Old Norse women, feminism, and textiles: the post-medieval representation of traditional femininity.

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Valkyrie: Dominant Image of Old Norse Women
Darraðarljóð, *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 157

“He went up to the room and looked in through a window that was there and saw that there were women inside and that they had set up a loom. Men’s heads were used for weights, men’s intestines for the weft and warp, a sword for the sword beater, and an arrow for the pin beater. The women spoke these verses …

The warp is woven with warriors’ guts, and heavily weighted with the heads of men. Spears served as heddle rods, spattered with blood; iron-bound is the shed rod, and arrows are the pin beaters; we will beat with swords our battle web.”
Popular Culture: comics, video games, TV, movies
“A woman can do whatever a man can do, but sexier!”
Vikings
Norsemen
Game of Thrones: Arya vs Sansa

Rebelling against traditional roles
Archaeological Evidence for Female Warriors, or mythological artifacts?
Old Norse Literature: Women in male sphere, but limits and rules

Valkyries, shield-maidens, & maiden kings

Brynhildur: “Sigurd went inside the fort and saw a man there, asleep and lying fully armoured. First he removed the helmet from his head and saw that it was a woman. She had on a hauberk and it was as tight as if grown into the flesh. Then he sheared right down from the neck, then right along both sleeves, and the blade bit in as if cutting cloth.”

“At that time Brynhild, Heimir's foster-daughter, was back with him. She lived in her own quarters with her maidens. She was more skilled in the domestic arts than other women. She was working her tapestry with gold thread and embroidering on it the deeds performed by Sigurd, the slaying of the dragon, the seizure of the treasure and the death of Regin.”

Volsunga saga, ch. 21, 25.
Old Norse Literature: Women in male sphere, but limits and rules

Valkyries, shield-maidens, & maiden warriors

• Hervǫr / Hervard: “She was brought up in the house of the jarl, and she was as strong as a man; as soon as she could do anything for herself she trained herself more with bow and shield and sword than with needlework and embroidery... taking up the gear and weapons of a man she made her way to a place where there were some Vikings, and for a time she went roving with them and called herself Hervard... became captain of the band... Hervǫr went off to join Vikings, and was out raiding for a time; and when she grew weary of that she went to Bjarmar the jarl, and settled down to fine work with her hands.”

*The Saga of King Heiðrek the Wise*, p.10,12,20

“Hervor’s Death,” Peter Nicolai Arbo, c. 1892
Birka chamber grave, Bj. 581
Female military commander?

Women’s Work: Weaving Wealth


In: National Museum of Iceland
Oseberg Tapestry
Medieval altar frontals: visualizing religious tradition through embroidery

https://www.sarpur.is/
Medieval and beyond: Motifs and patterns of lived environment

https://www.sarpur.is/
Sartorial Messages

- Michelle Carragher, costume designer: Embroidery signals identity and alliances (personal, family, geography)
  - Dragon skin
  - Lions
  - Flowers
  - Fish

Refilsaumur: Laid and couched stitch in Bayeux Tapestry, Njálurefill, and Game of Thrones
Taking back traditional women’s activities
For more information:

- Njáls saga tapestry: [https://www.facebook.com/Njalurefill/?ref=page_internal](https://www.facebook.com/Njalurefill/?ref=page_internal)
- Icelandic Textiles: [https://www.sarpur.is/](https://www.sarpur.is/)
- Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Valkyrie*, [https://www.amazon.com/Valkyrie-Viking-J%C3%B3hanna-Katr%C3%ADn-Fri%C3%B0riksd%C3%B3ttir/dp/1788314778](https://www.amazon.com/Valkyrie-Viking-J%C3%B3hanna-Katr%C3%ADn-Fri%C3%B0riksd%C3%B3ttir/dp/1788314778)
Appendix: Darrarljod (Song of Dorrud) from *Njal’s Saga*

Earl Sigurd asked Thorstein Hallson to hold the banner. Thorstein was ready to do so.

Then Anmund the White said, "Don't take the banner, everybody who does gets killed."

"Hrann the Red," said the earl, "you carry the banner."

"Carry that devilish thing yourself," answered Hrann.

The earl said, "Then it's best that the beggar and his bag go together," and he took the banner off the pole and tied it between his clothes. A little later, Anmund the White was killed. Then the earl was pierced through by a spear.

Ospak had fought his way through the whole flank of the army. He was badly wounded and both of Brian’s sons were dead. King Sigtrygg fled before him, and then Sigtrygg’s whole force broke into flight. Thorstein Hallsson stopped to tie his shoe-string while the others were fleeing. Kerthialfand asked him why he wasn’t running away.

"Because I can’t reach home tonight," said Thorstein — "my home’s out in Iceland."

Kerthialfand spared him.

Hrann the Red was chased out into a river and there he thought he saw Hel down below and devils trying to drag him down to them.

He spoke, "This dog of yours has run twice to Rome, Apostle Peter, and would run there a third time if you let him."

Then the devils turned him loose, and he got across the river.

Brodriki saw that King Brian’s forces were chasing the fugitives and that there were only a few men at the shield wall. He ran out of the woods and cut his way through the shield wall and hacked at the king. The boy Tadik shot up his arm, but the stroke cut it off and the king’s head too, and the king’s blood fell on the stump of the boy’s arm, and the stump bled at once.

Then Brodriki called loudly. "Let it pass from man to man that Brodriki killed Brian."

They ran after those who were chasing the fugitives and told them of the fall of King Brian. Ulf, Hraeda and Kerthialfand turned back at once and formed a circle around Brodriki and his men and hemmed them in with branches. Brodriki was then taken prisoner. Ulf Hraeda cut open his belly and led him around an oak tree and in this way pulled out his intestines. Brodriki did not die until they were all pulled out of him. All of Brodriki’s men were killed too.

Then they took King Brian’s body and had it out the king’s head had grown fast to the trunk.

Fifteen of the banner fell at Brian’s Battle (the Battle of Clontarf). Hallodd Godmundarson and Erling of Storma also fell there.

On the morning of Good Friday, in Calvary, this happened: a man named Dorrud walked outside and saw twelve people riding together to a woman’s workroom. He went up to the room and looked in through a window that was there and saw that there were women inside and that they had set up a loom. Men’s heads were used for weights, men’s intestines for the weft and warp, a sword for the sword beater, and an arrow for the pin beater. The women spoke these verses:

1. A wide warp
   warm of slaughter;
   blood rains
   from the beam’s cloud;
   a spear-grey fabric
   is being spun,
   which the friends
   of Rundreki’s slayer
   will fill out
   with a red weft.

2. The warp is woven
   with warriors’ gists,
   and heavily weighted
   with the heads of men.
   Spears serve as heddle rods,
   haired with blood,
   iron-bound is the shed rod,
   and arrows are the pin beaters;
   we will beat with swords
   our battle web.

3. [The names are of valkyries]
   dog of helmn’s sword
   [image refers to winding up the woven fabric on the loom’s beam; web of spear battle]

4. We wind and wind
   on the web of spears.

This poem usually goes by the name "Darrarljod" (Song of Dorrud). Thomas Gray (1716–1771) translated it as "The Fatal Sisters," referring to the valkyries who sing the song and weave the fabric which corresponds to the Battle of Clontarf (called "Brian’s Battle" here). The poem is based on the similarities between weaving on a loom and fighting on a battle-field, and even the terminology is similar: the word "shaft" in stanza 3, for example, suggests both the heddle rod on a loom and a spear shaft. The valkyries are engaged in two activities simultaneously: weaving a fabric made of men’s intestines and describing (even directing) the battle.
which the young king
has carried on before,
let us go forth
amongst the fighters
when our dear ones
deal out blows.

5. We wind and wind
the web of spears,
and then stand by
our stoutest king.
Guðni and Gudal
who guarded the king,
saw the bloody shields
of the brave men.

6. We wind and wind
the web of spears,
there where the brawny
of bold men go forth;
we must not let
his foe be last —
valkyries decide
who dies or lives.

7. The men who inhabited
the outer headlands
will now be leaders
in the lands.
I declare the mighty king
decreed to death.
The earl has fallen
in the face of the spear.

8. And the Irish will
endure an evil time
which will never lessen
as long as men live.
Now the web is woven
and the war-place reddened;
The lands will learn
of the loss of men.

9. Now it is good
to gaze around.

SNAUS SAGA

as blood-red clouds
cover the sky;
the heavens will be parished
with the gore of men
while the slaughter-wardens
sing their song.

10. Our pronouncement was good
for the young prince:
May he be wise
he who listens
learn from this
the tones of spear-women
and tell them to men.

11. Let us ride swiftly
on our saddle-less horses
hence from here,
with swords in hand.

The women then pulled down the cloth and tore it to pieces, and each of them kept the piece she was holding in her hand.

Dórrнул then went away from the window and back home, and the women climbed on their horses and rode away, six to the south and six to the north.

A similar thing happened to Brand Gneistason in the Faroe Islands.

At Svinafell in Iceland blood appeared on the priest’s cope on Good Friday, and he had to take it off.

At Thóratta river on Good Friday a priest thought he saw a deep sea next to the altar, and he saw many terrifying sights in it, and it was a long time before he was able to sing mass again.

In Orkney this happened: Harek thought he saw Earl Sigurd together with some other men. Harek took his horse and rode to meet the earl, and people saw them come together and ride behind a hill. They were never seen again, and no trace of Harek was ever found.

Earl Gill in the Hebrides dreamed that a man came to him and gave his name as Herfinn, and said he had come from Ireland. The earl asked him for news, and Herfinn spoke this.

23. When swords screamed in Ireland
and men struggled, it was those
many a weapon were shattered
when shields met in battle.