in those who stepped outside of the “normal” expression patterns of women and men were apparent.

Myths are key to assessing gender, its diversity, and its place within the social and religious structures of any society. For medieval Scandinavia, the characterization of Loki and Odin are important in understanding how people with differing levels of social standing

<sup>147</sup> C. Hedenstierna-Jonson, et al., “A female Viking warrior confirmed by genomics.” 2017. p. 1.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

and gender presentations were perceived. Loki, for example, was demonized and viewed negatively because of his deviant actions—both in terms of his gender and his allegiance to Odin—perhaps due to the Christian interpretation of binary good and evil. Odin, despite his usual position of power at the head of the pantheon, was somehow immune to the societal ramifications of transgressing gendered lines.

Similarly, the Icelandic Family Sagas presented a host of gender-diverse characters and actions, ranging from the unmasculine behaviors of Thord, the aged Egil, Guðmund the Powerful, and Njal to the decidedly masculine exploits of Bergþora and Breeches-Auð. All six of these people, either through societal norms or through their own convictions, became something other than what was expected of them in regard to their expressions of themselves. Seeing these characters as both disdained and glorified within the Family Sagas has proven itself to be a compelling look into the social norms and convictions of contemporaneous peoples.

It is more difficult to pin down gender deviance in archaeology; however, it is clear that, due to the contemporary archaeological examples of both the Suontaka intersex individual and the individual in Bj 581, gender and its expression were both flexible, and (possibly) highly respected. As discussed above, archaeology can be limited due to the randomness of preservation and the lack of autonomy in the accessorizing and dressing of the deceased during burial/funeral rites, but even still, material evidence continues to validate the existence of gender diversity in populations across time and space.

Gender diversity is a topic that has been both divisive and intensely important in many people's lives, my own included. The fact that some scholars have refused to consider gender diversity in medieval documents and material culture should be controversial; it pushes the lives and actions of gender-diverse people into

the background of medieval reality when in fact they may have been shining in the forefront. In not allowing their stories to be heard, understood, and examined today, traditional scholars are not only disenfranchising potential new scholars from research and academia not only by excluding stories like theirs from modern knowledge of history but are actively pushing the false notion that gender deviation and its expressions are modern phenomena. It is critical that stories of gender deviance in medieval literature are understood and studied by a wider audience. Such knowledge and widespread understanding of historical gender diversity may be a way to widespread acceptance of modern gender diversity by countering fallacies that trans people are an invention by modern youth. This paper is a call for more research in such a field of study: queer theory and queer studies must be brought to the desks of medievalists. Without such a push, academia will continue to be alienating towards the people who will carry on the study of medieval cultures. The more unique perspectives that can be brought into a field, the better it performs, and medievalism must follow that trend.

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