

Sailing Beyond the Saga: Women Warriors and Viking Piracy



Figure 1: "On Viking Expeditions of Highborn Maids: Two female warriors participating in a sea battle." From Olaus Magnus' *Historia de Gentibus Septentrionalibus* (History of the Nordic Peoples) (Rome: Giovanni Maria de Viottis, 1555). Wikimedia Commons. Public Domain.

The image of a formidable female Viking, armored and brandishing a sword, journeying across the seas and charging into conflicts alongside her male companions has long fascinated academic and popular audiences. Traditional historiography and archaeology predominantly portrayed the Viking world as male-dominated, focusing mainly on men's lives and material culture.¹ Recent archaeological discoveries and scholarly re-evaluations have challenged this perspective, suggesting a

more complex social structure where women could hold martial roles. Viking warrior women, sometimes called *skjaldmær* (shield-maidens), are depicted in sagas and historical accounts as women who joined Viking men in combat, armed with weapons and clad in armor.² Among these legendary figures, Lagertha, who appears in Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum*, is emblematic of female warriors whose popularity has reignited due to contemporary portrayals in media. Many Viking narratives describe women as formidable in battle and active in raids and Viking piracy.³ The archeological discovery of female warrior burials suggests that the depiction of these women in historical texts and sagas were not all fictional but reflected a societal role.

In 2017, DNA analysis of the 1878 archaeological findings from Birka, Sweden, on a high-status warrior grave from the tenth century presumed male but was confirmed to contain a female skeleton through DNA analysis, have added empirical weight to these historical narratives.⁴ These DNA results attest to female warriors within the Viking community. This paper examines the historical, narrative and archaeological evidence to reassess women's roles in Viking warfare and piracy. By integrating historical, archaeological, and literary sources, this study aims to uncover a more nuanced understanding of gender roles in Viking society, challenging long-held perceptions and acknowledging the dynamic capabilities of Viking women.

Vikings as Pirates

Examining Vikings' historical activities through the lens of piracy reveals striking similarities that make a compelling case for viewing Vikings as pirates or proto-pirates. The word 'Viking' is used in contemporary sources to mean a 'pirate' or 'sea warrior.'⁵ These Nordic raiders, renowned for their seafaring prowess and fearsome reputation, suggest that Vikings could be considered among the earliest examples of maritime marauders or pirates. From the late eighth to early eleventh centuries, the Viking Age saw Norse warriors journeying across the seas seeking new territories to conquer and riches to seize, targeting monasteries, coastal settlements, and trade centers across Europe; to seize treasure and resources as far as North America and the Pontic Steppe and the Middle East; and the Swedish Vikings (the 'Rus') are also credited for being active in the formation of the first Russian state.⁶ The first documented raid was on Lindisfarne in 793 CE.⁷ Still, archeological evidence of a raid through the Viking boat burial at Salme in Estonia predates the Lindisfarne raid by nearly half a century.⁸

Similarly, pirates of the Golden Age in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries attacked merchant ships and ports to plunder valuable cargo.⁹ Seafaring Vikings relied heavily on surprise attacks, with their longships designed for speed and maneuverability, allowing them to strike swiftly and retreat before local forces could mount a defense.¹⁰ Maritime raiding has been a feature of many seafaring cultures for millennia, but unusually, Vikings are defined by this piracy.¹¹ Vikings utilized violence and intimidation, involving the killing or enslavement of inhabitants and the destruction

of property.¹² Vikings are famous for their ship technology, allowing for fast transport of large numbers of individuals in a single vessel,¹³ and their raids disrupted European trade routes, leading to economic instability and prompting the fortification of towns and the development of organized defenses.¹⁴ Vikings and pirates have been romanticized over time, becoming larger-than-life figures in popular culture. Vikings like Ragnar Lothbrok have been immortalized as legendary warriors, blending historical fact with myth.¹⁵ The organizational structures of Vikings and pirates also share similarities, with Viking raids led by chieftains who commanded loyalty through their success in battle and the distribution of plunder, akin to pirate captains.¹⁶ Viking raids sometimes included warrior women or female Vikings who played active roles in raiding parties, adding another layer of complexity to the analysis.

Historical and Literary Context of Viking Warrior Women

The annals of the Viking Age include historical and literary narratives of female martial participation. More than 20 warrior women are mentioned in sagas and histories, with an additional 53 appearing in poems and stories, and an Icelandic law book from 1260-1280 addresses women bearing weapons as a societal threat, indicating their existence due to their inclusion in legal texts.¹⁷ In his seminal work from 1200, the *Gesta Danorum*, Saxo Grammaticus recounts the tales of warrior women such as Rusla, who fought numerous times against her brother Throndo for the throne of Denmark,¹⁸ and Princess Alfhild, who rejected her suitor, left her royal life, changed into men's clothing, and became a fierce female captain of a pirate band.¹⁹ Saxo also writes about Lagertha, a *skjaldmær* (shield maiden), who not only donned the garb of warriors but also honed their skills for battle, suggesting a tradition of female fighters within Danish society.²⁰

Several texts depict Viking warrior women in complex and nuanced narratives from Alfhild's fierceness to Queen Modthryth's character in *Beowulf*.²¹ According to Saxo Grammaticus, Alfhild demonstrated extraordinary bravery, slaying men and performing feats beyond what was expected of women.²² Saxo also mentions Alfhild was not alone in her pursuits, noting that "many girls of the same persuasion had enrolled in her company,"²³ indicating a collective movement among women towards piracy and combat. Women of high rank could learn about military practices and be called on to support their husbands. Some young women received formal instruction in military arts, including using weapons, ensuring fortresses were well garrisoned, and being ready to command, launch attacks, or defend against them.²⁴ Therefore, even women who remained at home needed to know war strategies and weaponry to defend themselves, their homes, and their children.²⁵

Lagertha's story is complex, featuring her as a crucial figure in battles alongside her future husband, Ragnar Lothbrok, and later as an independent warrior who ultimately became the sovereign of Norway. Lagertha entered Ragnar Lothbrok's camp with an army of women dressed in men's clothing when he was leaving to avenge his

grandfather against King Frö of Sweden. When the women arrived, they wanted to join the fight declaring their preference for death over dishonor such as capture or rape.²⁶ Lagertha fought alongside Lothbrok, and she is described as "skilled in military art" and possessing a "virile temper." Lagertha's contribution was crucial to their victory.²⁷ The Saga continues with Lagertha later offering Lothbrok one hundred and twenty ships for his military endeavors.²⁸ Lagertha's story highlights the dual aspects of her identity: a warrior of remarkable strength, independence, and courage who could lead and fight both alongside her husband and independently.²⁹ Her eventual rise to power as a ruler in her own right—culminating in her seizure of sovereignty after killing her husband—further cements her legendary warrior legacy.³⁰ Despite debates about her historical authenticity, Lagertha's depiction as an independent and combative figure resonates with contemporary audiences, aligning with modern values of gender equality and female agency.³¹

Saxo Grammaticus draws parallels between shield-maidens and Amazons, noting that these women, like Lagertha, exchanged beauty for men's clothes and dedicated their lives to mastering military arts.³² He describes them as women who "preferred hardness to therein flattery, they were looking for wars and not kisses, they tasted blood instead of lips, they practiced military exercises instead of love ones".³³ These women, embodying great physical strength, determination, and courage, acted "masculine" while retaining strong feminine sensuality.³⁴ The historical context of Viking warrior women, as depicted by Saxo Grammaticus and other sources, portrays them as formidable figures who challenged the traditional gender roles of their time, demonstrating exceptional prowess in combat and leadership.

Norse literature and sagas frequently feature women in active combat roles, which often blur the lines between historical fact and myth. These literary depictions are paralleled by archaeological findings where women are not only armed similarly to their male counterparts but are also given equivalent burial rites, suggesting their roles in life may have mirrored those heroic tales.³⁵ The Icelandic sagas describe women accompanying men or even leading expeditions to North Atlantic islands, such as Freydis Eiríksdóttir from *The Saga of the Greenlanders* and *Erik the Red's Saga*, who sailed with her husband and siblings to settle in Vinland at the L'Anse aux Meadows site in present-day Canada in 1000 CE.³⁶ She is a tyrant as she demands the entire neighboring Icelandic camp be slaughtered, and when everyone refuses, she grabs an axe and kills five women. In *The Saga of the Greenlanders*, she is described as fighting Indigenous people while eight months pregnant, exposing her breasts, beating her chest, yelling, and waving a sword to scare them. She was reported to have lied about the murders on return to Greenland, saying the missing people had decided to stay in Vinland and threatening her crew with death if they said otherwise. It is difficult to know how much of her violence is history or a narrative tool to create masculine-feminine tension when she engages in violence as a pregnant woman.³⁷

Viking sagas vividly depict shield-maidens' presence and significant roles in battles and leadership. For instance, the *Qrvar-Odds* saga portrays shield-maidens accompanying warriors and actively participating in combat. In this saga, King Herraúðr gives Oddr a shield-maiden as a gift, emphasizing her reliability and past contributions in battle: "Here is a gift, Oddr, I want to give you; it is a shield-maiden, she is reliable in battle and has always accompanied me well."³⁸ Further emphasizing their leadership, the *Sögubrot af fornkonun-gum* describes warrior women commanding large groups of men. Visina, one of the prominent figures in this text, is portrayed as "a woman practiced in harshness and very expert in the military art," leading a substantial army of Wends (Slavs) who unquestioningly obeyed her authority. The sagas highlight Visina's pivotal role in a significant battle, working alongside another shield-maiden, Heiðr, to lead hundreds of combatants.³⁹

Valkyries, another category of women in Norse mythology, are more intensively studied than shield-maidens, though scholars sometimes use the terms interchangeably.⁴⁰ Valkyries, though mythological, had a military function and escorted men from battle to Valhalla—the realm of the honored dead.⁴¹ In contrast, shield-maidens were mortal women who fought in battles without otherworldly powers.⁴² These narratives highlight women's complex identities and roles in Viking society, engaging in warfare alongside men. Freyja, the ultimate Valkyrie, embodies this concept.⁴³

Interestingly, while Valkyries do Óðinn's bidding, they have the power to disobey him, and he can only punish them without reversing their actions, as seen with Brunhildr.⁴⁴ Saxo describes shield-maidens as "unwomanly" for their martial inclinations and independence.⁴⁵ However, other scholars argue that these warrior-women, with their fluidity in navigating masculinity and femininity, carved out a unique niche in Viking society, potentially inhabiting a nonbinary or third-gender role to participate in combat.⁴⁶

There are also foreign accounts from the Viking Era of the presence of female Viking warriors. An Irish history book from the twelfth century, *The War of the Irish with the Foreigners*, recounts the story of a formidable Viking warrior woman known as "The Red Maiden." This text lists Viking fleets that attacked Munster in the tenth century, with the last of these fleets led by "The Red Maiden." Furthermore, a Greek historian named Johannes Skylitze, writing in the late eleventh century, documented an attack on the Byzantines in 971 by the Viking who was the ruler of Kiev at the time. The Byzantines were astonished to discover armed women among the fallen warriors, underscoring the presence of female combatants in Viking ranks.⁴⁷

Archaeological Evidence of Viking Shield-Maidens

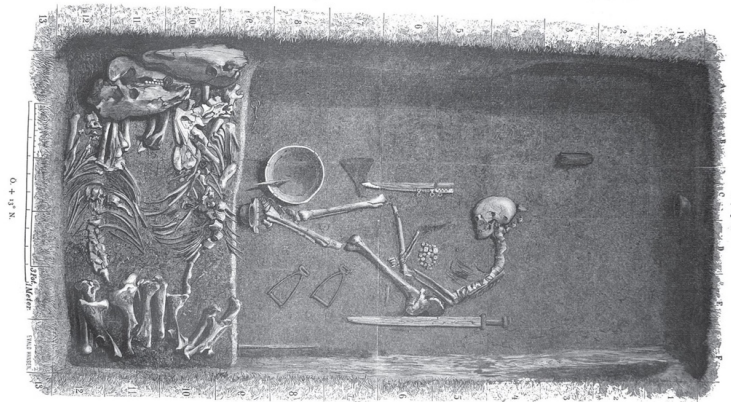


Figure 2: Sketch of archaeological grave found and labeled "Bj 581" by Hjalmar Stolpe in Birka, Sweden, published 1889. Wikimedia Commons. Public domain.

Recent archaeological findings provide concrete evidence of female participation in martial roles. Across Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, graves containing the remains of women equipped with a full array of warrior's regalia—axes, knives, swords, spears, arrowheads, and shields—have been discovered.⁴⁸ These findings suggest that these women held significant roles in Viking warfare and piracy. One particularly compelling archaeological find is the Birka burial in Uppland, Sweden. Initially assumed to be a classic male warrior's grave due to its rich assortment of weapons, genetic testing later confirmed that this grave belonged to a woman.⁴⁹ An evaluation of the isotopes in her bones also showed she was a well-traveled warrior.⁵⁰ The burial included weapons, trader's weights, and gaming pieces bundled in her lap indicating knowledge of commerce, tactics, and strategy, and two horses, suggesting the buried individual was a high-ranking officer.⁵¹



Figure 3: A grave find from Solør, Norway: A skull of a woman, a sword, a spear, an axe, and arrows from the late tenth century. Wikimedia Commons. CC-BY-SA-4.0.

Other sites, like the grave found at Aunvollen, Norway with a sword, axe, arrowheads, shield and two spears, or Solør, Norway provide further evidence of women as warriors, leaders, and strategists within their societies.⁵² In 2019, there was a renewed interest in female Viking warriors when *National Geographic* did a facial reconstruction of the skull from a Viking woman's burial discovered in 1900 from Nordre Kjølén where she had been buried with a two-edged sword, spear, axe, shield, arrows, a horse and other tools.⁵³ Male archeologists excavated many Viking cemeteries in the twentieth century but most were not adequately documented. The skeletons in the graves were often automatically assumed to be male based on accompanying weapons, in part because the skeleton in these ancient graves is often degraded, but this assumption may be a mistake.⁵⁴ Still, the remains may have belonged to biological females and there may be many more as there have been over 3000 graves found with swords in Norway alone.⁵⁵ There are issues with assigning gender by their grave goods. In addition to Viking women buried with weapons, there are Viking men that were buried with clothes and artefacts usually associated with the opposite sex.⁵⁶ More research is needed into whether these were cross-dressing Vikings or if they held some other role in society such as shamans embodying both male and female qualities. Additional study of the DNA of the skeletons needs to be completed to see what percentage of these skeletons are female. These findings reignited interest in the existence of Viking shield-maidens, suggesting that gender roles in Viking Age society were more fluid and dynamic than previously understood. Additional research must be done to determine if a warrior woman was a viable societal role or an exception. Beneath the helmet, the Viking warrior standing on the prow of a dragon ship may reveal a female face.⁵⁷

Scholarly Debate and Interpretation

The scholarly debate on the historical presence of female Viking warriors is complex and multilayered, blending perspectives from literature, archaeology, and gender studies. Old Norse sources include women engaged in power and combat, indicating a cultural acceptance, in specific contexts, for women to wield weapons and assert martial prowess.⁵⁸ This debate is further complicated by the influence of Roman historical writing on Norse chroniclers like Saxo Grammaticus, whose narratives often conclude with these women either meeting their demise in battle or being coerced into domestic roles.⁵⁹

Physical evidence from places like Kaupang, where multiple female graves with weapons have been identified, supports the notion that some Viking women engaged in warfare.⁶⁰ Despite the burgeoning acknowledgment of their historical significance, ongoing research is needed to fully understand these women's roles and the societal implications of their martial involvement.⁶¹ The academic discourse surrounding Viking

shield-maidens is evolving. As new archaeological discoveries, such as the warrior burial in Birka, come to light, they spark a re-evaluation of past interpretations and stimulate new discussions on the dynamic roles of women in Viking societies.

Cultural Representations



Figure 4: Photo of Silver Figurine from Hårby. Dated to the Viking Age. Found at isle of Fyn, Hårby, Denmark (2012). Displayed at the National Museum of Denmark. Wikimedia Commons. CC-BY-SA-4.0

The portrayal of shield-maidens in Viking culture in historical chronicles and modern interpretations has sparked significant academic and cultural interest. Recent decades have seen increased scholarly focus on women's diverse roles in Viking societies, extending beyond domestic duties to include participation in trade, leadership, and spiritual practices.⁶² The discovery of iconographic artifacts such as brooches and figurines depicting women wielding weapons in Viking art and donning warrior attire provides compelling visual evidence that Viking art celebrated the concept of female warriors.⁶³ In 2012, an amateur archeologist and metal detectorist found a small, gilded silver figurine of a woman holding a double-edged sword and shield near the village of Hårby in Denmark.⁶⁴ It is estimated that this figure dates to 800 CE, during the Viking Age. It is often labelled as a Valkyrie, but why is it immediately assumed that the figure is a mythological figure and not a representation of warrior woman?⁶⁵ The narrative of Lagertha, as revived in modern media with the History Channel's drama series *Vikings*, presents twenty-first-century viewers with a vivid portrayal of what a Viking warrior woman might have looked like, embedding the existence of such figures in the minds of many.⁶⁶

In poetic and literary traditions, women participate not only in the physical aspects of Viking life but also in the intellectual and mystical, teaching runes and wisdom that suggest a complex view of gender roles within Norse literature.⁶⁷ Moreover, the cultural impact of such figures extends beyond scholarly debate, influencing popular culture and modern perceptions of Viking history. Shield-maidens and Valkyrie characters, once confined to ancient sagas and epic poems, now feature prominently in video games and television, reflecting a broader societal fascination with Viking mythology and powerful female figures. This blend of historical evidence, literary tradition, and modern reinterpretation creates a dynamic image of Viking shield-maidens that continues to inspire and provoke discussion, highlighting their significance in historical and contemporary cultural discourse.

Gender Dynamics and Identity in Viking Society

The examination of gender dynamics and identity within Viking society reveals a complex tapestry of roles that women could occupy. Studies in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have shown that Viking Age women participated in various activities, from household management and trade to leadership, from piracy and raids to military expeditions.⁶⁸ The sagas, rich in tales of intrigue and conflict, frequently cast women as catalysts for action, suggesting their significant influence within Viking society. Historical records and sagas recount instances of women leading as queens, engaging in trade, and managing estates, indicating flexibility in gender roles that might have been more accommodating than previously thought.⁶⁹

The archaeological evidence supports women in combat roles, with graves containing weaponry and armor traditionally associated with male warriors but found with female remains. This evidence challenges the conventional archaeological interpretation and suggests that women's roles in Viking society were more complex and integrated than previously acknowledged.⁷⁰ The gender dynamics in Viking society were nuanced and multifaceted, with women often stepping into roles that transcended traditional gender boundaries. This participation was not merely an exception but a vital part of the societal fabric that allowed Viking culture to adapt and thrive across various realms of life.

Integration

Historical, literary and archeological examples can be difficult to generalize as Viking communities were based in several countries. Hence, no single 'Viking world' exists, but a coalescence of 'Viking worlds' or competing kingdoms with a shared cultural background marked by rapidly growing maritime exploration, trade, war and settlement in new lands.⁷¹ Therefore, more research into female warriors is needed in various countries, including Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Iceland. Still, there is evidence of

Viking presence in places such as the Baltic, England, Ireland, Iceland, and Greenland.⁷²

Vikings enslaved people they brought back to their home communities, such as early Celtic individuals.⁷³ The Vikings occasionally incorporated people from other countries and cultures into their ranks, not just as enslaved people. They sometimes formed alliances and integrated foreigners into their society. The Vikings hired foreign mercenaries and formed alliances with local rulers during raids and campaigns. This collaboration helped them gain local knowledge and strengthen their military efforts. Genetic evidence from graves at two Viking execution sites in Dorset and Oxford, England, showed that the Viking forces were composed of individuals from different places of origin.⁷⁴ Interestingly, a genetic study that included Greenlandic Vikings did not find evidence of ancestry from Inuit or First Nations populations. These results suggest that if sexual interactions took place, it was on a small scale, or the children remained in the Indigenous communities.⁷⁵ By contrast, the rare mitochondrial lineage C1e has been interpreted as possible evidence of at least one North American Indigenous woman arriving in Iceland around the Viking Age. While other ancient-DNA research has proposed a northern European origin as an alternative explanation, the original study argued that an Indigenous origin from the eastern coastline of the Americas “seems most likely.”⁷⁶

For example, most texts highlight how the Finns and Sámi were exploited by the Vikings,⁷⁷ while the *Historia Norwegiae* c. 1500-1510 records Norse traders settling in Finnmark among Indigenous Sámi and employing their services. In Snorri Sturluson's *Olaf's Saga*, Helga, a Norse chieftain in Halogaland, is described as having a group of several hundred Sámi supporting him and coastal Sámi were known for their boat building abilities.⁷⁸ There is also evidence of intermarriage between Norsemen and Sámi women, as seen in grave mounds found in northern Norway showing Sámi ornamentation. This has been supported by a recent DNA study of Viking graves that had some individuals from Nordland in Northern Norway with Sámi admixture, just like Gotland graves had some with Finnish genetic components.⁷⁹ Harald Fairhair himself married Snæfríðr Svásadóttir, a Sámi girl, with the story embedded in *Heimskringla* unequivocally showing that Harald married her legally, and the later kings of Norway descended from this match.⁸⁰ What role could these Sámi women married to Norse have had on the community? Sámi women are known to have been hunters on skis.⁸¹ In addition to the image featured at the beginning of this article, Olaus Magnus' *Historia de Gentibus Septentrionalibus* (History of the Nordic Peoples), published in Rome in 1555, also depicted Sámi women hunting while on skis.



Figure 5: Image from Olaus Magnus' *Historia de Gentibus Septentrionalibus* (History of the Nordic Peoples) (Rome: Giovanni Maria de Viottis, 1555), depicting Sámi women hunting while on skis. Wikimedia Commons. Public Domain.

The iconography in archaeological sites provides significant insights into these women's historical and cultural realities. Artefacts from various regions, such as Karelian or Gotlandic artefacts found in northern Norway, reflect the diverse artistic expressions of the Viking world, including those of the Sámi people. As Storli noted, these artefacts demonstrate the interconnectedness of Viking and Sámi societies.⁸² The Old Icelandic texts, which do not strictly differentiate between the Sámi and other groups, indicate a more fluid understanding of cultural identities during the Viking Age.⁸³ The exploitation of the resources of Halogaland and Finnmark for export purposes must have been initiated by Norse traders who settled among nomadic Sámi and employed their services.⁸⁴

Conclusion

This exploration of the roles and representations of women in Viking society, mainly focusing on the figure of Lagertha and the broader category of pirates and warrior women, underscores a far more complex narrative than traditionally portrayed. The case of the Birka warrior is emblematic of the potential that interdisciplinary approaches hold in rewriting the histories of the past.⁸⁵ This example, supported by DNA analysis, challenges the long-held assumptions of a male-dominated Viking world and illustrates the importance of continually questioning and testing academic assumptions. Figures like Lagertha, who navigated and sometimes subverted the expected gender roles of

their time, are culturally significant.⁸⁶ These figures, whether historical or mythologized, serve as symbols of strength and agency.

The complexity of the Viking era, where women could rise to prominent military and social roles, suggests a more dynamic and fluid society in terms of gender roles than often appreciated.⁸⁷ The discovery of warrior burials, such as warrior Bj.581, highlights that women could achieve high status and suggests that they may have been more actively involved in martial roles than previously acknowledged.⁸⁸ These findings invite a re-evaluation of how we understand gender and status in Viking societies, suggesting that women's participation in warfare was not merely symbolic but a reality for some.

As research continues to uncover more about the Viking Age, it is clear that the narrative of female participation in both domestic roles and martial piracy deserves more study and a more prominent place in our understanding of the past. This re-examination not only enriches our historical narrative but also provides a deeper understanding of the dynamic capabilities of women in Viking society, challenging and expanding the traditional views of gender roles during the Viking Age. The legacy of these courageous and fierce warriors endures, inspiring women across generations to embrace their strength, courage, and independence.

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Notes

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