

# Queer Vikings?

## Transgression of gender and same-sex encounters in the Late Iron Age and early medieval Scandinavia

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### Introduction

The Viking is the ultimate symbol of North European machismo. Since the 19th century, this pseudo-archaeological figure of an early medieval heroic barbarian has been used in innumerable political and cultural projects, often but not exclusively in ones associated with political conservatism or right-wing extremism. Despite all the national-romanticist trappings devoid of any authenticity, the Viking myth has some historical basis. After all, no one can deny the military successes, artistic achievements or wide-ranging discoveries of the people with Scandinavian cultural and linguistic origin during the 8th–11th centuries AD. However, the Viking world involved a diverse range of social and cultural positions, some of which do not fit very well in the reactionary and chauvinistic representations of the ancient “Heroic Age”

My intent is to give a brief presentation of the recent research regarding the role of gender-transgressing or gender-mixing practices, often of an openly sexual quality, in the Viking period Scandinavian society and religion. This presentation is not based on any first-hand research, and is intended essentially as an information piece. My

ambition is limited to presenting this interesting field of queer history for a new readership, and guiding the intrigued readers to the rich research literature of this topic.

### A world of honour

In an article like this, the first thing is to admit that we actually know much less about the queer sexuality in the Viking period that we would like to know. The most relevant group of sources are the famous Icelandic sagas, an extensive corpus of narrative texts written mostly during the 13th and 14th centuries, as well as some Scandinavian legal texts of the same age. It must be noted that these sources are considerably later than the proper Viking Age (dated roughly from AD 750/800 to 1050), and they are influenced by Christian models of thinking (the conversion of Scandinavia progressed rapidly after the 10th century). The sagas are literate works and they should be seen as intention-bearing discourses, rather than documentary reflections on the Icelandic society. Despite these source-critical complications, it is commonly accepted that much of the content of the sagas is ethnographically accurate, and the socio-cultural institutions described in them and

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in other Old Scandinavian texts sometimes have a pre-Christian, Viking Age origin.<sup>1</sup>

In Viking Age and medieval Iceland, and Scandinavian cultural sphere in general, the basic social unit was an agrarian household living usually under a male master. Different households formed networks or local communities on the basis of kinship, affinity, fictive kinship, neighbourhood, alliance, patronage, judicial allegiance, etc. (Miller 1990; Byock 2001). The public affairs were run by free males, although it seems that also females could sometimes wield considerable ritual, political and economical power and influence in the Scandinavian world. According to the normative texts, material culture, social space and behaviour models were strongly gendered – but there was also a degree of recognised ‘gender blurring’. Females could sometimes be allowed to assume male-gendered poses, artifacts and practices, and be appreciated because of that. Presumably this was most common in households lacking adult or capable males. Young, unmarried females could then adopt a role of a ‘surrogate son’, at least temporarily (Clover 1986). Also the widowed mistress of a farm could make decisions normally restricted for male householders. Boundary-crossing females were discussed in the myths and literature of the era (Jochens 1996; Ney 2004), and there are archaeological indications of such individuals also in real life – for example, the few cases of females buried with a weapon. On the other hand, it seems that

the males who adopted female gender attributes were objects of contempt in these patriarchal societies. But apparently there were specific social domains in which male persons often crossed the gender boundaries in culturally pre-scripted ways.

The historian Carol J. Clover (1993) has suggested that the Old Scandinavian gender system can actually be characterised as a *one gender model*. The only gender was the normative masculinity, which was constituted by the performances of an individual and could be lost very easily. There were two levels of gender continuity: the biological males and some females who fulfilled the vigorous demands of masculinity, at least temporarily, and the rest who did not: most females, children and the old, disabled, low-status or effeminate males. The archaeologist Ing-Marie Back Danielsson questions the whole concept of individual in the context of the Old Scandinavian culture. According to her, the Iron Age Scandinavians lacked a sense of coherent, constant and fixed self (Back Danielsson 2006: 226). Instead of a stable selfhood being contained inside of a separate body, the Scandinavian person was extended and dispersed onto his/her social relations and incorporated or possessed materialities, being in a constant state of flux. Such a ‘dividual’ mode of personhood (Fowler 2004) could incorporate both male and feminine attributes at the same time, even though I suggest that the preferable goal for many or most biological males was to be constituted according to the normative masculinity (Raninen 2007).

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<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, the dissertation of Bjørn Bandlien (*Man or Monster? Negotiations of Masculinity in Old Norse Society*. University of Oslo, 2005) was not available to me while writing this piece.

*Honour* was a dominant form of symbolic capital in the Old Scandinavian societies (Meulengracht Sørensen 1995). The male identity was defined and publicly controlled according to an aggressive, martial value system. Signs and allegations of physical cowardice, weakness or lack of self-control could have extremely negative effects – not just for the individual in question, but also for his household and relatives. The loss of honour would lead to social marginalisation and insecurity. Thus the challenges of honour were often met with highly violent responses, resulting in homicides. Vengeance homicides were easily escalated into blood-feuds between kin groups. Although excessive blood-thirst was not generally appreciated, there was an unyielding ethical and political necessity to be able to retaliate with a limited, “moderate” number of killings, or at least threaten with violence and persuade the opposing group to deliver acceptable material compensation (Byock 2001).

Historians and philologists with psychoanalytic orientation may find a hidden presence of “homoerotic libido” in the poetic celebrations of the early medieval males and their closely bonded comradeships (Hill 2000), but it was never explicitly discussed in the texts. According to the Icelandic texts, sexual encounters between males received their publicly addressed meaning from an elaborate discourse of honour, manly virtue, shame and humiliation. The key concept was *ergi*, a noun referring to shameful behaviour with sexual connotations. My presentation of this concept follows closely the extensive discussion by Preben Meulengracht Sørensen (1983). Meulengracht Sø-

rensen stresses that his study, based on the Old Icelandic narratives, is above all a study of Iceland during the 13th and 14th centuries. However, he finds it very probable that the *ergi* conceptions described in the medieval texts derive from the ancient, pre-Christian past (1983, 11–12, 85–86).

### Sexual defamation

Among the Icelandic females, promiscuous or incestuous heterosexual behaviour was sometimes called *ergi*. The sagas never discuss lesbian relationships. However, an Icelandic religious code (*Icelandic Homily Book*) dated to the late 12th century mentions and forbids such activities under a threat of severe penitence, comparing them with male homosexuality and sodomy with animals (Meulengracht Sørensen 1983, 26). The possibility of females having sexual affairs between each other was not a part of the narrative world of the saga authors, but the threat of such a sin happening in real life obviously penetrated the awareness of medieval Icelandic clerics. In any case, the noun *ergi* or its adjectives were only rarely used to describe females, and this usage of the word may have been a secondary formation (Clover 1993, note 38).

Among the males, the noun *ergi*, the adjective *argr* and its commonly used metathesis *ragr* signified general “unmanliness”, a state of deep immorality and disintegrity, implying weakness and cowardice. It involved – but was not restricted to – a notion of passive homosexuality, i.e. adoption of the “female” sexual role by allowing himself

to be penetrated in anal intercourse. The male rear was a physical focus of *ergi* symbolism. This was expressed in a graphic and grotesque way by a certain poetic verse attributed to the 11th century warrior-poet Þórmóðr Bersason Kolbrúnarskald and preserved in later manuscripts. The verse describes a drowning enemy, Falgeir from Greenland, whose legs are immobilised because his belt has been ripped and his trousers slipped down after a combat in open water. The uncovered rear of the man breaks the surface of water while he struggles to swim. The poet equals the writhing of his dying foe with the position of a man offering himself to be anally penetrated, commenting his “gaping arse” in malicious glee (Meulengracht Sørensen 1983, 71–73; Price 2002, 212–213).

Importantly, it seems that no hint of unmanliness (in the pre-Christian culture, no shame in principle) was associated with a male who penetrated another male. This was, however, seen as an aggressive act, as it implied serious loss of honour on the passive part of the intercourse. It was presumably always a shameful deed to violate a friend in such a way - but the act of “phallic aggression” against a male foe may have been a proper, even praiseworthy expression of masculine strength. In a later phase, around the year 1300, the clerical perception of homosexuality had influenced the also the secular Icelanders. The penetrator could be now be perceived as lewd or perverted - but he did not carry the taint of effeminacy, and was subjected to lesser shame than the penetrated one (Meulengracht Sørensen 1983, 27–28, 51–57).

There is no conclusive evidence that there really was a custom of raping defeated enemy men during the Viking Age or later, but some possible references to such a practice have survived in the source texts, for example in the epic poetry. A famous example of this is the epic poem *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*. The legendary hero Sinfjotli insults his opponent Gudmundr by suggesting that he has given birth to seven wolves, fathered by Sinfjotli himself. This accusation blends the notions of male pregnancy, anal penetration and amorality of the non-human world (Meulengracht Sørensen 1983, 53). There were also other, recognised ways of sexual humiliation, such as the concept of *klámhogg*, a “shameful stroke” inflicted on the buttocks of a male (Meulengracht Sørensen 1983, 68).

The phallic connotations of masculinity were also underlined by the fact that the loss of male potency was a sign of *ergi*. Ultimately, the old age could be seen to make any male *ragr*. There is a masterful Old Icelandic lamentation poem called *Sonatorrek*, attributed to the adventuresome 10th century poet cum homicidal maniac Egill Skallagrímsson, who is believed to have composed it at the end of his long life (Meulengracht Sørensen 1983, 86). According to Clover, poetic laments were a feminine genre of oral literature. Presumably Egill could compose such a poem only because his advanced years had de-constituted his maleness, depriving him of his erection – as he mournfully admits in his stanzas (Clover 1993, 382–384).

Publicly made accusations (*níð*) of a man being *ragr* were often expressed with sexual or gender symbolism, suggest-

ing that a man had adopted a feminine role in a way or another. A *níð* insult could be presented by several ways. Stereotypical *níð*-formulas existed, but there was also a genre of elaborated *níð* poems. Insulting “gifts”, such as pieces of female clothing, could be given. There are also descriptions of “wooden *níð*” and “*níð*-poles”, apparently effigies or wooden poles representing males in *ragr* acts. One of the best-known sagas dealing with these topics is *Gísla saga Súrssonar* (available as translations in various languages, including Finnish).

Allegations of shameful sexual acts, impotence or transvestism were not necessarily intended to be taken literally. Instead they were symbols of a more wide-scale moral accusation, allegation of serious deficiency of personality or behaviour. *Níð* was a denial of a persons’ ability or intention to be a dignified, honourable male - and it could bring forth a savage retaliation in a society where the man’s honour was paramount. Considering the destructive consequences of the *níð* insults, it is hardly a wonder that the 13th century law-code of Iceland, *Grágás*, sanctioned them with the penalty of temporary outlawry. *Grágás* also explicitly granted the right of vengeance killing for those who were insulted with accusations of being *ragr*. Otherwise, this right belonged only to the relatives of a victim of homicide, rape or adultery.

That these were not exclusively Icelandic worries is proven by the Norwegian *Law of Gulathing* from the late 13th century. This law threatened with outlawry everyone who makes an “exaggeration” of another man by declar-

ing that “he is a woman every ninth night” or has born a child. Presumably these expressions were among the most common *níð*-formulas. It was also forbidden to call a man *sannsorðinn* (“demonstrably fucked”), a mare, a bitch or any kind of a female animal. The later type of insults combined the accusation of gender-transgression with a breach of the boundary between human and animal. The Swedish *Hednalag* from the 13<sup>th</sup> century is not so sexually explicit, but it still does reflect an aggressive code of manly honour (Nøttveit 2006, 146).

Also allegations of sexual breaches of status separations (between free individuals and slaves) and even separations between humans and trolls could be presented as insults. Despite the legal sanctions, there is evidence that *níð* insults were commonly presented even in conflicts between the members of the most sophisticated elite of Iceland and Norway. Even the members of the royalty were not safe from the *níð* poems.

Interestingly, the same-sex *ergi* acts themselves were not penalized or even mentioned in *Grágás*. Apparently it was not in the interests of a secular law-maker to control and condemn this kind of behaviour, however shameful it may have been. *The Law of Gulathing* includes a prohibition of sexual acts between males, supposedly originating from King Magnus Erlíngsson in 1164. However, it seems that this clause was rarely enforced, and it disappeared from later laws (Gade 1986).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See Nøttveit 2006 for an interpretation concerning survival of *nix* concept and related material symbolism in late medieval Scandinavia.

How far into the past can the *ergi* concept [can] be projected? In this respect, only speculations can be offered. As we have seen, the anal defamation is described in a poem traditionally dated to the 11th century, and a lament of lost masculinity is attributed to a semi-legendary 10th century figure. The word *ergi* is probably mentioned already in some 7th or 8th century runic inscriptions found in Blekinge, South Sweden, predating the Viking Age. Perhaps the ideas related to *ergi* have a truly ancient history: The Roman historian Tacitus reported already during the 1st century AD that the *Germani* penalized cowardly males who had “defamed their bodies” by drowning them in bogs. This defamation of the body has often been interpreted as transgression of sexual norms, perhaps covering the same semantic field as *ergi* (Meulengracht Sørensen 1983, 85). However, this is not certain. According to the Finnish Latinist Tuomo Pekkanen (1976, 90), it rather refers to self-mutilation done in avoidance of military service.

A later, very interesting but rather obscure piece of information is provided by the 4th century Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus. He tells that a “debased” Central European tribe, the Taifali, had a shameful custom of making boys to sleep with adult men, a defiling condition that lasted until the boy had killed a wild boar or a bear. It is hard to avoid the impression that we have here a blurred description of an age-based liminal phase, during which a young member of a Germanic warrior tribe lived in a sexual union with an older male guiding and teaching him. After an initiatory hunt, the youngster was passed into adult status and the sexual relationship marking the

pre-adult phase was terminated (Kershaw 2000; Barbero 2008, 78). It remains unknown whether this included a notion of young, un-initiated males as feminine beings subjugated under the phallic aggression, or whether the temporary same-sex union was considered to be constitutive of developing masculinity.

Finally, it should be mentioned that the archaeological material of pre-Christian Scandinavia includes at least two pictorial representations of some sort of physical closeness or intimacy between people of same gender. The so-called gold foil figurines (Sw. *guldgubbar*) were small golden items which were ritually deposited into the ground in aristocratic settings during the years 600–900. A well-known group of gold-foil figurines are the ones depicting what is stereotypically interpreted as a ‘loving couple’, a male and a female figure embracing and kissing each other. This has been seen as a dynastic or a mythological wedding scene. However, Ing-Marie Back Danielsson reports of two cases in which both of the couple could be interpreted of being same sex (2006, 70–74). One of them includes two figures with obviously female shape and dress embracing each other. The another one depicts a presumably male figure in a close face-to-face embrace (kiss?) with a figure having both a full beard and long hair reaching down to his waist. Such hair is usually an attribute of the figures interpreted as females, so the bearded one would seem to be a representation of ‘gender-mixing’. It is difficult to give an interpretation for these figurines. According to Back Danielsson, they are related to ritualised transitions and transformations of bodies and personhoods.

## The religious role of gender-mixing

Some Icelandic texts describe a ritual complex called *seiðr*. Especially since the seminal work by the philologist Dag Strömbäck (1935), many – although not all – researchers of the pre-Christian religion of Scandinavia have accepted that *seiðr* was essentially a shamanic practice, a way to negotiate with the spirit world with ecstasy techniques and incantations. My discussion of this topic follows the monograph by Neil S. Price (2002), an extensive study of various aspects of *seiðr* (see also DuBois 1999; Raudvere 2003). *Seiðr* was often practised by female ritual specialists. For our purposes the real interest of the *seiðr* lies in the fact that it had male practitioners too – but some texts suggest that these were considered *ragr*. An early 13th century narrative called *Ynglinga saga*, written by famous Snorri Sturluson, makes it quite clear that the practice of *seiðr* brought an immense dose of *ergi* on males.

Rather paradoxically, the war-god Oðinn was also a master of *seiðr*. In the epic poem *Lokasenna*, the god is actually insulted of being *ragr* because of this. The cult of Oðinn was practised by the members of aristocracy and martial sodalities (Nordberg 2003), so it remarkable that this divinity was associated with a practice that would make human warriors cowardly and effeminate. On the other hand, Oðinn was associated with transgression and subversion of almost all possible ethic norms. He was a kind of a Trickster figure, a god to be worshipped but not to be trusted - and in this respect, he certainly was a realistic personification of the fickle fortune of war. The close con-

nection between the *seiðr* complex and war has parallels in the aggressive shamanic practices known in Eurasian and North American native religions (Price 2002). The female *seiðr* specialists, with an ability to weave and chant destructive magic spells, may have had an essential part to play in pre-Christian warfare (Price 2002). But what can be said about the male *seiðr*-practitioners and their socio-cultural roles, which were characterised by *ergi*?

For a long time, researchers have associated this aspect of *seiðr* with transvestism, homosexual practices and the concept of a “third gender” known to have existed among the shamanic cultures of Eurasia, North America and the Arctic (e.g. Strömbäck 1935; Price 2002, 301–303). One relatively well-known example are the Chuckhi, an indigenous people in north-eastern Siberia. Among the 19th century Chuckhi, the “soft men” (*yirka-lául*) were a category of biologically male shamans who adopted first female hairstyle, then female dress, and finally married males. They were hated and scorned but also feared by the rest of the Chuckhi, as they were considered to be much more powerful than other shamans (Price 2002, 302). Ethnographical parallels support the idea that the *ergi* aspect of *seiðr* has a real prehistoric background, and it is not just a medieval literary construct, as might be supposed otherwise.

Brit Solli (1998) has noted that one of the Old Icelandic terms referring to a male practitioner of *seiðr* was *seidberendr*. “Berendr” seems to be a word referring to female genitalia. Solli ventures to suggest that *seidberendr* was

the name of the third gender, biologically male transgressors of gender boundaries working in shamanic contexts. However, Price (2002, 216) notes that the Icelandic sources do not contain any conclusive evidence of a well-developed concept of third gender, comparable to the Chuckchi “soft men”. On the other hand, in the light of the numerous ethnographical parallels it seems a realistic possibility that some gender-transgression or gender-mixing practices were included in the *seiðr* complex. There are also intriguing pieces of archaeological evidence pointing to the same direction. Price (2002, 271–272) refers especially to a well-known 12th century burial excavated already 1913 in Vivallen, Jämtland (Sweden). The dead individual, determined biologically as a well-built middle-aged male, was probably buried in a female dress, augmented with some dress-items generally attributed to males. The location and several details of the burial suggest that the male was of Sámi ethno-cultural background. The Sámi shamanism was well-known to the Scandinavians, and it shared many similarities with *seiðr*. According to a rather convincing interpretation, the man from Vivallen was a gender-mixing shaman (Zachrisson 1997, 148–149).

Rather interesting observations are also supplied by the archaeologist Deborah J. Shepherd regarding the pre-Christian Anglo-Saxons, a culture more or less related to the Viking Age Scandinavians (1999). Shepherd notes that in Anglo-Saxon cemeteries, burials of biological males with artefacts signifying femininity seem to be much more common than burials of females including male-gendered goods. It must be recognised, as Shepherd does, that the

determination of the biological sex from skeletal remains is not a simple issue. Despite of this source-critical reservation, intriguing hypotheses can be presented. Shepherd suggests that these “feminized males” were related to a shamanic complex similar to *seiðr*.

Why *seiðr* and many other shamanic traditions had so strong association with ‘gender-blurring’? Various explanations are available. For example, it has been suggested that the entering of spirits into a human body could have been equalised with a sexual penetration. This would make *seiðr* a feminine practice, one that makes men *ragr* (e.g. Shepherd 1999: 226, referring to Clunies Ross 1994). The weakness of this explanation is the fact that there is no positive evidence of a ‘possession trance’ being included in *seiðr* rituals (Price 2002, 220). On the other hand, the absence of evidence might not constitute evidence of absence in this case, as only one detailed description of a *seiðr* ritual survives. In any case, as Price shows himself (2002, 304–306), sexual and phallic gestures and symbolism are common in shamanic traditions, presumably also in *seiðr*. Perhaps this symbolism was somehow conceived as defaming to a male, instead as a manifestation of the aggressive, phallic masculinity. Eldar Heide (2006) notes that a type of iron staves from the Viking Age, convincingly interpreted as ritual *seiðr* items by Price (2002, 181–200), are closely reminiscent of traditional wooden distaffs used in spinning of wool. The Old Scandinavian sources suggest that there was a cognitive association between *seiðr* and textile work. Textile work was characteristic of women, so it would have made a male effeminate. On the other hand,



Heide also stresses the phallic symbolism of the staff. Perhaps the social marginality and manipulation of gender norms also had something to do with the shaman's role as a transgressor of otherworldly boundaries. However, it goes beyond the present author's expertise to address these questions in more detail.

It seems safe to conclude that the gender system(s) in Old Scandinavia were rather dissimilar to the modernist perceptions of selfhood, sex and gender. The normative discourse present in the written sources, associating the sexual encounters between males with violence, subjugation and shame, might not look very endearing to the present-day readers. It is hard to believe that this would have covered the whole emotional and motivational range involved in such encounters - but in this respect, the "queer" or "gay" Vikings stay in shadows.

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