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Last Ride of the Valkyries: To (re)interpret Viking Age
Female Figurines according to Gender and Queer Theory

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Last Ride of the Valkyries: To (re)interpret Viking Age Female Figurines according to Gender and Queer Theory

Julia Wihlborg¹

Abstract

This article concerns the symbol of Kyngervi—the lady with a drinking horn. This motif, and other motifs like it, are well known from a selection of small Viking Age figurines that predominantly are interpreted as representing *valkyrjur*—the shieldmaidens of the god Óðinn. This interpretation is a simplification of the figurines' otherwise polysemous qualities and needs to be challenged. Based on the 'Hårby figurine' as a case study, this article identifies how the *valkyrjur*-interpretation came to be and why it is questionable, as well as suggests different interpretations based on gender and queer theory. The results indicate that the *valkyrjur*-interpretation originates from modern gender stereotypes and questionable comparative studies between different figurines and between the figurines and medieval sagas. The conclusion being that by investigating Viking Age figurines with other methods than strictly comparative, new knowledge can be gained. The medieval written sagas should, therefore, only be used as a reference material and not as the singular basis for interpretations.

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Introduction

The scope of the following article concerns the very symbol of the *Kyngervi* journal. The image of a woman holding a drinking horn (or mead cup) is for everyone interested in Viking Age archaeology a symbol for Viking Age women. The motif is best known from Gotlandic picture stones, gold foil figures (in Swedish 'guldgubbar'), the Danish Gallehus Horn and, most importantly, from a small group of figurines which constitute the scope of this article. These figurines are most commonly known as 'valkyrjur pendants' or 'valkyrjur amulets' and depict not just women with drinking horns, but also women with weapons and other attributes as well as different poses. No matter their attribute or pose, they are almost exclusively interpreted as representing *valkyrjur*, shieldmaidens of the god Óðinn. It is my opinion, as well as that of other researchers,² that kind of interpretation is a simplification of an otherwise polysemous and rich material. The female figurines could, if approached differently, offer further information about women's social roles and the creation of gender during the Viking Age. My intention with the following article is to elaborate on how the *valkyrjur*-interpretation of the figurines came to be, why this interpretation is questionable, and finally to present some alternative methods of analysing the figurines. However, before I start, I wish to highlight why this matter matters.

Why it matters

It is my belief that the way contemporary scientists interpret prehistoric people reflects the dominant views of people in the present. It is very difficult, perhaps even impossible, to be entirely objective in one's interpretations. With this perspective in mind, the way Viking Age women are presented today offers some interesting reflections.

² Neil Price, 'What's in a name?' in *Old Nordic Religion in Long-Term Perspectives: Origins, Changes, and Interactions*, edited by Anders Andrén, Kristina Jennbert & Catharina Raudvere, 179-183. Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2006; Ing-Marie Back Danielsson, 'Liten lurifax från Lejre,' *Arkeologisk Forum* 22 (2010) 30-33.

First and foremost, it must be acknowledged that the view of Viking Age women still today is influenced by the heteronormative and nationalistic bias of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century.³ Especially Richard Wagner and the way he presented the *valkyrjur* in his operas ‘The Ring Cycle,’ have had a great impact on the current idea of Viking femininity. Wagner’s *valkyrjur* were portrayed by curvy, feminine-looking women, and were all about deep emotion and assisting the male protagonist. Even though contemporary museums do not support the nationalist agenda of Wagner, Viking Age women still seem to play a supporting role in the story of the Viking Age, as exhibitions tend to focus on raids, sea voyages, and warfare. This is typically men’s work, while Viking Age women are consigned to the part of the exhibitions describing life at the farm and the Vikings great skill at creating fine jewellery.⁴ One example of this is ‘The Viking Museum’ in Stockholm, Sweden, whose main attraction ‘Ragnfrids saga’ (a storytelling attraction presented to visitors through audio, visuals and models) is named after one of the women in the story, even though the real main character is her husband, going on a typical Viking journey.⁵ In popular culture, on the other hand, Viking women are presented as either fierce *skjaldmær*, as in the popular HBO series ‘Vikings,’ or as *valkyrjur* who, if Google image searched, are depicted with large breasts and wearing small amounts of ‘armour.’ In other words—highly sexualized women and not far from the ladies in Wagner’s operas.

What this illustrates is that Viking women flourish in our contemporary society in two separate forms—as caring housewives and as sexualized warriors and *valkyrjur*. This is a dichotomic view that in many ways fit within what

³ Amy Jefford Franks, ‘Valföðr, völrur, and valkyrjur: Óðinn as a Queer Deity Mediating the Warrior Halls of Viking Age Scandinavia,’ *SCANDIA: Journal of Medieval Norse Studies* 2 (2019) 44-51.

⁴ For instance; Campbell Grade, ‘Meet Some Gender Stereotypes at the National Museum in Copenhagen: A Review of the Meet the Vikings Exhibition,’ *Kyngervi* 1 (2019) 108-113; Ludovic Hunter-Tilney, ‘Vikings: Life and Legend, British Museum, London,’ Review in *Financial Times*, March 4, 2019; Felix Vestergaard, ‘Museum and Exhibit Review: VIKING. The National Museum of Denmark,’ *The Public Historian* 36, no. 2 (May 2014) 153-159.

⁵ Personal visit September 2017.

Sigmund Freud⁶ identified as the Madonna-Whore complex. That is, that women must be either sexual and free—a whore—or caring and restricted—a Madonna. That a woman could be both a mother and a sexual being, or both take care of her family and be an active member of society has for a great part of Western history been considered impossible. This idea is so ingrained in Western culture that today's women still struggle in its aftermath.⁷ When all female images from the Viking Age are interpreted as *valkyrjur*, fuel is added to the flame. If these figurines were instead interpreted in a more diverse way, which pays tribute to their polysemous qualities, it could make a difference in the present, as well as create a less biased view of Viking Age women. A good starting point is an investigation of where the current *valkyrjur*-interpretation comes from.

How things came to be: The Hårby figurine as an example

The Hårby figurine was found in December 2012 when amateur archaeologist Morten Skovsby searched through a field in Hårby, Denmark with a metal detector. The figurine turned out to be the first discovered example of a three-dimensional Viking Age figurine wearing a female dress and hairstyle as well as holding a sword and a shield. Shortly after this discovery, Odense Bys Museer published an article on their website declaring that:

Hårby-figuren forestiller utvivlsomt en valkyrie, en af Odins kvindelige hjælpere, hvis opgave det var at bringe faldne krigere til Valhal og opvarte dem dér. Valkyrie-figurer kender vi fra en lille serie eksklusive kvindesmykker fra tidlig vikingetid (800-tallet), og flere af detaljerne på Hårby-figuren genkendes fra disse, så den må også være fra denne tid.⁸

[The Hårby figure undoubtedly depicts a *valkyrjur*, one of Odin's female helpers, whose task it was to bring fallen warriors to Valhalla and to take care of them once arrived. We recognize the *valkyrjur* motif from a small series of exclusive

⁶ Sigmund Freud, 'On sexuality: three essays on the theory of sexuality: and other works,' Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986.

⁷ Mark Landau et al., 'The siren's call: Terror management and the threat of men's sexual attraction to women,' *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 90, no. 1 (2006) 129-146.

⁸ Odense Bys Museer, 'Valkyrien fra Hårby,' Posted February 28, 2013 at Odense Bys Museers Webpage. <http://museum.odense.dk/nyheder/2013/valkyrien-fra-haarby>.

women's jewellery from the early Viking era (9th-century), and several of the details on the Hårby figure are similar to these, so it must also be from the same time period.]⁹

The first thing that needs to be said about this statement, is that the dating of the female figurines to primarily the ninth century is not valid. According to the inquiries I made for the catalogue section of my MA-thesis¹⁰ the majority of the Viking Age female figurines have not been dated to any particular century, only to the Viking Age in general, and some might even originate from the Vendel period (550-800 AD). Those that have a more precise dating occur from all centuries during the Viking Age and not only the ninth century.

The second questionable claim which needs to be addressed from the quoted statement is the *valkyrjur*-interpretation itself. The argument for this interpretation is the same as for the dating, namely through comparisons to other similar figurines. The points of comparison are the attributes of the figurines which in the case of the Hårby figurine are the dress and hairstyle, as well as the sword and shield. If we then take a look at the other female figurines referred to on the Odense Bys Museer website, we will soon notice that even though similar at first glance, they are actually quite different from the Hårby figurine. It may be that most of them wear the same clothes and hairstyle, but when it comes to other signifying attributes they are crucially different. Some of them are carrying weapons or armour similar to the Hårby example, but others carry drinking horns or drinking cups. Others have their hands placed on their chest. Some are pulling their hair and some do not appear to have any additional attributes at all. These five main motifs have been found in several similar copies and apart from these, there exist unique figurines whose motifs are only known from singular specimens. Among them are the often referenced Aska pendant found in Östergötland, Sweden.¹¹ In total, I have found 53 individual figurines,

⁹ Writer's translation.

¹⁰ Julia Wihlborg, 'More than Valkyries: A re-interpretation of Viking Age Female Figurines,' MA-thesis., Uppsala University, 2019.

¹¹ Elisabeth Arwill-Nordbladh, 'Aska och Rök: om minnen och materiell kultur i nordisk vikingatid,' in *Arkeologi och identitet*, edited by Bodil Petersson & Peter Skoglund, Lund: Lund University, 2008, 169-195.

which I present in my MA-thesis.¹² Because of the wide range of motifs, it is unlikely that all of them were created to represent the same concept. To base an argument on a broad comparison and claim it is ‘undoubtable,’ as Odense Bys Museer¹³ has done, is therefore questionable. However, others argue more strongly for the *valkyrjur*-interpretation. Judith Jesch, for example, states in a blog post on the British Museum website that:

The medieval Icelanders understood the function of valkyries [...] as handmaidens of the war-god Odin. He would send them to battle to choose those warriors who were worthy of dying and going to Valhalla, the hall of the slain [...]. There, the valkyries acted as hostesses, welcoming the dead warriors and serving them drink.¹⁴

What Jesch highlights in this quote are that the *valkyrjur* had two major functions, one as judges on the battlefield and one as hostesses in the hall of Óðinn. These are two very different functions that she suggests co-exist in the Hårby figurine through the combination of dress, sword, and shield.¹⁵ In other words, the reason behind the *valkyrjur*-interpretation is that the Hårby figurine combines what in Western society is perceived as feminine and masculine traits. I have previously described objects such as these as gender ambiguous, a trait that generally triggers divine interpretations.¹⁶ A likely reason for this is that it is generally considered unlikely that ordinary humans would cross gender boundaries. Gods, on the other hand, could cross gender boundaries since they answer to different rules than humans. This kind of reasoning also applies to the Hårby figurine and could explain why it is perceived as representing something divine and not strictly human.

To sum up, I believe that the *valkyrjur*-interpretation comes from a position of uncertainty concerning the combination of masculine and feminine traits

¹² Wihlborg, ‘More than Valkyries: A re-interpretation of Viking Age Female Figurines.’

¹³ Odense Bys Museer, ‘Valkyrien fra Hårby.’

¹⁴ Judith Jesch, ‘Viking women, warriors, and Valkyries,’ The British Museum blog, April 16, 2014. <https://blog.britishmuseum.org/2014/04/19/viking-women-warriors-and-valkyries/>.

¹⁵ Jesch, ‘Viking women, warriors, and Valkyries.’

¹⁶ Wihlborg, ‘The Valkyries crisis of identity: The Hårbyfigurine and the (re)interpretation of gender ambiguous objects,’ BA-thesis., Uppsala University, 2017.

within the figurines and that this has led many previous archaeologists to turn to a divine interpretation, not least since it has been considered unlikely that human female warriors existed during the Viking Age. The *valkyrjur*-interpretation has then spread from the armed figurines to other female figures through comparative studies.

The valkyrjur identity crisis

There are at least three reasons why the *valkyrjur*-interpretation is questionable, all of which can be found in the medieval sagas. The first is that the way the *valkyrjur* are described in the sagas is not homogenous. According to Neil Price,¹⁷ two different descriptions are particularly distinguishable. One is as bloodthirsty battle creatures, beings with a never-ending appetite for carnage and who are literal impersonations of the horrors of war. This is reflected not least by their names; Hild – battle, Herja – devastater, Gøll – battle noise, and so forth. The other description of *valkyrjur* is as fair shieldmaidens longing for the love of mortal men. They are full of ancient wisdom, which they happily share with the men who capture their hearts. According to Price,¹⁸ the first description is the one most likely. This presents the *valkyrjur* as conceived of as an impersonation of battle, with the wistful *valkyrjur* being a construction formed by medieval writers. That being said, the medieval sagas do not explain whether these ‘battle creatures’ were feared or not, or even considered evil. Nor do they describe exactly what the *valkyrjur* looked like. It is not impossible that they were believed to have a female form and could blend in among mortal women. The duality of the *valkyrjur* description in the saga material is thus not a strong enough argument to completely change the *valkyrjur*-interpretation for good.

The second saga-based argument against the *valkyrjur*-interpretation is that only two out of the five most common motifs among the female figurines can be directly linked to the description of *valkyrjur* in the sagas. These two motifs are the women carrying weapons, and the women holding drinking horns. The

¹⁷ Price, ‘The Viking Way: Religion and War in Late Iron Age Scandinavia,’ PhD diss., Uppsala University, 2002, 331-335.

¹⁸ Price, ‘The Viking Way: Religion and War in Late Iron Age Scandinavia,’ 331-340.

remaining motifs most likely earned the interpretation through similarity in style, dress and hair to the other two motifs. If we start with the women carrying weapons, it is fair to say that they mostly carry swords and shields before other weapons. Only two figurines exist that hold spears, except for a number with spears clamped under their thighs. These figures, however, are not *holding* the spears, they are holding swords.¹⁹ This is to be compared with another passage from the previously quoted post by Judith Jesch.

When carrying out their duties on the battlefield [...] they [the *valkyrjur*, writer's clarification] were usually equipped with helmets, mail-coats and spears. Any association between valkyries and swords [...] is very rare as a sword, closely associated with masculinity, would be incongruous on a female figure.²⁰

Jesch here raises the issue that the *valkyrjur* in the saga material rarely use swords, but spears. This is of importance since the figurines are representations, and thus metaphors, and the way metaphors work is through recognition.²¹ This means that if the tangible and the intangible description do not match, the metaphor does not work. By this line of thought, the sword-bearing figurines could not represent *valkyrjur*, but rather some other deity or heroine who was worshipped or admired during the Viking Age, perhaps one that is not mentioned in the written sources. At the end of the day it must be considered that our knowledge about Viking Age cosmology might be far from complete.

The other motif with connections to the *valkyrjur* in the medieval sagas is women holding drinking horns. This motif is most famously known from the so-called 'welcoming motif' on Gotlandic picture stones and is composed of a rider on a horse met by a woman holding a drinking horn. This motif is normally explained with reference to Snorre Sturlasson and his descriptions of *valkyrjur* welcoming warriors to *Valhöll* by serving them mead.²² However, the mead

¹⁹ Wihlborg, 'More than Valkyries: A re-interpretation of Viking Age Female Figurines.'

²⁰ Jesch, 'Viking women, warriors, and Valkyries.'

²¹ Birgitta Johansen, 'Ormalur. Aspekter av tillvaro och landskap,' PhD diss., Stockholm University, 1997.

²² Agneta Ney, 'Välkomstmotivet på gotländska bildstenar i jämförelse med litterära källor från vikingatid och medeltid,' In *Gotlands bildstenar: Järnålderns gåtfulla budbärare*, edited by Maria Herlin Karnell. Visby: Gotlands museum, 2012, 73-75.

serving scene is also known from sources where no *valkyrjur* were involved, for example in *Skírnismál*,²³ where the giantess Gerðr offers a drink to Skírnir, the messenger of the Vanir god Freyr. Another interesting source in this context is the Old English poem *Beowulf*,²⁴ in which queen Wealhþeow welcomes guests to her hall by, in order of rank, letting them drink from a drinking horn. By doing this she not only shows her and her husband's hospitality, but also establishes the order of power in the room, by letting her husband drink first. These kinds of drinking ceremonies also have support in the archaeological material through findings of drinking vessels and similar equipment in halls across Viking Age Scandinavia, and it is possible that the lady in the house had a major part to play in the execution of these.²⁵ The women holding drinking horns could thus just as likely represent legendary human women, as they could *valkyrjur* or other godlike beings.

A third and final argument against the *valkyrjur*-interpretation drawn from the saga material is that other characters could fit the same description as the *valkyrjur*. To name a couple, there is the goddess Freyja, who according to *Gylfaginning*²⁶ claims half of all warriors who fall in battle, and some of the giantesses, who represent the chaos powers of the world and thus are the gods' number one enemy.²⁷ Both Freyja and the giantesses are figures of great power. They are ladies of their own halls and have connections to warfare and battle. What I mean to say by this is that it is not very likely that nearly all female images from the Viking Age represent the same thing. When making comparative studies between the saga material and material images, the probability of finding only one character with attributes matching those of the image is very small. They might represent *valkyrjur* but they might just as well represent something

²³ *Skírnismál*, verse 37. Snorre Sturlasson *Edda: Snorres Edda & Den poetiska Eddan*, Svipdag Fritiofsson. Göteborg: Mimer bokförlag, 2015, 218.

²⁴ *Beowulf*, verse 610-625. *Beowulf*. (Trans.) Björn Collinder. Stockholm: Bokförlaget Natur och Kultur, 1954.

²⁵ Michael Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup: Ritual, Prophecy and Lordship in the European Warband from La Tène to the Viking Age*, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996.

²⁶ *Gylfaginning*, verse 24. Snorre Sturlasson *Edda: Snorres Edda & Den poetiska Eddan*, Svipdag Fritiofsson. Göteborg: Mimer bokförlag, 2015, 32.

²⁷ Anette Lassen, *Øjet og blindheden i norrøn litteratur og mytologi*, København: Museum Tusulanums Forlag, 2003, 112; John Lindow, 'Addressing Thor,' *Scandinavian Studies* 60, no. 2 (1988) 127-128.

else. To use ‘*valkyrjur* figurine’ as a category term, which is the case in both the Swedish SHM catalogue²⁸ and the Danish NS catalogue,²⁹ is more misleading than helpful. If a category term needs to be used, which sometimes is very practical, perhaps ‘female figurines’ is a better alternative. This term is also flawed, as I will argue, but it does refer to something all these figurines have in common—a female Viking Age high-status dress or hairstyle. That character-bound interpretation comes with major weaknesses is in any case evident. For that reason, I will now present three alternative studies of the Hårby figurine based on gender and queer theory.

Changing the approach

Since the female figurines are now left with something of an identity crisis, other ways of interpreting them needs to be found. A more in-depth discussion on this topic is presented in my MA-thesis,³⁰ but in this article I introduce three alternative interpretations of the Hårby figurine drawn from first gender theory and then queer theory.

To become a man

If we start with gender theory, the Hårby figurine’s ambiguous nature makes for some interesting results. Especially if one applies Thomas Laqueur’s³¹ one- and two-sex model, according to which women throughout history have been considered either as a lesser form of men—the one-sex model—or as the opposites of men—the two-sex model. As stated in Laqueur’s theory,³² and supported by Michel Foucault in his work ‘*Histoire de la sexualité*’,³³ the two-sex model did not grow into existence until the eighteenth century when modernist thinkers had divided the world into different oppositions. A prominent philosopher in this context was Rene Descartes who in the

²⁸ Historiska Museets Samlingar.

²⁹ Nationalmuseets Samlinger.

³⁰ Wihlborg, ‘More than Valkyries: A re-interpretation of Viking Age Female Figurines.’

³¹ Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: body and gender from Greeks to Freud*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990.

³² Laqueur, *Making Sex: body and gender from Greeks to Freud*.

³³ Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité. I-III*, Paris: Gallimard, 1978-1984.

seventeenth century presented a theory today known as Cartesian dualism. This theory came to strongly influence the subsequent view on men and women by stating that human beings consist of two parts—mind and matter—of which matter was considered feminine and of a lesser value than the masculine mind.³⁴

Applying Laqueur's theory³⁵ to the Viking Age would mean that it most likely was arranged following the one-sex model. This assumption, if true, would shatter the old stereotype of Viking men as the natural actors in the public sphere and Viking women as masters of the home.³⁶ Instead, we would have had a situation where masculinity is the norm, but men did not automatically claim it. Men would constantly have had to fight to retain their manhood through masculine deeds, such as upholding his and his family's honour. If he did not uphold his manhood, he would risk becoming *ergi*, that is, an unmanly man equal to a woman.³⁷ The constant fight for masculinity also meant that women, if doing masculine deeds, could advance their status and become men. This idea has previously been discussed by Carol J. Clover,³⁸ in her article: 'Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe.' In this article, Clover presents examples from the medieval sagas where women acted like men and gained increased respect as a result. One of these women is Auðr from *Laxdæla saga*,³⁹ who took up arms to defend her honour after her brothers refused to do so. This deed was afterwards met with great praise, even though she had worn trousers at the time—an action deemed reason for divorce during the Viking Age.⁴⁰ Another example comes from *Brennu-Njáls saga*, where the women Bergþóra and Hildgunnr are described as *drengr*.⁴¹ This term that can be

³⁴ Lynn Meskell, 'Writing the body in archaeology,' In *Reading the Body: representations and remains in the archaeological record*, edited by Alison E. Rautman, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000, 14-15.

³⁵ Laqueur, *Making Sex: body and gender from Greeks to Freud*.

³⁶ Elisabeth Arwill-Nordbladh, *Genuskonstruktioner i nordisk vikingatid: Förr och nu*, PhD diss., Gothenburg University, 1998.

³⁷ Brit Solli, 'Det norrøne verdensbildet og ethos: Om kompleksitet, kjønn og kontradiksjoner,' in *Vägar till Midgård 4: Ordning mot kaos: Studier av nordisk förkristen kosmologi*, edited by Anders Andrén, Kristina Jennbert & Catharina Raudvere, Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2004, 277-279.

³⁸ Carol Clover, 'Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe,' *Speculum* 68, no. 2 (1993) 363-387.

³⁹ *Laxdæla Saga*, chapter 35. See Carol Clover, 'Regardless of Sex.'

⁴⁰ *Laxdæla saga*, verse 35.

⁴¹ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, chapter 95. See Clover, 'Regardless of Sex,' 372.

translated to ‘bold, valiant, worthy man.’⁴² These two examples of manly women indicate that women indeed had the opportunity to advance into the role of men if acting accordingly.

If we were to apply gender theory to the Hårby figurine it would mean that the sword and shield of the figurine might work as a way to manifest the story of a woman who became a man or had manly qualities. This is especially exciting in light of the on-going discussion concerning the individual in Birka chamber grave Bj. 581 who, through aDNA-testing, turned out to be genetically female.⁴³ This result, soon after its publishing in 2017, went viral and attracted both positive and negative criticisms, arguing back and forth concerning the existence of female warriors during the Viking Age.⁴⁴ What I wonder is whether the question is not asked in the wrong way? Perhaps it is not whether female warriors existed that is the issue, but whether they were regarded as men or as women. Maybe the female warrior buried in the Birka grave and the Hårby figurine were actually regarded as men.

Female warriors as the real deal

The Hårby figurine can also be used to argue that female Viking warriors did exist during the Viking Age, not least if investigated through the eyes of Judith Butler. Butler⁴⁵ presents the idea that gender is produced through performativity, arguing that femininity and masculinity is something humans learn from their surrounding society and culture, and then try to replicate in order to be understood as a person and gain agency. In this equation, the Hårby figurine can be positioned in the role of culture. It is an image produced by someone to

⁴² Clover, ‘Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe,’ 7.

⁴³ Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson et al., ‘A female Viking warrior confirmed by genomics,’ *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 164, no. 4 (2017) 1-8.

⁴⁴ For instance; Fedir Androshchuk, ‘Female Viking Revised,’ Accessed March 20, 2020, https://www.academia.edu/34564381/FEMALE_VIKING_REVISED; Jesch, ‘Let’s Debate Female Viking Warriors Yet Again,’ Norse and Viking Ramblings Blog, September 9, 2017. <http://norseandviking.blogspot.com/2017/09/lets-debate-female-viking-warriors-yet.html>; Jesch, ‘Some Further Discussion of the Article on Bj 581,’ Norse and Viking Ramblings Blog, September 18, 2017. <http://norseandviking.blogspot.com/2017/09/some-further-discussion-of-article-on.html>; Price et al., ‘Viking warrior women? Reassessing Birka chamber grave Bj.581,’ *Antiquity* 93, no. 367 (2019): 181-198.

⁴⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York: Routledge, 1990.

mimic their idea of gender, and at the same time it is part of the creation of gender by being an active gender expression within the world. In this way, the figurine must be interpreted as understandable by its Viking Age audience, or it would not have been created in the first place. This means that the combination of feminine gender expressions, such as the long dress and Irish knot hairstyle, during the Viking Age could realistically have been combined with weapons without the person losing their ability to act within the social frame. This suggests that female warriors might well have existed during the Viking Age and that the Hårby figurine might portray one of them.

In a transformative world

Another performative possibility related to the Hårby figurine requires some engagement with Viking Age cosmology and the seemingly vibrant and ever-changing view of the world which can be found therein. There are examples of this worldview in animal ornamentations where animals are torn apart, divided into pieces and then put together again in ways that do not exist in nature.⁴⁶ Another example is the concept of *ulfbæðnar* and *berserker*, people who could turn themselves into animals on the battlefield and fight with the rage of a beast.⁴⁷ Even the boundary between people and gods were not stable, as suggested by Neil Price and Paul Mortimer⁴⁸ in an article concerning the Sutton Hoo helmet—which they propose could, during the right circumstances, turn its wearer into Óðinn himself. All these examples indicate that Viking Age people lived in a transformative world where few boundaries were stable and where seemingly fixed categories could be broken under the right circumstances. For example, it has been suggested that *seiðr* could allow a person to leave their

⁴⁶ Lotte Hedeager, 'Dyr og andre mennesker: mennesker og andre dyr: Djuornamentikkens transcendentale realitet,' in *Vägar till Midgård 4: Ordning mot kaos: Studier av nordisk förkristen kosmologi*, edited by Anders Andrén, Kristina Jennbert & Catharina Raudvere, Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2004, 221-226; Kristina Jennbert, 'Människor och djur: Kroppsmetaforik och kosmologiska perspektiv' in *Vägar till Midgård 4: Ordning mot kaos: Studier av nordisk förkristen kosmologi*, edited by Anders Andrén, Kristina Jennbert & Catharina Raudvere, Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2004;193-199.

⁴⁷ Price, *The Viking Way: Religion and War in Late Iron Age Scandinavia*, 390.

⁴⁸ Price & Paul Mortimer, 'An Eye for Odin? Divine Role-Playing in the Age of Sutton Hoo,' *European Journal of Archaeology* 17, no. 3 (2014) 533.

body.⁴⁹ Another transformative scenario could be oral performances during which both objects and people, through various actions, such as wearing masks or other props, were perceived as transforming into gods or other mythical beings.⁵⁰ It is thus not impossible that the Hårby figurine depicts a woman who, under certain circumstances, used weapons. Accordingly, it is possible that the boundaries between genders were fluid and that a person in different situations could take upon themselves the attributes of another gender and still be gender congruent. Just as a person could bear an animal *hamr* and still be understood and hold agency, so could a person combine what today are considered clashing gender attributes. In the end, it is all about not placing our own ideas of gender onto the lives of people who ultimately existed in a time very different from our own.

Final remarks

The female figurines and other female images from the Viking Age have for a long time been connected to the same supernatural beings—the *valkyrjur*—and not been interpreted to their full potential. This has resulted in the loss of archaeological information and contributed to un-wanted stereotypes in the present. I have in this article explained where I believe the *valkyrjur*-interpretation originated from, and discussed why it is questionable. I believe that the saga material sometimes hold too much influence over interpretations of Viking Age imagery, which limits the present understanding of Viking Age society. As an alternative, I have experimented with the kind of results gender and queer theory could create concerning the Hårby figurine. It is my wish with this article to present alternative ways to use Viking Age imagery beyond representation, in order to encourage fellow researchers and other interested parties to embrace the polysemous attributes of the material at hand. I do not argue that medieval sagas should not be used at all, but only as reference material

⁴⁹ Solli, 'Odin the queer: On ergi and shamanism in Norse mythology,' in *Glyfer och arkeologiska rum: en vänbok till Jarl Nordbladh*, edited by Anders Gustafsson & Håkan Karlsson, Göteborg: Göteborgs universitet, 342.

⁵⁰ Back Danielsson, *Masking Moments. The Transitions of Bodies and Beings in Late Iron Age Scandinavia*, PhD diss., Stockholm University, 2007, 100-106.

and not as the basis for an entire argument. This is perhaps easiest done by first interpreting an object solely from archaeological knowledge, through different methods and from different theoretical frameworks, and only later comparing this with the written sources. Artefacts are, after all, not bound by the representations human minds place upon them, but have their own properties that create affect in their meeting with humans. This means that objects influenced people of the past (as well as they influence people of the present) in ways sometimes hard to deduce. It is possible that an object's shape, size, material and so forth were of greater importance than what the object represented. Nevertheless, when a motif is open for interpretation, it is important to realize that sometimes the easy answer is also the one most likely. Sometimes a woman with a sword is just a woman with a sword.

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