



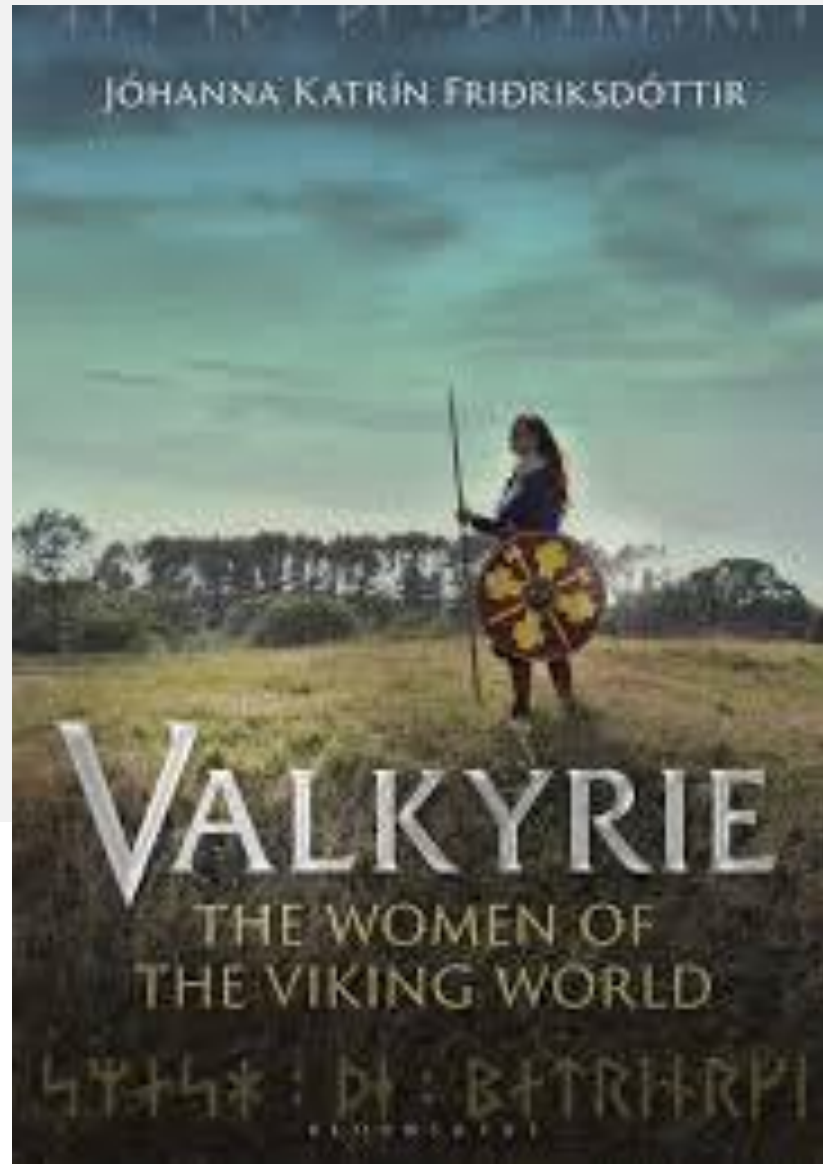
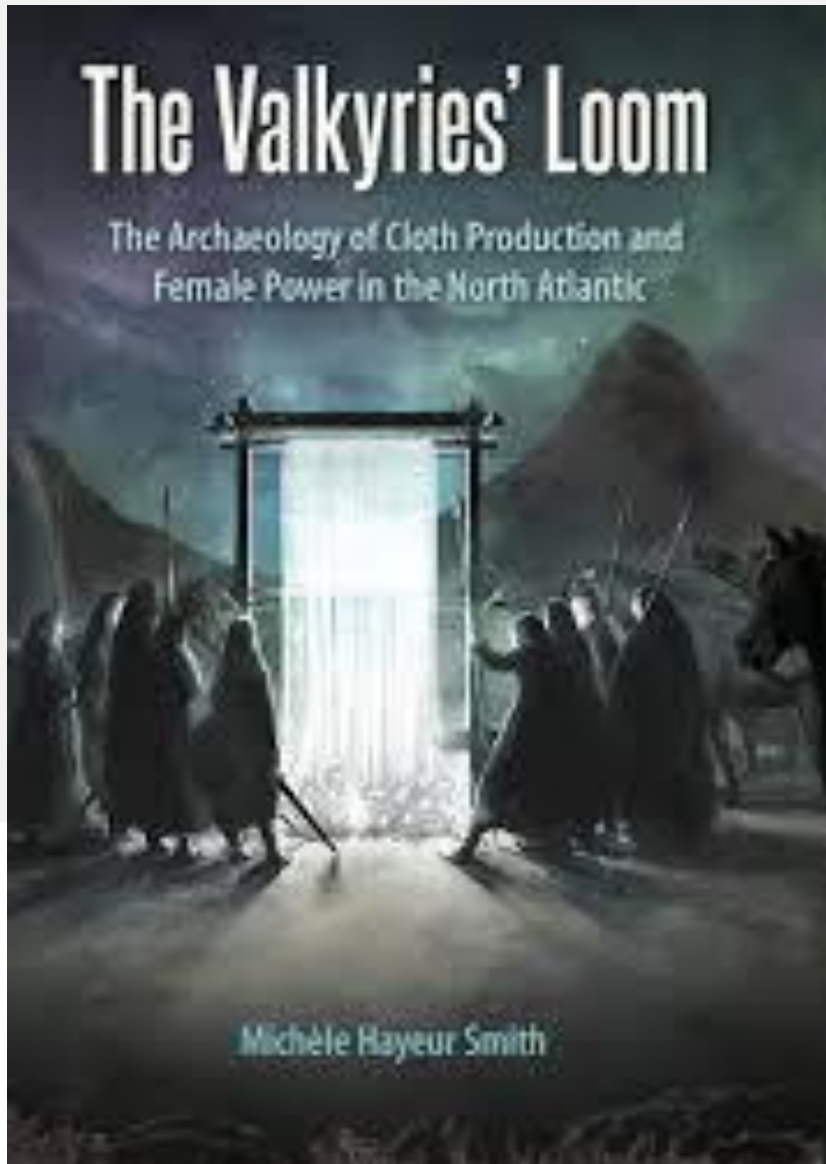
Old Norse women, feminism, and  
textiles: the post-medieval  
representation of traditional  
femininity.

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Valkyrie:  
Dominant  
Image of Old  
Norse  
Women

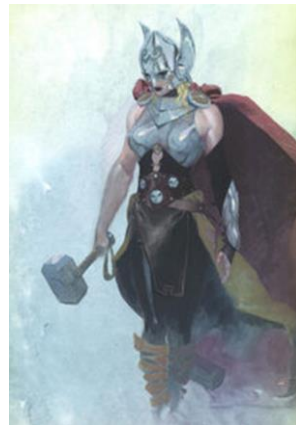
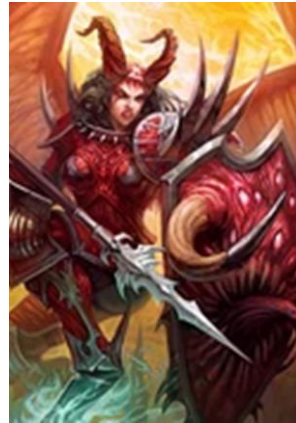
## Darraðarljóð, *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 157

“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.”



Uotnerne.



Popular Culture:  
comics, video  
games, TV,  
movies  
“A woman can  
do whatever a  
man can do, but  
sexier!”



# Vikings

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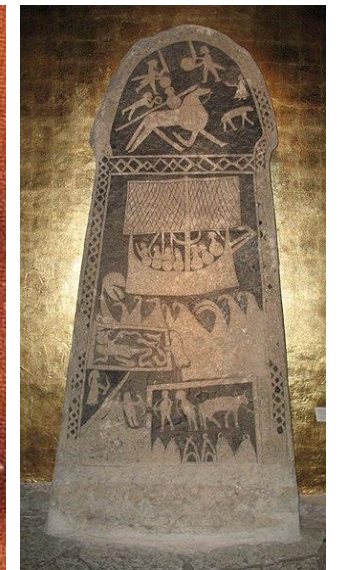
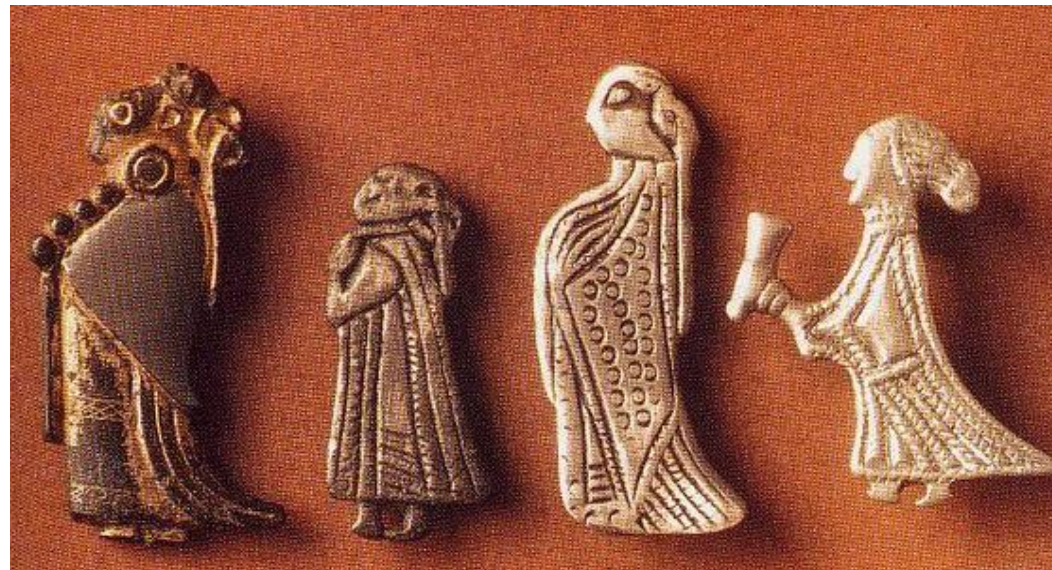
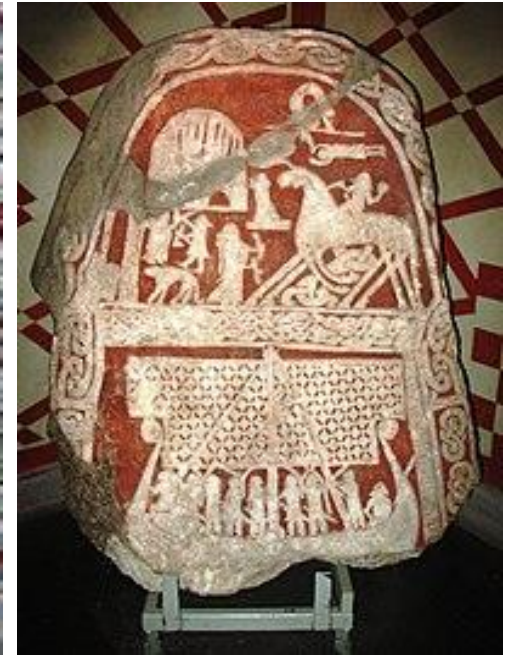
Norsemen

*Game of Thrones:*  
Arya vs Sansa

Rebelling against  
traditional roles



Archaeological  
Evidence for  
Female  
Warriors, or  
mythological  
artifacts?







“Brunnhild,” Gaston Bussière 1897

# 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.



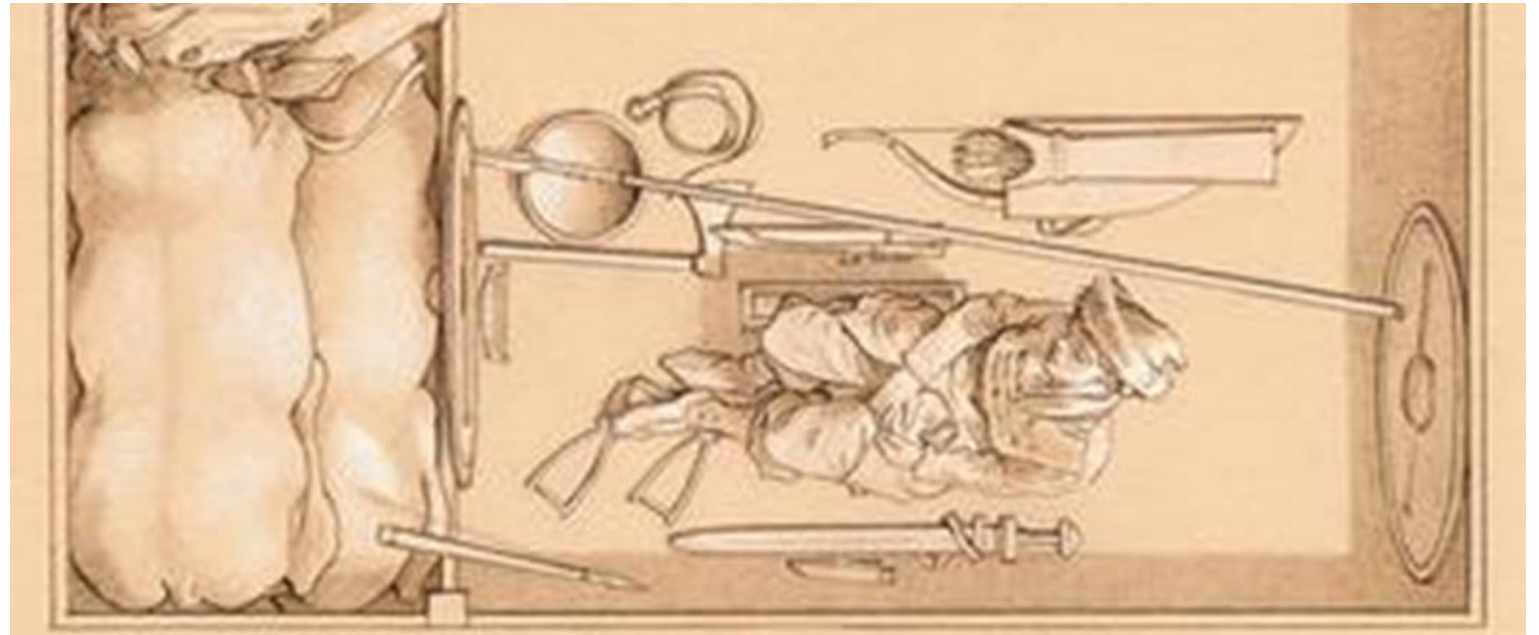
“Hervor’s Death,” Peter Nicolai Arbo, c. 1892

# Old Norse Literature: Women in male sphere, but limits and rules

## Valkyries, shield-maidens, & maiden warriors

- Hervor / 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... Hervor 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



# Birka chamber grave, Bj. 581 Female military commander?

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Images: Tancredi Valeri, Þórhallur Þráinsson, from Price, et al "Viking warrior women?  
Reassessing Birka chamber grave Bj.581" 2019



From: von Holstein, et al, "Provenancing Archaeological Wool Textiles from Medieval Northern Europe by Light Stable Isotope Analysis,"

# Women's Work: Weaving Wealth



In: National Museum of Iceland



Oseberg Tapestry





Medieval altar frontals:  
visualizing religious tradition  
through embroidery



Medieval and beyond: Motifs and patterns of lived environment

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# Sartorial Messages

• Michelle Carragher, costume designer:  
Embroidery signals identity and alliances (personal, family, geography)

- Dragon skin
- Lions
- Flowers
- Fish

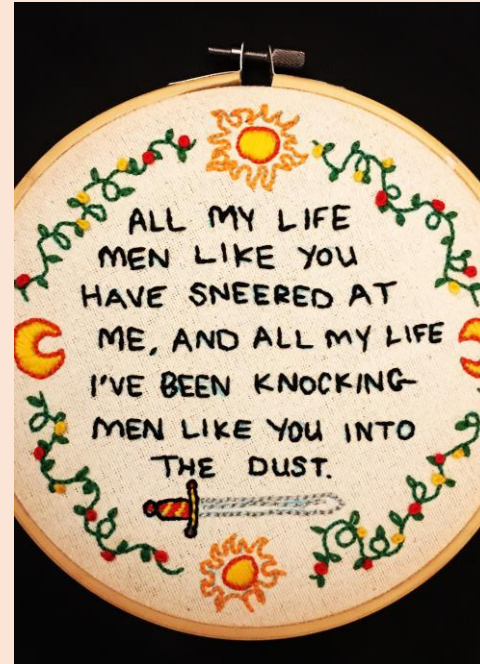
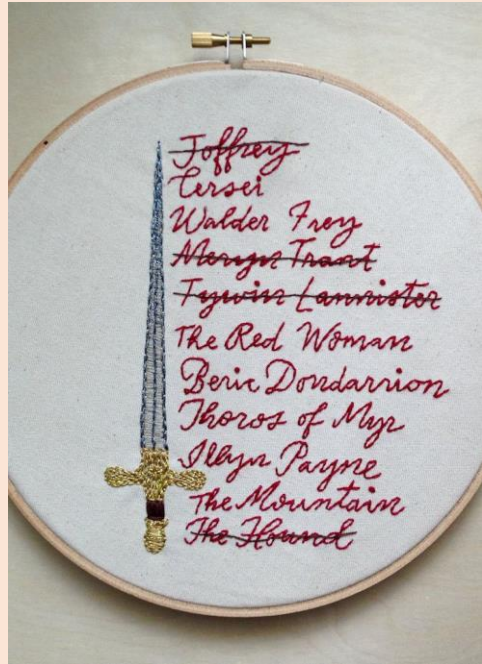






Refilsaumur: Laid and couched stitch in Bayeux Tapestry, Njálurefill, and Game of Thrones

# 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)
- Bayeux Tapestry (Full view available on website): <https://www.bayeuxmuseum.com/en/the-bayeux-tapestry/discover-the-bayeux-tapestry/explore-online/>
- Game of Thrones Tapestry: <https://www.nmni.com/whats-on/game-of-thrones-tapestry-exhibition>
- Price, N., Hedenstierna-Jonson, C., Zachrisson, T., Kjellström, A., Storå, J., Krzewińska, M., . . . Götherström, A. (2019). Viking warrior women? Reassessing Birka chamber grave Bj.581. *Antiquity*, 93(367), 181-198. doi:10.15184/aqy.2018.258
- Osberg textiles: <https://www.khm.uio.no/english/visit-us/viking-ship-museum/exhibitions/oseberg/the-textiles-among-the-oseberg-finds/>
- Icelandic Textiles: <https://www.sarpur.is/>
- Michèle Hayeur Smith, *Valkyrie's Loom*, <https://www.amazon.com/Valkyries-Loom-Archaeology-Production-Atlantic/dp/081306662X>
- Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Valkyrie*, <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 Hallsson to hold the banner. Thorstein was ready to do so.

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

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

"Carry that devilish thing yourself," answered Hrafn.

The earl said, "Then it's best that the beggar and his bag go together," and he took the banner off the pole and stuck it between his clothes. A little later, Amundi 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. Kerthjalfad asked him why he wasn't running away.

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

Kerthjalfad spared him.

Hrafn the Red was chased out into a river and there he thought he saw Hell 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.

Brodur 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 Tadk 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 healed at once.

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

They ran after those who were chasing the fugitives and told them of the fall of King Brian. Ulf Hraeda and Kerthjalfad turned back at once and formed a circle around Brodir and his men and hemmed them in with branches; Brodir 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. Brodir did not die until they were all pulled out of him. All of Brodir's men were killed too.

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

Fifteen of the burners fell at Brian's Battle (the Battle of Clontarf). Halldor Gudmundarson and Erling of Stroma also fell there.

On the morning of Good Friday, in Caithness, this happened: a man named Dorrud walked outside and saw twelve people riding together to a women's workroom, and then they all went into it. 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<sup>1</sup>:

1.

A wide warp  
warns of slaughter;  
blood rains  
from the beam's cloud.

A spear-grey fabric  
is being spun,  
which the friends  
of Randver's slayer  
will fill out  
with a red weft.

*beam's cloud*: the threads hanging from the cross-beam on a loom  
*spear-grey fabric*: battle ranks

*Randver*: son of Ermanric (4th century), hanged or killed by Odin himself; *friends of his slayer*: valkyries

2.

The warp is woven  
with warriors' guts,  
and heavily weighted  
with the heads of men.  
Spears serve 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.

3.

Hild sets to weaving,  
and Hjorthrimul  
and Sanngrip and Svipul,  
with swords drawn.  
Shafts will splinter,  
shields shatter;  
the dog of helmets  
devours shields.

[the names are of valkyries]

*dog of helmets*: sword

4.

We wind and wind  
the web of spears,

[image refers to winding up the woven fabric on the loom beam]; *web of spears*: battle

<sup>1</sup> This poem usually goes by the name "Darradarljod" (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 stalwart king,  
Gunn and Gondul,  
who guarded the king,  
saw the bloody shields  
of the brave men.

6.

We wind and wind  
the web of spears,  
there where the banners  
of bold men go forth;  
we must not let  
his life be lost –  
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  
doomed to death.  
The earl has fallen  
in the face of the spears.

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 gruesome  
to gaze around,

*young king:* Sigtrygg

*men:* the vikings, under Sigtrygg

*mighty king:* Brian

*earl:* perhaps Sigurd Hlodvisson

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

*slaughter-wardens:* valkyries

10.

Our pronouncement was good  
for the young prince;  
sound of mind  
we sing victory songs.  
May he who listens  
learn from this  
the tones of spear-women  
and tell them to men.

*young prince:* Sigtrygg

*spear-women:* valkyries

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.

Dorrud 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 Thvotta 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 Gilli 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, I was there;  
many a weapon was shattered  
when shields met in battle.