Völur and *Seiðr*: How Pre-Christian Shamanistic Practices Gave Viking Age Women Agency

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ABSTRACT: The Viking Age was a patriarchal time when men dominated the social and political world. However, due to the shamanistic practice known as *seiðr,* women of this time had access to unique roles as spiritual leaders. This essay discusses the impact seiðr had on Viking Age women's agency and self-empowerment. Seiðr has close ties to textile arts, with seiðr rituals taking influence from repetitive spinning and weaving circles. The relationship between seiðr and textile art is seen throughout Norse mythology, and women who practice seiðr (called *völur)* are agential characters throughout many Icelandic sagas—most notably Thorbjörg from *Eirik the Red's Saga* and Gunnhildr in *Njal's Saga*. The rise of Christianity in Scandinavia and its subsequent anti-witchcraft laws soon led to the dissipation of seiðr.

RÉSUMÉ: L'âge des vikings était une époque patriarcale où les hommes dominaient le monde social et politique. Cependant, grâce à la pratique chamanique connue sous le nom de *seiðr*, les femmes de l'époque avaient accès à des rôles uniques en tant que chefs spirituelles. Cet article traite de l'impact du *seiðr* sur l'agentivité et l'autonomie des femmes de l'ère viking. Le *seiðr* a des liens étroits avec les arts textiles, les rituels du *seiðr* étant influencés par les cercles de filage et de tissage répétitifs. La relation entre le *seiðr* et les arts textiles est présente dans la mythologie nordique, et les femmes qui pratiquent le *seiðr* (appelées *völur*) sont des personnages agissants dans de nombreuses sagas islandaises, notamment Thorbjörg dans la *Saga d'Eirik le Rouge* et Gunnhildr dans la *Saga de Njal*. L'essor du christianisme en Scandinavie et les lois anti-sorcellerie qui en ont découlé ont rapidement entraîné la disparition du *seiðr*.

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Viking Age Scandinavia was a deeply patriarchal society where men formed and dominated the social landscape. They led battles, headed the political sphere, and made final decisions regarding trade and commerce. While pagan Norse women enjoyed much more autonomy and freedom than other European women of the time, it is important to remember that men were the most visible leaders of the Viking Age. And while men were dominating the wider world, women were in control of more intimate facets of society, like homemaking and spirituality. During the Viking Age, women practiced a pre-Christian magic called *seiðr* which gave them unique power in a male-dominated world. Seiðr had close ties to the gendered field of textile work, meaning women could learn seiðr from their female relatives and become knowledgeable experts within their communities. In a highly patriarchal society, seiðr was able to grant women different ways to achieve their goals without leaving their homesteads or wielding physical weapons.

In Viking Age Scandinavia, women were leaders of the home. Women oversaw their homesteads' finances, food inventory, and farm efficiency. On top of generally managing the home, women also participated in certain specialized crafts necessary to maintain their homestead, which usually involved various kinds of textile work. Archaeologist Michèle Hayeur Smith discusses Viking Age textile work in her book *The Valkyries' Loom: The Archaeology of Cloth Production and Female Power in the North Atlantic* where she writes:

> North Atlantic Norse societies were dominated by men, yet textile production was a very gendered occupation, controlled by women. . . . Cloth and its production became symbolically gendered and associated with a woman's world and female power (15).

By overseeing textile production, women were in control of producing things like warm clothing and ship sails: items crucial to the development of the Viking Age.

Textile work also gave women control over various aspects of Norse daily life. It is no surprise then, that textile work is so important to the practice of seiðr: a pre-Christian, shamanistic magic women used during the Viking Age. Scholars argue the name seiðr could translate to "binding," or possibly even "thread," linking it closer to spinning and weaving practices (Gardeła, 49). And like textile work, seiðr was harshly gendered. A female practitioner of seiðr would be called a *völva*, which translates from old Norse to *staff bearer* or *wand carrier*. A völva would not have faced discrimination within Viking Age society, in fact, she would usually be considered a leader in her community. On the other hand, a male practitioner would be called a *galdramaður* and considered a social deviant. He would most likely face discrimination from his community.

Galdramenn were rare during the Viking Age as strict cultural expectations dictated that men stay away from anything "effeminate" (Gardeła, 48). Though men occasionally participated in seiðr, this essay will focus specifically on the role of seiðr in the lives of women.

While seiðr could be described as "Norse magic," it would be more accurate to say seiðr is the utilization of Norse spirits to achieve a specific purpose; be it healing, hexes, or foresight. It involves a connection between the tangible world and the spirit world, usually in the form of a séance (Blain, 2). Anthropologist Leszek Gardeła writes that these séances likely originated from groups of women working on textiles, an activity "during which songs are sung, stories told, and finally — while performing the same monotonous and repetitive actions of spinning or weaving — one gets tired and falls into a sort of trance" (50). Like textile work, seiðr could easily become a group practice. In the *Eirik the Red's Saga*, a woman with the gift of foresight named Thorbjörg practices seiðr in the hopes of better understanding a famine plaguing Greenland. Beforehand, she seeks out other women who know certain chants necessary to achieve contact with the spirit world. Then, during the practice, Thorbjörg stands in the middle of a circle of women who assist her in chanting (Hreinsson, I: 6-7). The communal nature of seiðr directly reflects women's group textile work.

The most well-known connection between textile work and spirituality in Viking Age culture is in the practice of Norse female deities who weave fate, like the *Nornir* and the Valkyries. In "The First Poem of Helgi Hundingsbani" from the *Poetic Edda*, the Nornir are seen weaving a young prince's fate with golden threads (Larrington, 111). In *Njal's Saga,* Valkyries weave the fates of warriors with human entrails and heads, while the Valkyries' spears and swords serve as weaving tools (Hreinsson, III: 215). Historians argue that weaving perfectly represents the pre-Christian Norse idea of fate (Bek-Pedersen, 35). With weaving, there is a set pattern existing in the minds of the weavers. Since it cannot be fully seen or felt, it does not seem to exist. Fate, like a textile pattern, is intangible, yet it dictates what is to come. As weaving commences, those who partake have free will, but they still must follow the preset pattern to create a cohesive piece. The fact that fate is so interconnected with weaving, a practice belonging to women, demonstrates the power women held in the fields of both textile work and spirituality.

Further linking the connection between textile art and magic, archaeologists have found various Viking Age female graves across Scandinavia with iron rods resembling distaffs (Gardeła, 53). Archeologist Neil Price writes that Scandinavian archaeologists have found "more than fifty graves that contain metal staffs closely resembling the saga descriptions of a sorceress's main attribute," (223). Price explains that literary evidence points to these staffs being used in sorcery and magic, with the previously discussed character Thorbjörg carrying a staff with her during her séance. The staff is described as

having a knob at the top, similarly to the shape of a distaff (Hreinsson, 1:6). The relationship between textile work and seiðr should not be understated. In a patriarchal society which limited women in their roles, it is understandable that the freedom they had within textile work translated to freedom of spirituality.

There are different reasons women practiced seiðr. Most evidence of women using seiðr is found in the Icelandic sagas. While this gives scholars limited material to work with, Neil Price argues Icelandic sagas are still incredibly informative regarding seiðr as they are "utterly saturated in magic" (Price, 221). In Icelandic sagas, uses of seiðr range from simple hexes to foretelling a hero's death, and the reasoning behind seiðr can come from a range of experiences and motivations. It is important to understand seiðr as a neutral device with its purpose depending on the emotional state of the practitioner, rather than a kind of dark witchcraft—a narrative seen in past literature (Blain, 97). When analyzing seiðr, one can divide its uses into two categories: seiðr as a tool to achieve a certain outcome, and seiðr to understand fate. These uses gave female practitioners certain powers and privileges which men did not have access to.

Seiðr as a tool to achieve a specific outcome exists in many Icelandic sagas. In chapter 20 of *The Saga of the People of Eyri*, the sorceress Katla uses seiðr to hide her son from those seeking revenge on him. Katla keeps him physically close while she spins yarn, and her son disappears into thin air (Hreinsson, 5:152). Later, in chapter 51, a wealthy, seafaring woman named Thorgunna falls ill. She explains to her friend, a farmer named Thorodd, how she would like her burial. Thorgunna says that he can take whatever he wishes, but she wants her bed and blankets burned. When she dies, members of the homestead do not honour her request and steal these items from her. Thorgunna then rises from her grave as a naked corpse and silently cooks a meal for Thorodd and those staying with him. After Thorodd sprinkles holy water on the food and brings Thorgunna's body to her desired place of rest, the haunting ends and Thorodd feels at peace (198-199). Thorgunna is never explicitly labelled a völva (she identifies herself as a Christian woman), however, she uses some form of non-Christian spirituality or magic as means to get revenge.

One of the most well-known völva in both Icelandic sagas and historical accounts is Gunnhildr, Queen of Norway and York, also known as "King-Mother" (Blain, 95). In *Njal's Saga*, Queen Gunnhildr, living in Norway at the time, meets the Icelandic traveler Hrut and takes him as her lover (Hreinsson, III:6). After weeks together, she learns that Hrut means to go back to Iceland to marry. Gunnhildr, upset at Hrut for leaving her, casts a spell on him and warns him: "you will not have any sexual pleasure with the woman you plan to marry in Iceland." (9). Later, Hrut's wife becomes deeply discontent with the marriage and separates from him, choosing to live with her father instead (11). Gunnhildr's hex clearly worked, much to the detriment of Hrut's family.

Anthropologist Jenny Blain describes Gunnhildr as "a woman who used her skills in politics or magic to further her own interests, sometimes cruelly" (97). In her book *Nine Worlds of Seid-Magic*, Blain analyzes other sagas and accounts involving Gunnhildr which build on her character as a powerful sorceress who did not always have pure intentions. Blain mentions the *Ágrip af Nóregskonungasögum,* or "The Summary of the Norwegian Kings' Saga," which blames Gunnhildr for the cruelty of her husband, Eirik Bloodaxe, and suggests Gunnhildr counselled him to be violent (96). Blain believes accounts like *Ágrip af Nóregskonungasögum* contain a certain amount of misogyny and feed into the "Witch Queen" stereotype, whereas older Norse narratives paint her with more nuance and humanity (97). Although Gunnhildr's reasoning behind using seiðr was harmful, her ability to practice seiðr undoubtedly gave her power in a world run by her male peers.

This is not to say women could never take on leadership roles, become warriors, or venture beyond the homestead. The Birka warrior woman of burial site Bj.581 demonstrates that people in the Viking Age may not have stuck to gender roles so rigidly, and that certain women at least had some opportunity to rise through warrior ranks (Price, 177). But these rejections of the gender norm were uncommon, and Viking Age society generally encouraged women to become wives and housekeepers. This is why seiðr was important as a woman's practice. It gave women the power to curse, take revenge, and protect loved ones without needing to pick up a sword. It also gave women the power to understand the thread running throughout Viking Age culture: fate.

It may be easier for readers to understand the previously discussed ways of using seiðr as they more closely resemble familiar Western fairytales that involve witches, spells, and curses. More foreign is the concept of using seiðr to understand the fate of mankind. The concept of fate runs deeply throughout pre-Christian Norse culture and religion. Fate goes beyond the concept of destiny—it is the pre-existing pattern that all beings weave. This makes the role of the völva that much more powerful, as she had the ability to learn fate's pattern and see into the future.

"Völuspá" from *The Poetic Edda*, also known as "The Seeress's Prophecy," is arguably the most well-known instance of a woman telling the future in Viking Age history and culture. The unnamed seeress prophesizes *Ragnarök*, the final battle of gods and giants, ending in the destruction of the known world and the birth of a new one (Larrington, 4-12). Even Óðinn, all-father of the gods, received his knowledge from a female seeress. Religion and mythology reflect the societies from which they originate, and it is clear from "Völuspá" that seeresses held immense power and were incredibly important to society. Seeresses, or völur, added to a culture's wealth of information, helping their community members weave the pattern of fate.

There are many instances of völur telling the future in the Icelandic Sagas, and their foresight and wisdom is usually honoured. After Thorbjörg from *The Saga of Eirik the Red* uses seiðr to learn the fate of Greenland, she then thanks the many women experienced in seiðr who helped her with the ritual. Thorbjörg foretells that one of the women who previously assisted her will have a long and honourable lineage (Hreinsson, 1:7). Thorbjörg's tale shows how seiðr allowed female practitioners to solidify connections and become leaders.

Though, future-telling was not always pleasant or community-centered. In *The Killer-Glum's Saga*, a seeress named Oddbjorg chooses to give either positive or negative readings depending on how well she feels she's been treated by her clients (Hreinsson, 2:285). After she is criticized for predicting potential conflict between friends, she explains "I won't visit your home any more, and you can take that as you like. . . . Things will get worse and worse in this district" (286). In *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*, an elderly woman named Thurid avenges her foster-son Thorbjörn by foretelling the death of his enemy, the titular Grettir, saying "I foresee that they [Grettir and his kinsmen] will take a turn for the worse" (Hreinsson, 2:170). Blain specifies "it is unclear whether [Thurid] has 'seen' his death or whether the words are themselves a spell that helps bring it about" (93). Whether or not her words hold magical power, Grettir still fears Thurid's foretelling, saying "No words have ever unsettled me more than those that she spoke" (Hreinsson, 2:169). *The Killer-Glum's Saga* and *The Saga of Grettir the Strong* show how women used seiðr to tell the future, and how the nature of the foretelling depended largely on the seeress's desired effect.

While archaeology can explain *who* practiced seiðr, the Icelandic sagas help explain *why* they practiced seiðr. The sagas were written after the end of the Viking Age and often through a Christian lens. However, they still offer detailed accounts of the practice which can help scholars fill gaps. The Icelandic sagas show readers that women practiced seiðr in many ways and for a variety of different reasons, often blurring the line between altruistic and selfish. Seiðr was neutral, a tool women used to get what they needed. And in a patriarchal society where women rarely had opportunities to show their strength, seiðr empowered them.

As Christianity made its way throughout Scandinavia, seiðr came to an end. The end was not sudden, nor was it definite (small groups of people in Scandinavia still practice seiðr today as a form of neo-paganism). After arriving in Scandinavia, Christians believed seiðr conflicted with their religious ideologies. They worked to systematically remove this aspect from Norse culture. Historian Jenny Jochens explains three ways Christian authorities put an end to seiðr while also implementing Christianity:

> . . . by increasing the number of men in what had been primarily a female profession during the pagan period, by demoting magic

> from its former position of high prestige, and by permitting Christian leaders both to perform and to benefit from magic while the new religion gained acceptance (308).

One can see how views of seiðr changed by looking at how it is portrayed in sagas written in the first half of the thirteenth century versus the second half. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir notes these changes in the article "Women's Weapons: A Re-Evaluation of Magic in the *Íslendingasögur*." Friðriksdóttir explains that in sagas from the first half of the thirteenth century, völur use seiðr to tell the future and bring information to others (423). This contrasts with the second half of the thirteenth century, where magic is more often the cause of misfortune and völur are blamed for disasters like avalanches and shipwrecks (424). These late thirteenth-century sagas also tend to go more in-depth regarding the connection between magic and women's social position, which may suggest Christians were aware of how seiðr benefitted women (424).

The negative shift in how Scandinavians viewed seiðr advanced alongside new Christian anti-witchcraft laws, and seiðr was soon illegal throughout Scandinavia. Some of the first laws against witchcraft in the North were created in Norway and Iceland during the thirteenth century—specifically prohibiting people from waking up trolls (Hagen, 1). These laws grew in number as the centuries went on, with each law becoming less and less tolerant of witchcraft and seiðr. Anti-witchcraft laws culminated in Scandinavian countries having their own witch trials, beginning in the 16th century, and reaching a peak during the early 17th century (Hagen, 2). They involved the persecution of hundreds of people throughout Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Iceland. Women almost always faced stricter penalties for practicing witchcraft and seiðr (Hagen, 2). An exception to this rule was in Iceland, where a staggering 92% of those killed in witch trials were men (Apps and Gow, 45). This was mostly likely because Icelandic men had a much higher literacy rate, using runes far more than women. Another theory comes from author Caroline Lea, who explains that Iceland had a strong sense of community as its living conditions were incredibly harsh. Lea believes that since communities were tighter knit, there were no old women living outside of town who fit the "witch" stereotype that officials could point accusatory fingers at. It is important to recognize Iceland as an outlier when discussing witch trials throughout Scandinavia. Though when discussing the broader area of Northern Europe, anti-sorcery laws still predominantly impacted women, and women's death toll far surpassed that of men's (Apps and Gow, 45). The rise of Christianity brought with it new forms of misogyny and new ways to take power from women, specifically through laws prohibiting seiðr.

Even before Christianity was introduced, Viking Age Scandinavia was a time of rigid gender roles—a time when men dominated the wider social world while women governed their respective homesteads. In this patriarchal society,

women found power and agency in the shamanistic practice of seiðr. Seiðr's origins in traditionally feminine textile crafts like spinning and weaving show how the practice has long belonged to women, and the connection between textile work and fate emphasize how important women were to Viking Age spirituality. With the help of archaeology and Icelandic sagas, scholars can better understand seiðr's purpose and what it looked like in practice. The rise of Christianity in the North saw the dissipation of seiðr through anti-seiðr laws and witch trials in 16th and 17th century Scandinavia. Scandinavians ultimately left seiðr behind and became predominantly Lutheran. However, some could argue that seiðr was never truly banished. Seiðr as a form of magic may have been transformed alongside Scandinavian spirituality, not eradicated and forgotten. It is possible that any time a group of women share information while they sew, spin, weave, or knit, they are carrying on the millennium-old legacy of seiðr.

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