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2019, Katowice, Poland

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On the 28th of February and 1st of March 2019 the University of Silesia in Katowice hosted the ‘Gendering Viking Age Rulership’ conference. As the title suggests, this two-day event focused its attention on Viking kings and queens, rulers, and maiden kings. The conference was a wonderful experience, engaging with gender studies from a variety of perspectives, deriving from a number of disciplines and therefore using a range of theoretical approaches.

Jón Viðar Sigurðsson opened the conference with a keynote lecture on ‘Gendering Power: Scandinavia During the Viking Age.’ He noted the importance of social roles over gender roles in Viking Age society, with women able to take on positions of power. He questioned modern perspectives on the high-status burial of the Oseberg ship in Norway: why do we argue that this was a queen instead of king? What implications do each of these words have? He went on to argue that this woman may have been a chieftain, not a queen, without disregarding that she may have still been a woman. He further noted that women had their own social networks, and despite our limited evidence for this we know this would have given them further access to forms of power. A particularly powerful point made by Jón Viðar was a comparison he made to Britain in the Second World War, when the country was largely run on a ground level by women while the men were overseas fighting. Viking Age Scandinavia is likely to have been very similar: he estimates that throughout the Viking Age 500,000 men lost their lives overseas, leading to a society where women had to essentially take charge. Recognising the importance of women’s existence and role in all levels of society is something we must take stock of more, as Jón Viðar

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did throughout his paper, but by focusing primarily on the powerful roles of women, he set a strong tone for the conference.

Our next session featured Alexandra Sanmark discussing ‘Male and Female Rulership in Viking Age Society,’ focusing on scholarly biases that interpret male rulership within a secular and military context, while female rulership is placed within the sphere of cultic leadership. Similar criticisms were then noted in Unn Pedersen’s paper, in which she highlights that male ship burials in the Vestfold region are perceived as political monuments, while the Oseberg woman is seen as apolitical and passive in her burial. Anne Irene Riisøy closed the session with a slightly different paper, exploring the role of women in medieval guild statutes from Norway, which she believes suggest pre-Christian roots.

Following the coffee break I presented my own paper titled ‘A Queenly King and a Kingly Queen: Negotiating Gender and Royal Ideology in the Viking Age’ in which I discussed Eiríkr *blóðøx* and Gunnhildr *konungamóðir* as a case study to explore the importance of correctly performing masculinity or femininity in relation to being a king or queen. Arngrímur Vídalín followed with a discussion on ‘Women of Power – Influence, Affluence, Violence,’ after which Karl Christian Alvestad presented his paper ‘Just the King’s Mother? A Woman’s Role in the Unification of Norway.’ The papers sat well together, exploring women within the concept of ideology and alliances.

In the next session Jakub Morawiec spoke to us about ‘A Kinglike Queen. Sigríðr *in stórráða* in historical and literary contexts,’ exploring how Sigríðr uses her position of power to achieve her personal goals. He then compared her to Gunnhildr *konungamóðir* and Álfífa Álfrimsdóttir, also known as Ælfgifu of Northampton. In particular, he highlighted their importance as royal mothers and royal widows, which reflects general research from surrounding medieval European queenship. Maciej Lubik then discussed ‘A Smart Wife of a Wise Prince – Ingigerðr Óláfsdóttir’s image in the Old Norse tradition,’ in which he argued that she was very independent in her decisions and heavily politically involved, providing counsel and acting as a peace-maker.

The last papers of the day were provided by Aleksandra Jochymek who discussed ‘The Faithful Queen: Christian Ideal of Female Chastity in the Old Norse Tale of Lady Olif,’ which explored a translated romance, and Remigiusz Gogosz, who discussed ‘The Concept of Co-Rulership in Viking Age Scandinavia.’ This latter paper was not only focused on the male-female co-rulership, but also considered the successes of male-male co-rulership.

The second day of the conference opened with Martina Mandera, discussing ‘Shieldmaiden Facts and Myths: The Story of Fighting Women,’ drawing attention to the exclusive presence of these figures within legendary texts. Miriam Mayburd followed this with her paper ‘The Subversive Maiden King Paradigm: Power Acts and Gender Dynamics in *Hrólfssaga Gautreksssonar*,’ in which she provided, in my opinion, a well-argued criticism of Carol Clover’s ‘Regardless of Sex,’² argued for a ‘destabilisation’ of the category of ‘woman,’ and argued that gender should be seen as a spectrum within three-dimensional space. Annett Krakow followed this with her paper ‘Authority Challenged: Examples from *Yngvars saga víðförla*,’ in which she used a wide variety of material for her analysis, including runestones, annals, and sagas.

The next session took us outside of Scandinavia proper into the diaspora areas. Marcin Böhm gave an exciting and engaging paper on ‘Zoë Porphyrogenita and the Varangians,’ after which Łukasz Neubauer presented his paper ‘*Sicut in caelo et in terra*: Capturing the Complimentary Model of Male-Female Political Responsibilities and Capabilities in the Dedication Page of the New Minster *Liber Vitae* (BL MS 944, fol 6r).’ Neubauer highlighted the way in which the image of the cross on the dedication page creates a divide of spheres of complementary nature: heaven and earth, and male and female. Rafał Boryslawski then closed this session with an engaging and humorous discussion of “‘The Violence and the Sacred.’ Challenging the Non-Christian in Old English Juliana and Judith.’

² Carol J. Clover, ‘Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe,’ *Speculum*, 68, 2 (1993) 363-387.

Our closing papers summarised the variety of the conference excellently. Marta Rey-Radlińska spoke on ‘The Image of King Haraldr *harðráði* in chosen *þattir* of Morkinskinna,’ engaging us with rulership ideology in a specific *konungasaga*. Kendra Wilson then gave us a concise but thorough tour through the historiography of *seiðr* in her paper ‘Óðinn, *seiðr*, and *ergi*,’ — no mean feat! Finally, Alexander J. Wilson closed the conference with what was undeniably the best title we saw over the two days: ‘No Woman, No Crime: The Transposition of Hyper-Masculine Gender Roles in Pálnatóki’s Founding of the *Jómsvíkingar*,’ in which he engaged with the famous *Jómsvíkinga saga*, addressing the strict rules that excluded women from Jómshorg, and used a variety of sources to argue that this was connected more to the romantic bonds men would form with the women than sexual.

In the closing discussion of the conference, Riisøy noted something we all knew to be true: you can turn to the index of any book on the Viking Age and find a section that lists the mentions of ‘women,’ but you cannot do the same for men. To even think of it is absurd: men are seen as the default, pervasive through all aspects of the Viking Age, while women are seen as a niche interest. This conference reminded us that the reality is far from that.

Overall, the conference was a resounding success. My thanks go to Jakub Morawiec and Anne Irene Riisøy for not only organising an engaging and exciting conference, but for also inviting me to speak. One of the biggest takeaways for me from this conference that was not strictly related to the papers was the kindness of academia. The delegates at the conference showed true openness, and it was a wonderful environment to be in.

The papers at ‘Gendering Viking Age Rulership’ were enriching, exciting, and well-researched. Alongside this, the delegates were all deeply kind people, creating a truly wonderful conference experience. I am very grateful to have been able to take part in this conference, and look forward to the futures of the papers involved!