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Beating a Dead Horse... Or Two: Bj. 581

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# Beating a Dead Horse... Or Two: Bj. 581

Elsa Simms<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Recent genomic testing of Bj. 581 revealed that the skeleton in the burial was genomically female. Instead of making rash assumptions about the gender of the burial, this article attempts to analyze other expressions of Bj. 581's identity in the form of their occupation. Frequently we impress modern gender onto people in the past who never asked for this classification, but by looking at the burial goods of Bj. 581, other warrior burials, and *seiðr* burials, we can see that the performative occupation is represented by the tools-of-the-trade of the buried individual. Performative occupation, whether accurate to the deceased or pageantry, exhibits how the people surrounding the dead chose to represent people in burials. Showing that occupation is just as important as the gender expression in the burial. This is seen in archaeology and supported by literature from later periods. This article will grapple with questions about whether or not modern people have the right to gender burials and suggest some solutions to these ethical problems.

**Keywords:** Bj. 581, gender, burials, warriors, archaeology

## Introduction

Bj. 581 is an Iron Age warrior burial from Birka in Sweden likely from the early 10th C. Recently, genomic testing proved that the skeleton is female.<sup>2</sup> The findings were reassessed and contextualised by the same team again in 2019.<sup>3</sup> The research team still interprets Bj. 581's identity in relation to common literary and archaeological sources that are concerned with female identities. Perhaps it is time to move away from such a male-female binary analysis. The authors of

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<sup>2</sup> Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson et al. "A Female Warrior Confirmed", *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 164, no. 4 (2017): 853.

<sup>3</sup> Neil Price et al. "Viking Warrior Woman? Reassessing Birka Chamber Grave Bj. 581" *Antiquity* 93 no. 367 (2019): 182.

these articles say that “Birka grave Bj.581 suggests to us that at least one Viking Age woman adopted a professional warrior lifestyle and may well have been present on the battlefield. We would be very surprised if she was alone in the Viking world; other women may have taken up arms in the same seasonal or opportunistic context as many male Viking raiders,”<sup>4</sup> which problematically resigns this person’s identity to womanhood. This limitation on gender will restrict future studies unless we can move away from media influence and second wave feminist attempts to insert women in the historical record. Identifying Bj. 581 as queer, trans, or an identity unknown to us today will allow for further queer analysis on the different occupations and statuses of people in the Viking Age. For the purposes of this paper, these identities will be referred to as genderqueer or queer identities. This is not an attempt to remove women from the record and replace them with queer identities but allows for more mobility for gender outside of the binary.

Since its initial analysis, questions about Bj. 581 contain a multiplicity of assumptions about societal mobility, gender, and occupation. Rather than belabouring gender identity in this case, perhaps we should look at occupation identity and tools of trades in burials. They can exist simultaneously and depend on numerous societal factors. These identities can be created in a number of ways by internal and external sources. For example, the dead cannot fully consent to their final rites and how they are represented in death, but we can conclude that the objects in the burial must have either a performative or accurate representation of the deceased person. Whether true or performative, occupation identity in burials is evident in many contexts all over Scandinavia and the Viking worlds. This does not mean that the discovery of a genomically female warrior is not significant, but perhaps a genomically female person can transcend the gender hierarchy to manipulate the authority of ritual violence and identity by expressing occupation identity. This simultaneity happens on several occasions in the literary sources and in archaeology. Iron Age and medieval

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<sup>4</sup> Price, “Viking Warrior Woman? Reassessing Birka Chamber Grave Bj. 581,” 193.

Scandinavia had a different hierarchy of gender, but Bj. 581 shows how the individual's occupation identity was important to the person's identity.

As previously mentioned, Viking age burials are incredibly diverse and representative of many international identities.<sup>5</sup> Also notable are how these identities became exaggerated or skewed when the person died. The individual is left represented by the objects they owned, the objects assigned to them by their communities, and the landscapes they are buried in. To approach this critically, we must “bridge the gap”<sup>6</sup> between how the individual presented in life and how they are represented in death. This does not mean that a burial is not representative of an individual's identity, but some elements must be performative, and others must be accurate to how the person identified during their life. One major issue involves separating and differentiating the two elements, which can be near impossible. If we are bridging this metaphorical gap with gender, what gives us and the people who buried the person the right to do so? Between media and academic interpretations of Bj. 581 we are serving this person an injustice through our own wishful thinking and ignorance of queer identities in the archaeological record. This paper will address Bj. 581 with they/them/their pronouns in an attempt to allow them agency in our interpretations of this burial. This analysis will include an interpretation of the literary sources concerning female and queer identities in relation to taking up arms and look at the archaeological context of tools in burials.

## **Context**

The first archaeological excavations at Birka were a product of their time, meaning that we need to revisit the excavations with new methods to draw new conclusions.<sup>7</sup> Along with the revisitation of material, we also have to consider Birka in its own time and place in the Viking Age landscape. The initial

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<sup>5</sup> Neil Price “Passing into Poetry: Viking-Age Mortuary Drama and the Origins of Norse Mythology,” *Medieval Archaeology* 54, no. 1 (2010): 123-124.

<sup>6</sup> Price “Passing into Poetry: Viking-Age Mortuary Drama and the Origins of Norse Mythology,” 123.

<sup>7</sup> Anna Kjellstrom, “People in Transition: Life in the Mälaren Valley from an Osteological Perspective”, *Shetland and the Viking World. Papers from the Proceedings of the 17th Viking Congress* (2017), 198.

excavation assumed that the skeleton of Bj. 581 was male due to the burial items. In the 1970s the skeleton was re-examined, producing an osteological report stating that the skeleton was genomically female,<sup>8</sup> though this was disregarded for many years.<sup>9</sup> Not only is the skeleton female, but the person in Bj. 581 comes from a diverse geographic background and does not seem to be from Birka or Sweden at all. Instead, the genetic analysis of the skeleton shows that the Birka warrior had genetic similarities to people in the British Isles and Norway.<sup>10</sup> This indicates that this person or their parents were mobile and participated in trade and interaction with other Viking Age settlements.

The landscape of the burial places it on “an elevated terrace between the town and a hillfort, the grave was in direct contact with Birka’s garrison.”<sup>11</sup> The placement of Bj. 581 was likely important in military culture. In the burial context, there is a sword, an axe, a spear, arrows, a battle knife, two shields, gaming pieces and two horses.<sup>12</sup> The burial items in Bj. 581 can be defined as tools-of-the-trade, offering a Marxist perspective on gender in an attempt to come to terms with the status of Bj. 581 and their high-status burial. By tools, I mean objects that could be used for work in any given profession. The osteological report indicated that the person was over 30 and had no instances of traumatic injuries.<sup>13</sup> Missing from this record is a study of bone deterioration. A study showing the usage of the body could be beneficial for knowing if this person was skilled in using weapons. However the lack of traumatic injuries does not necessarily indicate whether this person was in battle or not nor that the burial is purely performative. The grave goods signify a high-status warrior heavily involved in military strategy. The weapons and horses indicate that they were a warrior, and the game pieces and location of the burial indicate that they were skilled in strategy and warfare. Tools can tell us a lot about the occupation

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<sup>8</sup> Kjellstrom, “People in Transition: Life in the Mälaren Valley from an Osteological Perspective”, *Shetland and the Viking World. Papers from the Proceedings of the 17th Viking Congress* (2017), 198.

<sup>9</sup> Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson, *The Birka Warrior: The Material Culture of a Martial Society* (Stockholm, 2006), 197.

<sup>10</sup> Hedenstierna-Jonson et. al, “A Female Warrior Confirmed,” 857.

<sup>11</sup> Hedenstierna-Jonson et. al, “A Female Warrior Confirmed,” 853.

<sup>12</sup> Hedenstierna-Jonson et. al, “A Female Warrior Confirmed,” 854.

<sup>13</sup> Hedenstierna-Jonson et. al, “A Female Warrior Confirmed,” 855.

of an individual in a burial, along with the placement of the burial in the archaeological landscape.

Marianne Moen's dissertation on power and gender in mortuary practices discusses the dynamics of power and status in the Viking Age. Her study looks at the gendered landscape of burials and the division of men and women in cemeteries in Norway.<sup>14</sup> Moen's study may help to suggest that women in these burials benefit from their husbands' power or vice-versa. Bj. 581 is in the garrison, indicating that the warrior status was more important than the person's biological gender.

Carol Clover writes extensively on gender and binary breaking in the Viking Age. Specifically, her article "Maiden Warriors and Other Sons" is important for this paper. Clover focuses on textual rather than archaeological evidence to discuss the existence of shieldmaidens. In this paper, she looks at saga references to women bearing arms and compares this phenomenon with women taking on the legal status of 'son' in terms of property ownership and inheritance. Another piece of Clover's work "Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe" examines the power dynamics of gender through textual sources. Clover questions whether the gender binary is too simple but downplays the idea that their patriarchal surroundings suppressed many women in the Viking world.<sup>15</sup> Clover has some excellent insights on gender and society in both articles, but ultimately the literary sources exist differently than the archaeology. It is not enough to study Bj. 581 and only look at literary sources to conceptualize their life, but we can take away later societal perceptions and inheritances from older communities.

Most useful for my purposes is Clovers comment: "What finally excites fear and loathing in the Norse mind is not femaleness per se, but the condition of powerlessness, the lack or loss of volition, with which femaleness is typically, but neither inevitable nor exclusively, associated."<sup>16</sup> This suggests that women

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<sup>14</sup> Marianne Moen, *The Gendered Landscape: A Discussion on Gender, Status and Power Expressed in the Viking Age Mortuary Landscapes* (Oslo, 2010), 5.

<sup>15</sup> Carol Clover, "Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe", *Speculum* 682, no. 2 (1993): 3-5.

<sup>16</sup> Clover, "Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe," 13.

taking on masculine traits did not repel the people in the Viking Age, and men were not so afraid of being unmanly, but that there was a power struggle within this society, and having a lack of power was detrimental to one's status. This is particularly relevant for Bj. 581. From the lavish goods found in the burial, we can tell that this person did not repel the society around them.

Ultimately, this burial is a standout for all the wrong reasons. Much exemplification of Bj. 581 is based on the dismissal of what we already know about women and queer people in the Viking Age. By stressing the identity of Bj. 581 as a woman, we are actively erasing the potential for transgender identity and prioritizing a romanticised history of warrior women because of our obsession with powerful women in media today. But powerful does not solely depend on one's ability to perform in battle. We have evidence of powerful women from runestones and literary evidence, among other places.<sup>17</sup> Our obsession with military powerfulness is wholly problematic, and erases identities lost to the burial and literary records. How do we move away from our obsession with warrior women and get closer to the development of theories and methods that allow more autonomy for people outside the binary?

### Theories and Methods

One might speculate about gender expressions of Bj. 581 and the conscious decisions made in preparing the burial. Neil Price elaborates on Colin Renfrew's cognitive archaeological theories in *The Viking Way*, stating that archaeologists can find cognitive functions in the ground through archaeological contexts.<sup>18</sup> These contexts are meaningful, especially when looking at gender and queer theory. Queer theory is useful on the basis of the work Price has done *seiðr*<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Anne Sofie Gräslund "Late Viking age runestones in Uppland: some gender aspects," in *The Viking Age: Ireland and the West: Papers from the Proceedings of the fifteenth Viking Congress*. John Sheehan and Donnchadh Ó Corráin (Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2010).

<sup>18</sup> Neil Price, *The Viking Way* (Uppsala 2002), 38.

<sup>19</sup> *Seiðr* magic is a contested type of Viking Age magic that exists in literature and the archaeological record mainly performed by women. Its historiography is contentious and has been studied and debated by scholars such as Neil Price, Leszek Gardela, and Clive Tolley. For the sake of this article, I will be looking at *seiðr* in its context as a profession to compare it to warrior professions. It is described by the above scholars as a violent magic and they generally compare it to shamanistic activities.

magic in female burials. *Seiðr* is known from sagas, Eddaic, and Skaldic poetry.<sup>20</sup> From these sources, we can determine that *seiðr* is violent magic associated with Oðin for women and non-manly people.<sup>21</sup> Queer and cognitive theories in archaeology allow for an identification of professions from their burial contexts and associates them with the items related to sorceresses in literary evidence of sorcery in the literature. Price discusses the significance of staffs in female *seiðr* burials with the help of cognitive archaeology. Therefore, if staffs were purposefully placed in *seiðr* burials, they are *seiðr* tools-of-the-trade evident in the archaeological record whether performative or truthful to the deceased person's occupation in life.

Leszek Gardela's work on *seiðr* staffs also presents evidence for the ability to dissect identity in burials. His "A Biography of the *Seiðr*-staffs. Towards an Archaeology of Emotions" documents the history of interpretation and conflation of the contentious staff artefact. He notes that there was a massive conflation with mentions in literary sources of similar artefacts.<sup>22</sup> Much like sacrificed or defaced weapons in the Viking Age, he observed the occurrence of conflation with staffs as well.<sup>23</sup> By equating weapons and staffs, we can surmise that both are used similarly in burials to denote profession or protection. The degree of pageantry behind the placement of the artefacts will never be fully known, but they likely also signify how others chose to view the buried person in death. Of course, there is no reasonable way to categorize burials containing these items despite many noble efforts to do so. Gardela's 2013 article "'Warrior-Women' in Viking Age Scandinavia? A Preliminary Archaeological study" precedes the increased attention surrounding Bj. 581. Gardela called for better scrutiny when revisiting previously poorly excavated burial contexts.<sup>24</sup> This scrutiny includes holding sources and privileges accountable. He concluded

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<sup>20</sup> Price, *The Viking Way*, 68-69.

<sup>21</sup> Price, *The Viking Way*, 94.

<sup>22</sup> Leszek Gardela, "Biography of the Seiðr-Staffs. Towards an archaeology of Emotions," in *Between Paganism and Christianity in the North* (Rzeszów University, 2009), 190-192.

<sup>23</sup> Gardela, "Biography of the Seiðr-Staffs. Towards an archaeology of Emotions," 192.

<sup>24</sup> Leszek Gardela, "'Warrior Women' in Viking Age Scandinavia? A Preliminary Archaeological Study," in *Analecta Archaeologica Rzesoviensia: Funerary Archaeology*, Sławomir Kadrow, Magdalena Rzućek, Sylwester Czopek, Katarzyna Trybała-Zawiślak (Rzeszów: Rzeszów University, 2013), 276.



that the archaeological and literary records are not always in agreement, because of the later nature of the literary sources. Furthermore, the weapons in the surveyed graves were generally dual-purpose weapons like axes and knives, with everyday practicality.

*Seiðr* sorceresses seem to have had a civic duty in war and provided ritual services to their communities in the archaeological record.<sup>25</sup> Price aims to blur the lines between religion and warfare in Viking culture. He states that religion and violence co-existed, and existed together in everyday life and ritual, outside of actual expression of warfare. He also argues that power in medieval Scandinavia could be gender specific, and that violence had an important role in this power structure and its manifestations.<sup>26</sup> In realizing that the Viking Age incorporated many patriarchal societies, we can look for norm-breaking and cultural outliers, much like any other society. We may also note that queer identities are normal and are generally suppressed by ruling populations depending on privilege and power. This is an important idea for the examining of Bj. 581; if Bj. 581 is a queer person, this will prove that their occupation took priority over gender. Price advocates for an interdisciplinary approach, using anthropology and history in his book.<sup>27</sup> He argues that the literary sources such as the *Edda* and sagas are useful, but with care to realise the religious filter they are transmitted through in modern scholarship. They are products of a converted Scandinavia remembering their heathen ancestors centuries later.<sup>28</sup> This does not mean that these sources are entirely unreliable, but they do need to be studied carefully in conjunction with the archaeological and anthropological evidence to more accurately decipher the cognitive intentions of what they have left behind. *The Viking Way* demonstrates the connection between the literary and archaeological sources to identify *seiðr* occupation identity in the burial record. To look further into occupation identity, we can look at the archaeology of labour.

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<sup>25</sup> Price, *The Viking Way*, 27.

<sup>26</sup> Price, *The Viking Way*, 27.

<sup>27</sup> Price, *The Viking Way*, 32.

<sup>28</sup> Price, *The Viking Way*, 31.

Roberta Gilchrist's book, *Gender and Archaeology: Contesting the Past* discusses the importance of the archaeology of labour. She writes that:

Apparently utilitarian artefacts in graves do not necessarily reflect the subsistence activities of its occupant, but rather may represent symbolic items of mementoes placed by mourners; nor does the linking of biological male and female sex with specific tools further our understanding of the relationship between production and the social processes of gender. Conversely, where implements found in association with sexed skeletons may contradict received opinion on gendered patterns of labour, the context of the evidence is disregarded.<sup>29</sup>

This explains the approach taken in describing Bj. 581 clearly. In thinking that the burial goods in Bj. 581 do not belong to the skeleton or were placed there by the society they lived in, we are taking away the agency of the person buried there. It is unlikely that the items in Bj. 581 were heirlooms or effects not associated with the civic duty of the person. Gilchrist references Stalsberg's evaluation of Viking women participating in trade with the evaluation of Viking women in Norway and Russia buried with scales. Stalsberg explains the significance of scales in graves and notes that statistics show both men and women used scales; they were not merely heirlooms or mementoes in female burials.<sup>30</sup> This example is useful for Gilchrist, as before Stalsberg, no one had recognised that these women could be tradespeople or people who needed to use scales regularly.<sup>31</sup> If this was the case for the Rus' Viking tradeswomen, it can also be the case for Bj. 581.

Despite individuals matching grave good with occupation, we cannot sufficiently match sex and gender identity to occupation. If Bj. 581 had a queer gender identity, their occupation still takes precedence in the burial over however they chose to express themselves. This does not mean that gender was not a concern for the medieval and Iron Age Scandinavians; there are always exceptions to the rule. Perhaps it will eventually emerge that Bj. 581 was not an exception and queer people could exist outside the realms they were assigned in the literary records. These realms include all spheres in society, whether they

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<sup>29</sup> Roberta Gilchrist, *Gender and Archaeology: Contesting the past* (Routledge, 1999), 36.

<sup>30</sup> Anne Stalsberg "Scandinavian Relations with Northwestern Russian During the Viking Age: The Archaeological Evidence" *Journal of Baltic Studies* 13, no. 3(1982): 281.

<sup>31</sup> Gilchrist, *Gender and Archaeology: Contesting the past*, 37.

were originally assigned a binary or not. Future theoretical and methodological developments should allow more interdisciplinary work in literary and archaeological evidence. Perhaps a step in this direction will allow queer people more agency in the past. This requires new evaluations of older discoveries and the dissection of definitions of man/woman to include diverse spectra and webs of gender and sexual identities.

### **Literary evidence**

The Scandinavian Iron Age and Middle Ages was a time of massive change, and many of the literary sources discuss people who have not converted to Christianity but were written by Christians. Genders and religious dynamics changed with conversion to Christianity. Saxo Grammaticus was a medieval Christian historian writing in the twelfth century who mentions warrior women, with an air of disgust, several times in the *Gesta Danorum*. In a passage describing Danish warrior women, he describes these women as “unsexed” expert fighters and he belittles many standard household activities as “dainty” duties lacking importance in comparison to warrior activities.<sup>32</sup> Due to the late nature of the documents we can only glean his perceptions of these women, and not actual factuality. Perhaps better questions might address the language Saxo uses to describe the people in this passage. He actively tried to erase their gender. By removing their gender, he dehumanises the people in the passage. Not only does he dehumanise these warriors, he does not have the appropriate vocabulary to describe these mythical women. Saxo was familiar with Greek and Roman literature, and likely took many of the metaphors and descriptions from southern and more ancient sources. Therefore, this account likely reflects some societal impressions, but it is difficult to conclude that this is hard evidence of women warriors.

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<sup>32</sup> Saxo Grammaticus, Karsten Friis-Jensen, Peter Fisher, *Gesta Danorum* (Oxford, 2015), 7: 6.8. 477.

John Skylitzes's *Synopsis* is a Byzantine chronicle which mentions Viking or Rus' women laying with the dead after a battle at Kyiv.<sup>33</sup> This is a later source and therefore not entirely reliable. In addition to the late nature of the source, Skylitzes was from Byzantium, and may not have been capable of gendering the Rus' dead appropriately due to his social upbringing and learning in Byzantium. Again, we note that the gender of Bj. 581 may very well be completely unknown to us and indescribable in modern languages. Much like previous attempts of belittlement, Skylitzes attempts to degrade both the barbarians he mentions, and dehumanizes the women. Skylitzes may believe that the events he described were true,<sup>34</sup> but ultimately this is his interpretation of a much older story.

Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda* presents numerous instances of gender-swapping. His writing shows evidence of queer identities in the later Norse medieval collective consciousness. One example is the story *Loki and Svadilfari*, in which Loki turns into a female horse and births a mare. Loki spends quite a bit of time as a pregnant female horse, but he exists on the fringes and outside of the gender constraints experienced by the other gods. Loki is described as unmanly and devious in the story and by the gods surrounding him. But for Þor in the *Þrymskviða*, merely cross-dressing is stressful for the god because of his fear of being considered a coward.

*Þrymskviða* is a mythological poem by an anonymous author outlining the events which occurred when Þrym, a giant, stole Þor's hammer. The giant took the hammer to trick Freya into marrying him without her consent. Heimdal formulated a plan to cross-dress Þor (as Freya) and Loki (as Freya's handmaid) to retrieve Þor's hammer back from Þrym in Jotenheim.<sup>35</sup> The poem describes Þor in standard women's clothing,<sup>36</sup> but Þor's masculinity cannot be confined by his costume and he eats and belches at Þrym's table more than the writer expects women to in his own context. Could this be an indication of queer identities in Norse literature? James Frankki addresses some of these issues in

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<sup>33</sup> John Scylitzes, John Wortley, *A Synopsis of Byzantine History, 811-1057* (Cambridge, 2010), 290.

<sup>34</sup> John Scylitzes, John Wortley, *A Synopsis of Byzantine History, 811-1057*, 290.

<sup>35</sup> Carolyn Larrington, "Þrymskviða" *The Poetic Edda* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 93.

<sup>36</sup> Larrington, "Þrymskviða" *The Poetic Edda*, 95.

his article, "Cross-Dressing in the Poetic Edda". He writes: "Thor's initial reaction to the plan for his cross-dressing as Freyja is one of disdainful rejection, an indication that transgendered [sic] behaviour – by a highly respected male god nonetheless – was not favourably received or even tolerated in the thirteenth-century Icelandic society."<sup>37</sup> This highlights attitudes in the thirteenth-century, but the poem is likely more ancient than this, and we can tentatively and carefully consider the gender dynamics of the poem for earlier Norse societies. This poem not only presents the idea that Norse society rejected queer gender identities, but it also shows the mistreatment of women in the form of Freya.

Problematic third and other numbered genders continue to be forced on ancient and medieval people by modern scholars. The third gender is just as limiting as a binary. Diverse genders in history continue to be suppressed by studies limited to a binary, when diverse genders have always existed. Sometimes, this suppression of gender identity resulted in inadequate naming for gender identities. Instead of creating other labels for genders we can never fully explain, we should allow past gender diversity to exist on its own terms. Kathleen Self's proposition of a third gender for Valkyries and shield-maidens is not convincing.<sup>38</sup> Perhaps there was a civic duty in war that exceeded the importance of gender, but this example is ripe with modern wishful thinking and obsessions with powerful women. This does not mean that powerful women did not exist. We can see this in sagas that exhibit examples of rituals before wars, and archaeology that shows ritual objects in magical female burials possibly suggesting women's importance in war.<sup>39</sup> Maybe it is more problematic to force modern gender on to the Vikings than it is to realise these expressions as expressions of duty rather than gender. Genomically female people were very clearly able to be warriors and to serve beyond the previous magical expectations with *seiðr* or other magic. Other archaeologists such as Enrique Moral are critical

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<sup>37</sup> James Frankki, "Cross-Dressing in the Poetic Edda." *Scandinavian Studies* 84, no.4 (2012): 427-428.

<sup>38</sup> Kathleen Self "The Valkyries Gender: Old Norse Shield-Maidens and Valkyries as a Third Gender." *Feminist Formations* 24, no. 1 (2014): 144.

<sup>39</sup> Neil Price "The Way of The Warrior", *Vikings Life and Legend* (Cornell University Press, 2014), 116-117.

of this type of categorisation, calling third and fourth genders “stagnated categories”<sup>40</sup> and fabrications of the past, committing erasure on the actual multiplicity of queer gender identities in the past.

The sagas present numerous examples of women bearing arms, dressing in men’s clothing, and having military prowess. The first example is in *Gisla saga*. In this saga, we see Þordis take up arms against her brother’s murderer.<sup>41</sup> Another example of an armed woman is Freydis in the *Groenlandinga saga*. Freydis decides to use weapons and dress in men’s clothing. For both Freydis and Þordis, there is a motivation to break the binary and weaponize their womanhood, unlike Hervor in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðrek*. This saga depicts a woman bearing arms and leading a troop of Vikings on a journey to her father’s grave. However, the pronouns “they/them” might reflect Hervor/Hervarar better because her name is declined in both masculine and feminine to differentiate her gendered activities. They wear men’s clothing and behave in a traditionally masculine manner.<sup>42</sup> There are less instantaneous motivations of vengeance for Hervor to bear arms, as their life was spent bearing arms, unlike Freydis and Þordis. Perhaps Bj. 581 correlates with the story of Hervor.

The person buried in Bj. 581 died long before the writing of these literary sources. Saxo Grammaticus wrote the *Gesta Danorum* in the late twelfth century, Snorri Sturluson in the twelfth century, and John Skylitzes in the eleventh century. Comparing this international perspective to one burial in Sweden can be challenging, but it raises interesting ideas. The international perspective of the literary evidence reflects the international background of the person buried in Bj. 581. The international perspective does not account for the problems of trusting myth and legend though. Literary myth and legend are indicative of the societies they were written for, rather than the earlier societies that created them, though we must account for some cultural similarities and studies in oral histories. *Drymskviða* is a satire, and the Snorri Sturluson’s *Prose Edda* is a

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<sup>40</sup> Enrique Moral, “Qu(e)rying Sex and Gender in Archaeology: a Critique of the ‘Third’ and Other Sexual Categories,” *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 23, no. 3 (2016): 789.

<sup>41</sup> Judith Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age* (Boydell, 1991), 191.

<sup>42</sup> Carol Clover, “Maiden Warriors and Other Sons,” *The English and Germanic Journal of Philology* 85, no. 1 (1986): 37.

Christianised myth. The *Brymskeviða* does not necessarily equate positive trans and queer visibility in Norse myth and literature. Nevertheless, we can take this poem as an indication of the perception of the anonymous author who wrote it and as accurately depicting general ideas about homophobia or transphobia in later Norse society. We can also parallel this with Snorri Sturluson's stories of Loki transforming into a mare, or Oðin transforming into a woman to practice *seiðr* magic.<sup>43</sup> Shapeshifting, cross-dressing, and gender-swapping occur in the literary sources, but these sources only discuss men changing into women. Women do not seem to transform into men fully, and if they do come close, they are allowed to become entirely female once again, as is evident with Hervor. If this is the case for gender in the Iron Age and medieval North, genetically female people might have had a greater ability to have fluidity in their genders than genetically male people. Perhaps this is why Bj. 581 is such a lavish warrior burial. They were capable of this manipulation of power because women could only ascend from their status as women.

We should step away from analysing these literary sources from a primarily women's studies perspective and open them up to include instances of queerness in the literary record. In allowing greater fluidity in identity, we can begin to reconcile the diversity of gender identities in the past.

### **Other Burials and Archaeology**

Hjalmar Stolpe's initial excavation of Birka in the late nineteenth century<sup>44</sup> sexed the burials with grave goods by looking at the occupational goods and aligning those occupations with nineteenth century perceptions on gendered divisions of labour. This created the illusion of a binary of man and woman at the site. Today, we should interpret the occupations separate of and simultaneously with gender to understand the professional and societal functions of the buried people of Birka. One example of this juxtaposition of

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<sup>43</sup> Price "The Way of The Warrior", *Vikings Life and Legend* (Cornell University Press, 2014), 65-66.

<sup>44</sup> Anna Kjellstrom, "People in Transition: Life in the Mälaren Valley from an Osteological Perspective", *Shetland and the Viking World. Papers from the Proceedings of the 17th Viking Congress* (2017), 198.

gender and societal function are the *seiðr* burials, which are burials of magical women associated with Oðin. These burials are (so far) generally sexed as female and exhibit evidence of a magical occupation. Other than *seiðr* burials, there are many lavish warrior burials. Bj. 581 is likely one of these. I mention *seiðr* here because these burials also express a civic duty to their societies, much like warrior burials, and to represent that the profession is likely more important than gender. *Seiðr* practitioners were sorcerers, but also magicians and practitioners of magic thought to be vital to society. *Seiðr* is a classification on its own, so did the people who practiced it primarily identify as women or sorcerers? This makes it safer to identify Bj. 581 and *seiðr* practitioners primarily as their occupation because the occupations seem to be exemplified in the burials. This leaves the ancient people in the burials and the communities that buried them some agency in their gender identifications, gender expressions, and general identities in society.

Staffs in burials have been interpreted as indicative of a *seiðr* or sorceress burial. Here we can recognize performers of sorcery in an occupational group, suggesting that the staffs indicate occupation in the burial record. Usually, these are rich burials with expensive goods, chairs, jewellery, chests and most importantly staffs. One such burial (Bj. 660) is likely an inhumation of a *seiðr* performer, so interpreted because of the staff.<sup>45</sup> The skeleton did not survive but grave goods included a staff placed across her<sup>46</sup> left lap, a pair of oval brooches, a silver chain, a necklace with 28 beads, rock crystals, a wooden box containing a glass beaker, a small ceramic vessel, a silver crucifix, and a pendant with a whirling design. These items indicate a rather rich burial including magical tools, such as the staff, the crucifix, the box and vessels. The crucifix does not mean that this burial is a Christian burial, but was rather a spiritual item based on the majority of Norse religious artefacts and theorised occupation of the occupant. The burial also has imported glass and eastern items showing the diversity of objects that could be acquired in the early Viking Age. On her belt, she had iron

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<sup>45</sup> Price, *The Viking Way*, 128.

<sup>46</sup> Because of the lack of skeleton, this burial was sexed based on grave goods. This is problematic (as this paper suggests), but other burials exist with similar burial assemblages.



shears, an iron knife, an ear spoon, a whetstone and some other small objects.<sup>47</sup> This list of items is associated with regular items women or any person might carry on their person for personal hygiene. A similar burial to Bj. 660 is Bj. 845. Bj. 845 is also a Birka inhumation from the early tenth century.<sup>48</sup> Some of the similarities include items on the belt, oval brooches, and most importantly the staff. Both Bj. 845 and Bj. 660 are suggestive of the profession of the women buried there. The multiplicity of *seiðr* associated burials and the similarities of Bj. 845 and Bj. 660 are only a few examples of how *seiðr* association is possible in interpretation. The interpretations of *seiðr* burials indicate that these people played an important role in warfare and society. Therefore, we might expect similar occupational expression in Bj. 581. One of these expressions of identity might be found in horse burials.

There are many high status horse burials at Birka. There are 45 currently excavated at the site that include horses and/or horse riding equipment.<sup>49</sup> Bj. 834 is a double occupancy burial of a man and a woman and two horses.<sup>50</sup> For the purposes of this argument, perhaps we can also view horses as partially indicative of occupation. There are double occupancy and single occupancy burials that include sexed male and female people.<sup>51</sup> The horse burials, in addition to one other female burial and Bj. 581, are accompanied by weapons.<sup>52</sup> Horses at Birka seem to be an indication of warrior status. This includes Bj. 581. Horses appear in rich burials, but weapons are also a good indicator of a warrior burial. Weapons may be placed in burials to aid fallen warriors in the afterlife and seem to serve the same purpose as the horses in warrior burials.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Price, *The Viking Way*, 128-130.

<sup>48</sup> Price, *The Viking Way*, 142.

<sup>49</sup> Peter Shenk, *To Valhalla by Horseback?: horse burial in Scandinavia during the Viking Age*, (Oslo, 2002) 70.

<sup>50</sup> Price, *The Viking Way*, 132.

<sup>51</sup> Shenk, *To Valhalla by Horseback?: horse burial in Scandinavia during the Viking Age*, 70.

<sup>52</sup> Shenk, *To Valhalla by Horseback?: horse burial in Scandinavia during the Viking Age*, 70-71.

<sup>53</sup> D.M. Hadley and Letty Ten Harkel, "Whither the Warrior in Viking Age Towns", *Everyday Life in Viking-age Towns: Social Approaches to Towns in England and Ireland, C. 800-1100*, (Oxford, 2013) 9.

## Conclusion

Despite the evidence presented in this paper, there are numerous problems with determining the gender of Bj. 581. The first problem is whether we have the right to answer this question. Scholars have been gendering burials since the birth of archaeology, but with the rise of queer and gender theory, we should not be taking these outliers so lightly. Is it our job to impose modern gender on ancient bodies, and is it useful to do so? Creating new genders can be a problem, especially if the past society does not fit into the terms used to describe the established gender. I am uncomfortable with assigning someone a designation they never asked for, and therefore I hope to illustrate that the gender of Bj. 581 was secondary or equally important as their warrior status. The second problem comes from the mismanagement of Birka during the first excavation. Hjalmar Stople's initial excavation in the late 1800s was sloppy, leaving much of the evidence from the site catalogued incorrectly.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, the examinations of Bj. 581 until now were negligent and chose to gender the burial based on grave goods, rather than osteological evidence. The third problem is having to use evidence from a large range of time and space. Despite differences in Viking Age cultures, however, similarities existed in common languages, some material culture, and religious affiliations. The last problem is the lack of evidence. Despite the volume of evidence presented in this paper, Bj. 581 is ultimately an outlier. The biggest challenge is identifying Bj. 581 without other examples of burials containing genomically female people in warrior contexts.

Despite these problems, cognitive and gender archaeology show us that Bj. 581 existed as a high-status person decorated as a warrior. This warrior prioritised their status as a warrior before their biological sex. Through the archaeological evidence supporting occupation before gender in burials and the literary evidence depicting cultural ideas of female warriors, we can assume some form of Viking Age gender hierarchy. However, Bj. 581 suggests that the

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<sup>54</sup> Anna Kjellstrom, "People in Transition: Life in the Mälaren Valley from an Osteological Perspective", *Shetland and the Viking World. Papers from the Proceedings of the 17th Viking Congress* (2017), 198.

occupation of the warrior was ultimately more or equally important as the gender of the person.

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