

Nancy Coleman and Nanna Løkka, eds. 2014. *Kvinner i vikingtid*.
Vikingatidens kvinnor. Oslo: Spartacus and Scandinavian Academic Press.
381 pages. ISBN: 9788230401293.

Kvinner i vikingtid is a collection of seventeen articles in Scandinavian languages or English reflecting the recent and much-needed scholarly revision of women's gender roles in early medieval Scandinavia. The volume brings out the heterogeneity of women in the Scandinavian Middle Ages, offers fresh perspectives on well-known women's roles, and draws attention to lesser-studied women. In recent years, scholarly discussion has shifted away from the question of the historicity of saga narratives, especially women's whetting, their control over household matters, and participation in magic and cult rituals. Instead, identity issues have dominated the field, explored through figures such as woman warriors and rulers who are viewed as empowered or subversive by many. This development in scholarly interests follows broader theoretical trends and the influence of third-wave feminism and queer theory, and popular texts such as *Game of Thrones* or the History Channel's *The Vikings* have likewise developed characters that embody this turn. While many of the female figures prominent in studies from the 1980s and '90s, e.g., inciters and goddesses, make an appearance in *Kvinner i vikingtid*, the book is concerned with giving a more fleshed-out, nuanced, and balanced representation of the daily lives and historical realities of women than has often been the case. It makes effective use of archeological research to highlight the impact of variables such as social status, geography, ethnicity, and age on women's lives, bringing the focus away from the compelling but, ultimately, literary heroines of the sagas to "drier" and more mundane, though no less important, subjects.

The book opens with an introduction by one of the book's two editors, Nancy Coleman, giving an overview of research about women in the Viking Age from the last 20–30 years. The collection's goal is twofold. First, it seeks to counteract the persistent male-oriented view that, according to Coleman, still dominates scholarly discussion despite these ground-breaking studies. Second, the editors aim to remedy the fact that much of the knowledge yielded in these studies has not made impact outside the academy, e.g., in textbooks and museum exhibits (although the examples mentioned are predominantly Norwegian). The remaining sixteen articles deal with different aspects of women's existence from childhood to death and burial, their legal rights and abilities to access economic power, aspects such as clothing and names, and their contribution to industries and trade demanding a variety of skills. As we learn in this book, women's lives were often complex and multi-dimensional, and their identities were based on a number of factors that could presumably shift over the life-cycle.

This is an attractively produced book with high-quality paper and many illustrations, which will make it appealing to students and the general reader, while as a scholar, I sometimes missed some of the caveats and terminological precision that a more specialized book would feature. For example, the term “Viking Age” is rather loosely applied at times and a few articles applied information from thirteenth-century (or even later) Icelandic written sources to earlier times without discussing the problems inherent in these approaches. A related issue is characteristic of some of the articles with an archeological focus, which, although staying firmly within the realm of early medieval Scandinavia, side-step questions regarding how to make their sources “speak,” for example, how a seemingly neutral material object such as a bowl, found in a woman’s grave, can at all be interpreted as indicating women’s participation in pre-Christian religious practices. However, the inclusion of these types of discussions are also a question of pitch and space as they are unlikely to spark an interest in the general reader, so it is perhaps an understandable omission. On the other hand, the wider net cast by the book means that readers encounter subjects that have been marginalized until recently, and, in particular, chapters about Sámi women on the Scandinavian peninsula and Norse women in Dublin—highlighting the importance of considering variables such as ethnicity and geography—are refreshing and timely.

This breadth of subjects and emphasis on giving balance and perspective is one of the book’s key strengths. In particular, Pernille Pantmann’s treatment of the “key women,” i.e., women buried with keys (primarily in Denmark), sorts the facts from the myths and clichés that have circulated for years, putting the numbers of women’s graves with keys into context with the data as a whole. Pantmann points out that the ratio of key women to women buried without keys is too low to pronounce the key as signifying a woman’s role as a housewife, and she convincingly argues instead for a less simplistic interpretation. Keys could have been a symbol for a specific female role, the “wise woman,” available only to a select few, an intriguing suggestion that complicates women’s identities and potentially aligns with literary evidence found in eddic poetry and other sources. The same can be said for Marianne Moen’s reevaluation of the Oseberg burial and women’s rulership, which argues against generations of scholars that have treated the burial site as exceptional. Instead, Moen makes the case that, based on the similarity between Oseberg and other magnificent ship burials, we should consider the possibility that high-ranking Viking Age women fulfilled leadership roles and wielded political power. These authors’ insistence on freeing the discussion from preconceptions and interpreting the evidence in context is highly productive, and their findings show how applying feminist perspectives to the evidence is sometimes simply a question of releasing it from outdated patriarchal bias.

The book’s extensive photographs of material objects (real or reconstructed) and landscapes, maps, and diagrams, serve to illustrate the subject matter

effectively, but other images are often reproductions of beautiful paintings in the neoromantic style (most date to ca. 1850–1910) and show previous generations' idealized attitudes to the Viking Age, views which have proved difficult to alter. Although the foreword and some of the captions robustly denounce the ideas this sort of visual material encapsulate, noting that it played a part in shaping romantic-nationalist attitudes, their presence could arguably be seen as undermining the basic premise of the book (see, e.g., p. 88). However, these are small quibbles and although some readers will find the types of women featured prominently in this book less exciting than the dynamic shieldmaidens currently prominent in popular culture, it is important that we understand the diversity of women's lives and experiences throughout history. This collection makes a strong contribution to that effect. Teachers, students, scholars, museum curators, and anyone interested in medieval Scandinavia will find the articles in *Kvinner i vikingtid* accessible, useful, and stimulating.

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