

# **Textiles and Magic: The liminal position of women in Viking Age and Medieval Iceland**

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# INTRODUCTION

The economy of Viking age and early Medieval Iceland was based not on stone, wood, or metal, but on cloth. The importance of textile labor in this society cannot be overstated and thus is a prime topic for anyone studying Icelandic history. During this period, textile labor amongst Icelanders was generally divided by gender; men raised and sheared sheep and controlled the economic use of cloth after it was produced while spinning, weaving, nalbinding (a precursor to knitting) and sewing were all women's activities. While the whole society was involved in textile production and distribution in different ways, women performed a significant amount of the labor.

This paper explains the relationships between women, textiles, and knowledge structures in Iceland from settlement in the mid-800s CE, to the start of Norwegian Rule in 1262. I use two types of sources from this period, literature and material evidence, to examine how knowledge was informed by gender and textiles. Cloth, textile production tools, and clothing are material evidence that remains from the Viking age. Descriptions of textiles, colors, and clothing appear in the sagas. By combining these sources, I present three ways knowledge was structured around textiles. Clothing was a physical indication of wealth and power which was publicly displayed. Cloth and color represent a way of knowing available to the whole society. Conversely, a major part of magical knowledge is that it is kept secret. Some women in Viking Age Iceland possessed knowledge of witchcraft and magic. Magic ritual is evident in saga as, mostly as a literary device and can be seen in archeological material from grave sites. Magical knowledge was kept as secret as possible to increase its value. One area in which public knowledge and private knowledge intersect is in textile production. In Viking Age Iceland, women produced textiles in a building separated from the main living and working quarters. This building, called a *dyngja*, resulted in women-centric communities and was influenced by the magical associations between weaving and

prophecy. The *dyngja* represents a space in which knowledge was shared amongst women, but private from men. It also provides an example of how cultural concepts, like religion and magic, influenced physical space.

## Source Considerations

The Sagas of Icelanders are historical and literary texts written by anonymous Icelandic authors in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. They chronicle the settlement of Iceland and events which happened from about 870 to 1030 CE. Though the sagas are fictional accounts of the past, they contain valuable information about the culture of Viking Age and Medieval Iceland. Characters, details, and events are direct products of the author's understanding of history and society and literary productions. The texts are based on oral tradition and contain elements of purposeful storytelling and structure. Characters, events, and toponymy found in the Icelandic sagas can sometimes be historically or archeologically corroborated and sometimes appear to be complete fiction. The Icelandic sagas remain important historical sources but must always be treated with delicacy and with the awareness that they are, in the words of Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, "simultaneously descriptions and interpretations of reality."<sup>1</sup>

The saga corpus has been interpreted using many methods over time. Even when narrowing the field of saga scholarship to women and gender studies, some authors, like Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, in her article "Women's Weapons: A Re-Evaluation of Magic in the 'Íslendingasögur'" have examined the sagas solely as literature. She makes interesting and valid claims about the world created by the sagas and doesn't present them as historical truth. Knut Odnor takes a more anthropological approach in his article "Þórgunna's testament: a myth for

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<sup>1</sup> Preben Meulengracht Sørensen. *Saga and society: an introduction to old Norse literature*. (Odense: Odense University Press, 1993), 28

moral contemplation and social apathy,” where he analyses the symbolic function of a specific female character as representative of certain aspects of human nature. Other scholars, like Michèle Hayeur Smith and Karen Milek, both of whom are archeologists, have used specific moments in the sagas to explain the usage of physical materials and aid in the interpretation of archeological remains.

Because the sources of the Viking Age are limited, we have a narrow perspective from which to analyze the people of this era. The anonymous authors of early Medieval Iceland produced works which emphasized the male perspective and nearly erased the female experience. While women do appear in the sagas, the stylistic components of the genre focus on the male experience of honor, feuds, and family. When women do appear in the sagas, it is because they make an impact on the male storyline. Often the women who are mentioned are little more than the wife of a chieftain or the bearer of a famous line of bishops. Those who show any agency and impact the story often do so through manipulation of their male family members or supernatural means. These women are often negatively portrayed and cause strife and violence through their actions. Women who do not have agency in the sagas are more positive characters but have limited roles and personalities.

Archeological remains form a corpus of material evidence from Viking Age and Early Medieval Iceland. The analysis of these objects and the contexts in which they were found provides another lens through which to view this period. The material evidence used in this paper was found in graves across Scandinavia and in excavations of farm sites in Iceland. I also rely on the analysis and interpretation of archeological remains by scholars. Both literature and materials are incomplete records of early Icelandic society, but when analyzed in conjunction, they provide a more complete picture than either source alone.

One of the goals of this paper is to examine how women interacted in a society dominated by men and how the Sagas of Icelanders, can help us understand women of the Viking age. Though the saga source material interprets women through the male gaze, the limited accounts of women in the sagas can be coupled with material evidence to provide a different perspective. Though the material evidence that survives was influenced by gender, class, and other social phenomena, it was not explicitly authored by men. Thus, material evidence helps us understand the saga women outside a purely literary perspective, and the sagas lend context to material evidence.

For this paper, I chose to examine a single saga out of the dozens of Sagas of Icelanders. *Eyrbyggja Saga* or *The Saga of the People of Eyri*, which I will refer to by its Icelandic name for the sake of consistency, is one of the family sagas of Iceland. I chose this text because of its diverse portrayals of female characters and abiding supernatural theme. There have been several studies of the characters of *Eyrbyggja saga*, and even of the specific role of the female characters.<sup>2</sup> Even though this saga is well-studied, there is very little on textiles, especially in a non-magical context. Examples from *Eyrbyggja saga* are used to support more general theories of witchcraft in the Viking age.<sup>3</sup> These instances of magic are connected to textiles, and thus appear as supporting evidence for various theories, but are rarely discussed in the context of the saga. Although *Eyrbyggja saga* has fewer female characters with agency than sagas like *Laxadaela saga*, the instances where these characters appear are still valuable resources for discussions of how women wield power in the literature.

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<sup>2</sup> Forrest S. Scott. "The Woman Who Knows: Female Characters of *Eyrbyggja saga*" in *Cold Councils: The Women in Old Norse Literature and Myth*, eds. Sarah M. Anderson and Karen Swenson. (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2001); Knut Odner. "Þórgunna's testament: a myth for moral contemplation and social apathy," in *From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*. ed. Gisli Pálsson. (Enfield Lock: Hisarlik Press, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> Neil Price. *The Viking Way: Magic and Mind in Late Iron Age Scandinavia*. Second Edition. (Oxford and Philadelphia: Oxbow Books, 2019); Karen Bek-Pedersen. *The Norms in Old Norse Mythology*. (Edinburg: Dunedin Academic Press, 2011).

In this paper, I examine how three female characters, Geirrid, Katla, and Thorgunna display different aspects of the connection between knowledge, gender, and textiles. In *Eyrbyggja saga*, specific moments of female characters interacting with textiles, magic, and other people provide a basis by which to analyze the more complex relationships between literary and material evidence.

## **Categorizing Knowledge**

I have sorted these instances in *Eyrbyggja saga* into three categories of knowledge: public, known to the whole society, private, known only to one or two individuals, and semi-private, restricted by space and social class. The distinctions between communities of knowers in this society helps scholars understand the culture and people of Viking Age and Medieval Iceland. I incorporate discussions of literature, physical materials, and spaces to reconstruct social phenomena.

The most widespread knowledge based around textiles is that of public perception of clothing and color. Literary texts use descriptions of clothing to distinguish the social position of characters. Clothing is also physical and public. Certain cloths, color, and styles are the direct result of economic status, social relationship networks, and gender. Information gained through clothing choice was available to both men and women as a public interaction with society. Geirrid, Katla, and Thorgunna are all identified in the narrative of *Eyrbyggja saga* through their clothing. The specific colors each character wears, such as Geirrid's blue cloak, and Katla's enchanted red-brown tunic, can be analyzed as symbol and metaphor. Color is also something that is a material quality. The dyeing process was complex and involved plants which were grown outside of Iceland. Certain colors were harder to achieve than others which restricted access to the wealthier members of society. Thorgunna's wealth of clothing and bed-furnishings causes strife between her and Thurid, and influences how the narrative of the story continues. Physical characteristics of

textiles, like color, and narrative accounts of textiles like those that belong to Thorgunna, both fall into the public category of knowledge because they are visible and on display to all members of society.

The most intimate form of knowledge related to textiles in Icelandic society is secret magical knowledge. Unlike the public categories which are concerned with representation in general society, this category involves knowledge that is not willingly shared and distinguishes the knower from others. For women, this category primarily manifests in magical or supernatural knowledge. Textiles had magical and religious connotations in Viking age Iceland. Or rather, certain magical practices were intimately connected to textile practices, like spinning and weaving, and the resonance which surrounded these secret rituals spread to non-magical textiles. All three female characters which make up the bulk of my analysis of *Eyrbyggja saga* are connected with magic. Though the magical knowledge is made somewhat public in its appearance in the sagas, it is not publicly announced, nor is it common to all women. Katla, Geirrid, and Thorgunna each exhibit unique, private knowledge, and all of it is manifested as magic connected to textiles.

Some textile knowledge is neither in full view of the society nor is it known by one individual. For women in Viking Age Iceland, this semi-private knowledge was exemplified by textile labor in the *dyngja*. In the literary record, men never spin, weave, or sew. Instead, women labored with each other to make the cloth that kept the entire society alive.<sup>4</sup> As a separate space dominated by women, this building formed the basis of a culture where women shared stories and

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<sup>4</sup> Michèle Hayeur Smith. *The Valkyries' Loom: The Archaeology of Cloth Production and Female Power in the North Atlantic* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2020); Jenny Jochens. *Women in Old Norse Society*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); Ben Cartwright. "Making the cloth that binds us. The role of textile production in producing Viking-Age identities" in *Viking Worlds: Things, Spaces and Movement* ed. Marianne Hem Eriksen (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2014).



practical knowledge without male interference. Because it was so secluded from the male presence, there are few instances of women working in the *dyngja* in the textual sources. However, through a combination of archeological evidence of textile work in the *dyngja*, the brief literary mentions can be explored in new ways. Thorgunna's story in *Eyrbyggja saga* shows how women reacted to the introduction of a foreigner into the native Icelandic textile labor and the expected behaviors Thorgunna is expected to exhibit in order to fully participate in their society. Textiles are the focus around which women shared knowledge and interacted away from the male gaze.

The separation of knowledge between the public sphere, the private sphere, and the space in between is supported by evidence from literature and archeology. The specific examples from *Eyrbyggja saga*, coupled with material evidence allow for detailed analysis of how women and textiles influenced community Viking Age and Medieval Iceland.

## ***Eyrbyggja saga* Overview**

*Eyrbyggja saga* is one of the family sagas of Iceland. It details the Christianization of the region of Eyri on the Snaefellsness peninsula, especially around the area of Helgafell. This Christianization involves several generations of the families who settled this area, and their numerous feuds. Snorri the Priest is one of the main characters of the feud and is generally the protagonist of the saga. The feud plot and the religious change both influence the portrayals of female characters who are described as witches.

Geirrid Thorolf Twist-foot's Daughter is introduced in Chapter 15 as an important character in the early part of Snorri the Priest's ongoing feuds. Geirrid provides some interesting examples of how women, especially those viewed as witches are handled in this literature. Firstly, she is a widow and respected woman who is renowned for her knowledge of magic. She lives with

her son and his family, though it is clear from their interactions that she wields more power in their family than any of the other women on the farm. Geirrid also gives magic lessons to a young farmer. Geirrid's family is prosperous and well-liked by the community.

Geirrid is placed in direct opposition to Katla, another widow who has magical knowledge. Katla also lives with her son Odd nearby Geirrid's family at Holt. Both of these characters are negatively portrayed in the saga descriptions and are disliked in the community. She is described as "a fine-looking woman, but not very well liked."<sup>5</sup> Her son, Odd, is also disliked because he is "a big robust man, loud-mouthed, a born trouble-maker, and given to gossip and slander."<sup>6</sup> The general negative portrayal of these characters in the narrative is related to the fact that Odd is on the opposite side of the feud than Snorri the Priest, Geirrid's son, and other positive figures in the narrative. Katla's primary motivation is to keep her son from danger, and promote his reputation. She makes Odd a magic tunic, reddish-brown in color, which prevents weapons from harming him. Her other acts of magic produce illusions to hide Odd from hostile men. Though Katla is magically skilled, she and Odd are eventually defeated and executed.

Though Geirrid and Katla are of different economic status and have different relationships to the community, they have compatible magic powers. After the scene in which, Katla has thwarted the efforts of the men who want to take revenge on Odd, Geirrid arrives with the men to confront Katla. Katla recognizes Geirrid by her bright blue cloak, unique among her party. After countering Katla's magic and participating in their execution, Geirrid is not mentioned again in the saga.

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<sup>5</sup> *Eyrbyggja Saga*. trans. Herman Pálsson and Paul Edwards. (Edinburgh: Southside Publishers, LTD., 1973), 59

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

On the surface, the message of the story is clear. The two magical women are placed in opposition to one another. The “bad” witch is punished with the help of the “good” witch. The victor in their contest, indicates the narrative opinion of how characters should behave in society.

The third character I examine in detail appears later in the saga and has a more active role in the story for several chapters. Thorgunna is a complex figure in *Eyrbyggja saga*. She is full of contradictions: simultaneously associated with magic and a devout Christian, aging and large but still beautiful, reserved and proud with a crush on a teenage boy, and both polite and vengeful after death. She is a foreigner who is not a part of the on-going feud plot. The series of chapters dealing with Thorgunna are filled with all kinds of hauntings and while she has some connection to the great number of deaths and hauntings, it is unclear what exactly her role is after she is buried.

Thorgunna is a Hebridean woman who sails to Iceland, she possesses many fine clothes and magnificent bed hangings. She doesn't get along with the rest of the people whom she works for in Iceland, but she works hard at weaving and is a devout Christian. When the adults of the farm are raking hay one autumn day, they are overwhelmed by a shower of blood, which will not dry from Thorgunna's hay or clothing. She foresees her own death in this omen and falls ill. On her deathbed she requests that she be buried at Skalholt and a proper mass said over her body. She gifts her clothing to her hosts but requires that her beautiful bed-clothes be burned. All of these terms are agreed to but upon Thorgunna's death, the mistress of the house refuses to burn the bed linens. On the several days journey to Skalholt with Thorgunna's body, the coffin bearers are treated inhospitably by one of the farmers along the way. That night, Thorgunna appears, stark naked, in the kitchen and makes a meal for the coffin bearers. They eat it without issue, but the incident scares the rest of the people along the way so that they treat the bearers well. Thorgunna is buried without further issue, however, when the coffin-bearers return, people begin to go mad,

or get sick, and die at the farm. There are many incidents of the dead returning to the main house, and dozens of people end up dying and joining the growing ghostly bands. Finally, Snorri the Priest is brought in to end the hauntings. The first thing he orders is for Thorgunna's bed-clothes to be burnt and then they hold a full legal trial for all the ghosts. As each one is accused, they peacefully get up and leave.

Thorgunna's position as an outsider in the community gives us the unique chance to examine firstly how outsiders are received in the community based on their clothing and possessions, as well as how women formed community. Coupled with archeological evidence of *dyngjur* and textile fragments, a close reading of Thorgunna's presence in the saga opens up the world of the women centric society.

Thorgunna also has secret magical knowledge even though she is never explicitly called a witch or sorcerer. Magic in Viking age Iceland often included prophecy and ideas of fate and destiny. Thorgunna has visions of the future and is named as a weaver. Thus, reading Thorgunna's story with the idea of the connection between weaving, fate, and prophecy provides new insights into how this type of knowledge functioned in society.

## **PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE**

Clothing is a public representation of social and economic status. It exists in the physical world and as metaphor in literature. Characters in the sagas identify others based on the color of their clothing, displaying their awareness of the social conceptions surrounding color. In the literature, Geirrid and Katla present information to the people with whom they interact by wearing and making clothes of certain colors. Physical evidence also suggests the importance of color in social situations. Dyeing methods included plants and chemicals dependent on climate and

location. Other than browns, yellows, and poor-quality reds, native Icelandic plants did not produce good dyes. Vividly colored cloth, like dark blues and vibrant reds were dyed outside of Iceland and imported. Only those who were economically privileged had access to saturated colors, making these a publicly visible symbol of wealth. Literature and materials inform each other and provide nuanced views of public information when analyzed together.

Language indicates cultural values which are present both in literature as well as history. There are words in Old Norse that distinguish colorful cloth (*litklaedi*), fancy clothes (*skrudklaedi*), and denote a “well-dressed man” (*Skarsmadr*).<sup>7</sup> All of these words, especially the one denoting color, show that dyed clothing was present and admired in the Icelandic culture. The colorful cloth was partially preferred due to its foreign origin. These words show the cultural importance of color and style of clothing as a marker of social status.

In literary sources, descriptions of clothing were used by authors to indicate information about characters. The sagas suggest that blue and black, interchangeable in the Old Norse language, were associated with death.<sup>8</sup> When men headed out for revenge, they would dress in blue.<sup>9</sup> A sorceress in *Vatnsdaela saga* wears a black cloak, which appears to be more than functional clothing.<sup>10</sup> When Geirrid goes to confront Katla she wears a blue cloak and “the people at Holt saw them coming, and Katla was told there were now fourteen of them, one in bright-colored clothes. ‘That must be Geirrid the witch,’ said Katla, ‘and this means that something more than sorcery’s needed.’”<sup>11</sup> Geirrid’s blue clothes are consistent with literary conventions that use the colors blue and black to indicate omens of death and revenge. Due to the metaphorical uses of

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<sup>7</sup> Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 158.

<sup>8</sup> Hayeur Smith, *Valkyries Loom*, 35.

<sup>9</sup> Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 159.

<sup>10</sup> Price, *The Viking Way*, 127.

<sup>11</sup> *Eyrbyggja saga*, 79.

the color blue, I would argue that in this case “bright-colored” means highly saturated blue, such as royal or navy blue, rather than light colored.

Magic was a way in which women enacted revenge, especially violently, so associating witches, like Geirrid, with blue clothing is a continuation of this theme. Geirrid purposefully wears a blue cloak to confront Katla because that communicates a specific message in the saga. In the literature world, characters identify the intentions of others based on the colors of their clothing. Color was a way to broadcast knowledge to the community.

In the physical world, blue textiles were associated with women. In Iceland, 65% of female burials and only 31% of male burials included blue textiles.<sup>12</sup> This statistic indicates how color was associated with gender. If the majority of graves, regardless of gender, contained blue textiles, it might be interpreted as corroboration of the association between the color blue and death in literary sources. However, the statistically significant difference between male and female burials indicates gendered connotations of the color blue.

Blue was also a color reserved for wealthy individuals. While there is no evidence of sumptuary laws that legally restricted colors of clothing to certain classes, there were economic barriers to color for Icelanders. Guðrún Bjarnadóttir studies the historical uses of Icelandic plants and is a professional natural dyer. She argues that blue was reserved for the upper classes because the plant which produces blue dye could not be grown in Iceland.<sup>13</sup> Before indigo was traded from India in the Early-modern era, woad (*Isatis tinctora*), which contains the same chemical pigment as indigo, was used to produce durable blue dye. Even cloth that was made in Iceland from

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<sup>12</sup> Michèle Hayeur Smith et al. “‘Tangled up in Blue’: The Death, Dress and Identity of an Early Viking-Age Female Settler from Ketilsstadir, Iceland,” *Medieval Archaeology*, 63. 109.

<sup>13</sup> Guðrún Bjarnadóttir. *Plant Dyeing in Iceland* (Ölfusi: Guðrún Bjarnadóttir, 2020), 27.

Icelandic wool had to be exported to be dyed blue. Though this trade was not uncommon, it required resources.

Saturated color, like the dark blues described in the sagas, was even more difficult to produce than light blue. Woad requires a complex process to go from plant matter to dyed cloth. Yellow dye can be produced simply by boiling green leaves (such as lupin and rhubarb leaves in Iceland) in water and then boiling wool in that solution. It takes time but uses few ingredients, and is not technically difficult. Dyeing with woad involves manipulation of pH to separate pigment from biological material, fermentation to remove oxygen from the dye bath, and many rounds of exposure to air to produce bright blue.<sup>14</sup> The more saturated the color blue, the more plant material it requires, and the more difficult it is to achieve. In addition to the plant material, woad dyeing requires chemicals to raise the pH, such as lye or ammonia from urine, and still others for the fermentation process. All of these factors make blue dyed cloth particularly expensive. Geirrid's cloak indicates certain information in the saga world, but it also communicates wealth and femininity based on the material evidence.

Geirrid's expensive clothing is contrasted with a magic tunic Katla sews for her son Odd, which is described as "reddish-brown."<sup>15</sup> The word "reddish-brown" indicates some red color, but the emphasis is placed on the word brown. This word does not describe a particularly bright nor vibrant color. Though pure reds were difficult to dye, and came from foreign sources, like madder (*Rubia tinctorum*) and tree insects used for vermilion (*Kermes vermilio*), it was possible to achieve warm browns, and light reds from Icelandic materials.

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<sup>14</sup> This information comes from personal experimentation dyeing with woad.

<sup>15</sup> Eyrbyggja 64

Brown dye is much more easily sourced than blue dye, or even bright red. Brown dye can be made from three different species of Icelandic lichen (*Parmelia omphaloeds*, *Parmelia sulcata*, *Parmelia saxatilis*).<sup>16</sup> These lichens are mentioned in the Sagas of Icelanders as “brown-grass” because of their use in dyeing. The “reddish” part of “reddish-brown” could have come from a pigment from outside Iceland, though the fact that it would have been mixed with brown makes the color much less expensive since less of the red chemical (alizarin or purpurin) would have been needed than if the garment was vibrant red. The reddish pigment could have also come from plants native to Iceland, specifically Lady’s Bedstraw (*Galium verum*) and Northern Bedstraw (*Galium borale*).<sup>17</sup> Both of these are in the same family as madder but the roots, which contain the pigment, are much smaller. These plants would likely have been used to dye small amounts of embroidery thread bright red, rather than entire garments. When mixed with other dye colors, could have been used to create that reddish color alongside the brown. Clothing dyed with native Icelandic plants was less expensive to obtain than cloth from abroad. If Katla’s tunic were bright red, it would be a symbol of wealth, but because of the muted color and the dyeing methods used to achieve it, the tunic is an example of how various colors indicate different levels of social status.

Color shows different things in the literary and material worlds. Blue is symbolic of revenge and death in literature, and more indicative of wealth based on material evidence. However, these interpretations can inform each other. While the primary function of Geirrid’s cloak may be metaphorical, it also supports the idea that she is well-connected in society. She is a respected woman who has resources at her disposal and access to trade networks. Conversely, Katla and her son function as antagonists in the text. She and her family are in conflict with the

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<sup>16</sup> Guðrún Bjarnadóttir and Jóhann Óli Hilmarsson, *Plants of Iceland: Traditional Uses and Folklore*. (Borgarfjordur: Bjarnadóttir and Hilmarsson, 2018), 19.

<sup>17</sup> Guðrún Bjarnadóttir et al. *Plants of Iceland*, 57.



protagonists of the saga, and are not as well off in society as Geirrid. Her position in the story supports the interpretation of “reddish-brown” as an indication of lower social standing than pure red or blue. Additional layers of meaning are revealed by using material evidence from the period in which the texts were written to inform studies of literature. Just as literary evidence can support discussions of materiality.

Textiles were reflections of women’s personalities and power. Later in *Eyrbyggja saga*, the character Thorgunna possesses many valuable imported textiles including “English sheets,” and “a silk-covered quilt,” which she would not have made herself despite weaving being her primary occupation. The information spread about her before she is introduced to the community is that she “had some valuable things with her, very hard to get in Iceland.”<sup>18</sup> This connects foreign textiles with wealth, and emphasizes the limited market options in Iceland. The entire relationship between Thorgunna and her hostess, Thurid, is predicated upon the textiles Thorgunna possesses and refuses to sell. Thurid offers Thorgunna a place to stay because she hopes she will be able to convince Thorgunna to sell her clothes. In the Sagas of Icelanders, beautiful clothing does not “render a woman’s presence purely decorative: the wealth she bears signifies a silent power.”<sup>19</sup> Thorgunna’s presentation to the community is based firstly on her possession of textile wealth, and then her refusal to share that wealth with people. That selfish possession is linked to the events after her death.

On her deathbed, Thorgunna gifts her clothing to the mistress of the house, but demands that her exquisite bed-clothes are burned. After Thorgunna dies, Thurid convinces her husband to let her keep the fine cloth, contrary to Thorgunna’s warnings. Thurid views Thorgunna as selfish

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<sup>18</sup> *Eyrbyggja saga*, 156.

<sup>19</sup> Judy Quinn. 'Women in Old Norse Poetry and Sagas', in *A Companion Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 520.

and unfriendly because of her refusal to part with her clothing and textiles. Thorgunna is connected to the world of the living after her death by these beautiful bed-clothes. The entire farm is aware of her presence because of the physical nature of her possessions. These textiles represent many aspects of the public knowledge of Thorgunna.

## **SECRET KNOWLEDGE**

While some knowledge is shared by the entire community, individuals also have thoughts and information that is shared with no one else. Though this knowledge can be displayed through actions and events, it is kept secret until specific moments or not fully exposed. In Viking Age and Medieval Iceland, this information often took the form of magical knowledge. Geirrid, Katla, and Thorgunna have knowledge of the supernatural.

Women's supernatural power is also linked to textiles. Katla uses textile tools for her illusion magic, which Geirrid is able to counter and Thorgunna has knowledge of the future and is linked to weaving. While this knowledge is shared with others, it is not public, nor is it common to a large group of people. Katla and Geirrid have a shared knowledge base, as they are able to compete with one another on a supernatural level, but neither explains their actions nor the mechanics of their magic to anyone else. Knowledge, gender, magic, and textiles are all connected in material evidence and literary accounts.

## **Problems with studying Viking Age Magic**

There are several difficulties in studying and writing about Viking Age magic. Firstly, there is an issue of modern English terminology. Today we use terms like witchcraft, magic, spells, and charms which are performed by sorcerers, witches, warlocks, and wizards, and don't connect them to a particular practice. This was not necessarily the case in Viking Age Iceland. The terminology

we use today, especially words like “witchcraft” and “sorcery” have negative connotations. As explored in detail in Stephen Mitchell’s book *Witchcraft and Magic in the Nordic Middle Ages*, public perception of magic shifted with the conversion to Christianity.<sup>20</sup> In the pre-Christian culture of Scandinavia there was more social acceptance of helpful, healing, or protective magic, and condemnation of magic which harmed person or property. After conversion, and especially in the Early-Modern era, all magic was an indication of a pact with the devil and thus evil, regardless of its intention and outcome. The witch crazes and trials of the 16th and 17th century produced negative connotations in words like “spell” and “witch” that associated them with Satanic practices which were not present in pre-Christian cultures. Though there was negative terminology for witchcraft in the Viking Age, there are modern connotations for English words which are the result of events that occurred in later Christian eras.

As this paper is reliant on English terminology, I must acknowledge several things. Words, like “sorcery” and “witchcraft” are used interchangeably in this paper. There are inescapable connotations with those terms, but when relevant, I specify the distinction between harmful magic, and socially acceptable magic, as well as between different forms of magic. Finally, because I am working with the Old Norse texts in translation, I am reliant on the translator’s interpretation of the English equivalent of magic, sorcery, witchcraft, illusion, etc. in the text.

While there is some indication that generalized terms developed, especially in the early Christian era, there is also evidence that words were linked to individual practices.<sup>21</sup> For example, according to Neil Price *seidr* which will be discussed in detail below, was used “simultaneously

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<sup>20</sup> Stephen Mitchell. *Witchcraft and Magic in the Nordic Middle Ages*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

<sup>21</sup> Price, *The Viking Way*, 37.

as a precise term and also as a generalization for ‘sorcery’ in our modern sense of the word.”<sup>22</sup> Magic was used in many contexts and was associated with a variety of terms and religious connotations. In the texts, it is clear that there was no single form of magic. Even specific terminology, like *seidr*, was used to describe many different types of rituals. Sometimes the word was not used even when the ritual context matches other descriptions of *seidr*.<sup>23</sup> There was also a small group of terms which did have a more derogatory meaning, “with a range of negative connotations that include sexual license, ugliness, stupidity and outright evil.”<sup>24</sup> Magic was used for divination, prophecy, illusion, manipulating the elements, steering the actions of supernatural beings, and for the purpose of protection or aggression.<sup>25</sup> Regardless of their outcome, these actions served to influence the physical and mental world in which humanity lived. The many different terms and uses for witchcraft support the theory that witchcraft had variable social interpretations. This paper does not focus on distinguishing different rituals and practices of Viking Age magic, but rather uses the instances of magic in the text to illustrate how secret knowledge was established and used by women in this society.

Another consideration when researching pre-Christian magic is the limits of the sources. Magic in the texts seems to represent numerous perspectives. Either magic is used as a plot device for the authors of the sagas, the description comes from a specific tradition that has been passed down through poetry and oral history but is no longer practiced, or the magic was still practiced at the time of writing. There is no way to know definitively what category any given description of magic falls under. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir argued that the descriptions of magic in the

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>23</sup> Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir. “Women’s Weapons: A Re-Evaluation of Magic in the ‘Íslendingasögur.’” *Scandinavian Studies* 81, no. 4 (2009). 417, 421.

<sup>24</sup> Price, *The Viking Way*, 77.

<sup>25</sup> Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir. “Women’s Weapons,” 410.; Price, *The Viking Way*, 36.

Icelandic sagas serve primarily a narrative function and “was used for literary purposes rather than to record past pagan religious practices.”<sup>26</sup> But as I show in my analysis, textiles form links between the literature and material culture which provides insight on how magical knowledge was used by women.

## **Secret Knowledge in Public situations**

Though magical knowledge is secret, it is used in social situations. Because certain characters use magic in public to influence others, magical knowledge impacts the story of *Eyrbyggja saga*. Without public usage and acknowledgement of magic in society, there would be no indication of the secret magical knowledge. The other link between private knowledge and scholars today is material evidence. Textiles, textile tools, and symbolic interpretations of textile tools which appear alongside other evidence of magico-religious belief in archeological remains, link magical, secret knowledge with the material world. Magical knowledge is revealed through its impact on others in literature and through its impact on the physical world.

Witchcraft had a place in the world of the sagas. As we have seen with Geirrid, witches could be highly respectable people. It is precisely because they possessed secret knowledge that witches were valued and feared members of the community. The public acknowledgement of individuals with unique secret knowledge shows how these knowledge categories can be layered for more detailed interpretation.

Geirrid and Katla are both publicly accepted as witches. The treatment of their various witchcraft skills in the saga narrative is dependent on their relationship to the community. Geirrid does not have to rely on magic because she has strong male relatives who she can manipulate into

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 432.

maintaining their honor or building higher social status for their family. Katla is less economically and socially advantaged and uses her private magical knowledge to benefit her family in a more practical way than Geirrid.

Geirrid has an unusually high position in society, but she must work hard to maintain it. She is a well-respected woman, primarily for her knowledge of witchcraft. She lives with her son at Mavahlid. Though her son owns the farm, Geirrid is the mistress of the house, which was one of the most important roles on the homestead.<sup>27</sup> As a widow, Geirrid was economically entitled to her husband's assets, but because the Icelandic patriarchal system defined female power through male kinship. Women were not allowed to represent themselves in the legal system, so Geirrid had to rely on her son, who carried the public power of the family.<sup>28</sup> Geirrid's respected position also comes from her knowledge of witchcraft. She makes a name for herself through her knowledge of witchcraft by offering lessons to Gunnlaug. As Stephen Mitchell and Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir have noted, the idea that "magic abilities are based on skill and knowledge and can be taught and learned rather than being innate is dominant... This magical knowledge can then be turned into power if used shrewdly."<sup>29</sup> Geirrid's character is just one example of how magic was tied to learning and knowledge, and that women acted as teachers in magical arts.

Geirrid is unique because her main association with magic is her knowledge rather than her actions. Other female characters utilize magic as a tool to gain power and agency. The actions they accomplish with magical knowledge are the focus of saga narrative. While women in the texts were a source of knowledge of the future, few other characters fulfill the role of wise woman without giving prophecies. Characters in Norse Mythology, like the volva in *Voluspa*, are valued

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<sup>27</sup> Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 116.

<sup>28</sup> Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir. "Women's Weapons," 427.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 411.

for their knowledge of the future. Geirrid is not a prophet nor does she do much active magic. Instead, Gunnlaug visits Geirrid because she is “a woman who knows a thing or two.”<sup>30</sup> Geirrid chooses to share secret knowledge in order to make connections in the society. That knowledge is not shared publicly. The nature of Geirrid and Gunnlaug’s lessons is not revealed in the saga narrative nor does Gunnlaug use his knowledge in the story. While magical knowledge was passed between people, the selectivity and secrecy with which it was shared increased its value.

Geirrid’s witchcraft knowledge is abstract but it serves Gunnlaug and the community when they confront Katla. Katla uses more active witchcraft both for protection and revenge, partially because she is in a worse social position and she and her son are not well-liked in the society. Her harmful witchcraft causes the community to punish her and Odd. When Geirrid joins the party looking for Odd, she helps foil Katla’s magic and the party hangs Odd for various crimes, and stones Katla to death.<sup>31</sup> Geirrid and Katla are witches and have similar knowledge as Geirrid is able to counter Katla’s magic with her own. In the literature, kinship is ultimately the deciding factor in their fates. The narrative of the *Eyrbyggja saga* privileges the family and allies of the saga heroes, especially Snorri the Priest, and paints their enemies, like Katla and Odd, as unlikable, and morally corrupt. In this saga, witchcraft is a literary device that drives the plot. The portrayal of female knowledge passes judgement on how that knowledge was used. Geirrid is respected for her passive knowledge, and Katla is persecuted for her actions. The condemnation of women taking an active role is clear. In this case, magical knowledge is best kept secret.

While witchcraft is clearly a literary device in the world of the sagas, it is not hard to make the connection to the historical Icelandic society. As shown by law codes and histories like Ari

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<sup>30</sup> *Eyrbyggja saga*, 59.

<sup>31</sup> *Eyrbyggja saga*, 80.

Thorgilsson's Book of the Icelanders (Íslendingabók) and the Book of Settlements (Landnámabók), medieval Icelandic society was structured around powerful individual farmers and their families.<sup>32</sup> Women fit into that society as wives, daughters, slaves, laborers, and sometimes magicians. Magic had a role and was regulated like other institutions. Magic knowledge was not shared openly but its existence was accepted as fact and social judgement was based on practice and practitioner. Only specific individuals, labeled with terms like sorcerers or witches possessed this knowledge. Its secrecy is what made magical knowledge so valuable and dangerous. However, it is the display of magic and its use in social situations such as those seen in the sagas which makes secret knowledge visible to scholars.

## ***Seidr***

No examination of Viking Age witchcraft and female knowledge would be complete without discussion of *seidr*. This type of magic has been theorized and studied by a number of scholars who have posited many interpretations of what the ritual of *seidr* could have looked like and the purpose of the magic. The historiography of this subject is detailed by Neil Price in *The Viking Way*, from the first scholars who published on *seidr* in the 1850s through the early 2000s.<sup>33</sup> *Seidr* is commonly defined as “staff magic” though the ritual purpose and meaning of the staffs is the subject of debate. Iron staffs have been found in graves attributed to sorcerers. Scholars, such as Eldar Heide, Leszek Gardela, and Karen Milek, have claimed that the staffs are similar to distaffs in form. Distaffs are one of several tools used for spinning. They are wooden staffs around which combed wool was wrapped to be easily available during the spinning process. Distaffs kept

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<sup>32</sup> Ari Thorgilsson, *The Book of the Icelanders - (Íslendingabók)*. trans. Halldór Hermannsson. (New York: Kraus Repr., 1966); *The Book of Settlements: Landnámabók*. translated by Herman Pálsson and Paul Edwards. (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1972).

<sup>33</sup> Price, *The Viking Way*.



wool clean and portable so women could spin when they had a spare moment. Distaffs are usually made out of wood, so the iron staffs were more likely metaphorical than literal distaffs. There are also several instances in source texts of seidr practitioners using staffs. In *Eirik the Red's Saga*, Thorbjorg Litlivolva possesses a special staff along with distinctive clothing that mark her as someone who does seidr. While this staff is not described as a distaff, the association between seidr, women, and staffs supports the idea that seidr staffs were inspired by women's textile tools.



Two “seeress’s staffs” from the National Museum of Denmark. The shorter one is from the Gävle area of Sweden and the longer from a grave at Fuldbby, near Ringsted in Denmark.



Distaff with basketwork cage from the Institute for Archeologies at the University of Innsbruck.

The main problem in the discussion of *seidr* is the fact that there seems to be no distinctive set of rituals and uses for *seidr*. Some instances of *seidr* in the texts involve everything from prophecy to weather magic and only some examples of magic involve staffs. In Katla's case, she uses a distaff for illusion magic, but the description of her magic in *Eyrbyggja saga* does not use the word *seidr*. Gardela infers that Katla's use of the distaff for magic is an example of *seidr*,

despite specific reference.<sup>34</sup> As this analysis examines the link between textiles and knowledge, it includes the interpretation of *seidr* as magic that involves spinning implements.

Katla uses her distaff to disguise Odd three different times. Before the people pursuing Odd leave her house for the final time, they break her distaff, thus suggesting they know of the connection between the magic and the staff, and intend to break the spell she has put on her son.<sup>35</sup> This protective illusion magic is unlike other depictions of *seidr*, especially the best known instance of a sorceress in *Eirik the Red's Saga*. In that text, Thorbjorg Litlivolva uses a *seidr* ritual to prophesy.<sup>36</sup> Another instance of a *seidr* practitioner, a volva, in Norse Myth is in the poem *Voluspa* (Seeress' prophecy) from the *Poetic Edda*.<sup>37</sup> Both of these references to *seidr* involve prophecy, not illusion magic, and neither mention textile tools, though Thorbjorg does carry a unique staff.

The link between Katla and *seidr* is primarily through the staffs found in female graves alongside other implements of sorcery. However, there could be a deeper metaphorical link dealing with the manipulation of the mind. Price claims that “more than anything else, *seidr* seems to have been an extension of the mind and its faculties.”<sup>38</sup> Both prophecy and illusion deal with feats of mental magic. Scholars have also argued that etymologically the word “*seidr*” means to extend and cast out.<sup>39</sup> Using the distaffs, the metaphorical threads “which might be conceived as the sorcerer's mind... or metaphorical spirits” can be spun into a cohesive product, such as prophecy or illusion.<sup>40</sup> As Gardela argues, *seidr* “meant dealing with another kind of reality – an elaborate

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<sup>34</sup> Leszek Gardela. ‘Into Viking minds: reinterpreting the staffs of sorcery and unravelling *seiðr*’, *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 4, 45–84. 2008, 56.

<sup>35</sup> Bek-Pedersen, *Norns in Old Norse Mythology*, 146.

<sup>36</sup> Eirik the Red's Saga, trans. Keneva Kunz, in *The Sagas of Icelanders* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 659.

<sup>37</sup> “Seeress' Prophecy” *Poetic Edda*, trans. Carolyne Larrington. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 3-12.

<sup>38</sup> Price, *The Viking Way*, 64.

<sup>39</sup> Heide, *Spinning Seidr*, 164.

<sup>40</sup> Gardela, *Viking Minds*, 49.

world of thought which has the capacity to change the ordinary into the supernatural.”<sup>41</sup> With the tunic and with her distaff magic, Katla takes objects from the physical, everyday world and transforms them into exceptional items. However, unlike the tunic which Katla manipulates physically to make it impervious to weapons, her illusion magic occurs only in the minds of Odd’s pursuers. When she hides Odd as a goat, she begins trimming and combing Odd’s hair, but all the other men can see is Katla playing with a goat and “trimming its forelock and beard and combing is wool.”<sup>42</sup> There is no indication that Odd actually becomes a goat, only that the others perceive him as such. It is this manipulation of mental faculties that makes Katla’s illusion magic easier to define as *seidr* rather than a different kind of magic. This connection between mind and magic supports the idea of magic as secret knowledge. Unlike the physical manifestations of magic which can be perceived in wider social circles, knowledge of mental magic is completely restricted to the practitioner and the victim.

It is difficult to determine the format of the rituals or the meaning of all the symbolic objects, but in the saga world Katla’s magic provides clues as to how *seidr* was used in different situations. The illusory shape-shifting Katla performs on Odd using her distaff is an example of how *seidr* could be used for personal gain rather than to prophecy for the benefit of the community. In the Old Icelandic written accounts, many *seidr* practitioners “led the lives of wanderers.”<sup>43</sup> Katla is not a foreigner nor a wanderer but has a marginal position in the community which is a trait “commonly attached to witches in folktales.”<sup>44</sup> She is an outsider in the community and uses

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>42</sup> *Eyrbyggja saga*, 78.

<sup>43</sup> Gardela, *Viking Minds*, 48.

<sup>44</sup> Bek-Pedersen, *The Norns in Old Norse Mythology*, 147.

her skills in *seidr* for the protection of her family. Though Geirrid knows how to counter Katla's spells, the way in which Katla uses her power is unique.

*Seidr* was linked to women and textiles through material evidence as well as literature. Katla's distaff induced illusion magic provides one specific way in which textiles and magic knowledge are linked. Katla's magic is private because no one else in the saga performs this type of magic. Her *seidr* magic also manipulates the minds of others rather than the material world, which provides no physical display of magic powers. While this story gives little indication of how *seidr* worked outside of the texts, it is supported by the material evidence of staves found in graves. There is no way to know if distaffs were actually used to perform magic in Viking Age Iceland, but the combination of text and archeology supports the idea of magical knowledge related to textiles.

## **THE *DYNGJA* AS INTERSECTION OF PUBLIC AND PRIVATE KNOWLEDGE**

Knowledge is differently according to social position. Some knowledge, such as that displayed by clothing and color is shared visually throughout the society. Magical knowledge is highly restricted to the individual and only appears when it is used practically or shared selectively. There is plenty of knowledge between these two that is not broadcasted nor entirely concealed. It is often restricted by social boundaries. The wealthy have access to different information than less economically advantaged people. Men knew different things than women. In a society that was especially striated along gender lines, skills, stories, and knowledge were specified by gender. It is no surprise that women's knowledge and textiles are interconnected. The location in which textiles were produced physically separated women from men. This separation led to the

development of a female-centric culture focused around textiles and contributed to the supernatural connotations of weaving.

## **What is a *Dyngja*?**

The *dyngja* was both a physical location in which textile work was done and a space in which women formed community. A *dyngja* is mentioned in the introduction of *Darradarljod*, a skaldic poem interspersed in the prose text of *Njal's saga*. In this poem a man witnesses a group of Valkyries enter a *dyngja* to weave with swords and human entrails on a loom weighted with human heads.<sup>45</sup> Through this process they seem to be creating the fates of men for an upcoming battle. The man trespasses the boundaries of the feminine space by spying on the work inside the *dyngja* and glimpses the supernatural women manipulating the fates of warriors before a battle by weaving. Jochens notes how the sources treat cloth in society as “characteristic of the male perspective of the sources that although references to homespun as units of value are ubiquitous and information about the quality and measurement of the export cloth are full and detailed - all areas under male jurisdiction - the narratives are all but silent on the essential preliminaries of spinning the thread and weaving the cloth.”<sup>46</sup> As no texts mention male participation in textile production, nor do the actions performed inside the *dyngja* appear in literature other than in *Darradarljod*, we can assume this space was separate from the oversight of men.

As women sat together spinning and weaving for hours at a time, they entertained themselves by “talking, singing, and coordinating their individual efforts to create cloth,”<sup>47</sup> In fact, much of the socialization between women occurred while they worked. Unlike male labor which involved much more movement through space, women’s work was often done sitting down in the

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<sup>45</sup> *Njal's Saga*, Lee M. Hollander (trans.) (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1998), 349.

<sup>46</sup> Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 134.

<sup>47</sup> Hayeur Smith, *Valkyries Loom*, 16.

case of spinning, or standing in front of a stationary loom, in the case of weaving.<sup>48</sup> These activities were limited to an enclosed space and were often done at the same time as other women. The separation of textile activities into their own space, as evidenced by archeological data, created a female-centric culture. The songs, stories, chants, and gossip which entertained women at work were performed by those who participated in textile labor.

Karen Milek has done the most comprehensive archeological analysis of “pit houses” to date, which she links to *dyngja*, in her 2021 paper “The Roles of Pit Houses and Gendered Spaces on Viking-Age Farmsteads in Iceland.” Below is her interpretive diagram of the floor plan of an Icelandic pit-house based on her excavations and soil analysis.<sup>49</sup> In this paper, Milek examines the interpretations of Icelandic pit-houses by various scholars and concludes that these were likely the *dyngjur* from literature. She produces convincing evidence for the theory that the pit-houses were used for all kinds of textile work from spinning, to weaving, to dyeing.

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<sup>48</sup> Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 100.

<sup>49</sup> Karen Milek. “The Roles of Pit Houses and Gendered Spaces on Viking-Age Farmsteads in Iceland,” *Medieval Archaeology*, 56:1, 85-130, 2021, 118.

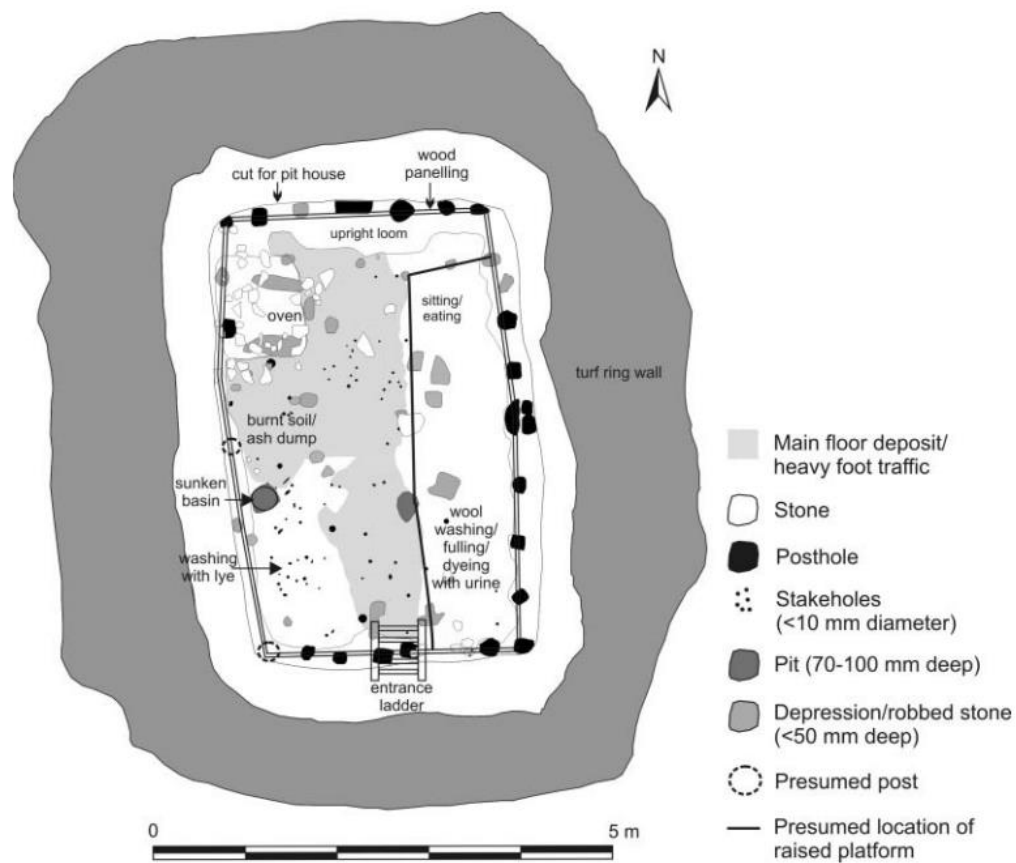


FIG 14

Interpretive plan of Hofstaðir G. Drawing by K Milek after an original by Gavin Lucas, © K Milek and Fornleifastofnun Islands 2009.

Archeological remains also suggest a more than practical use for the space. The pit-houses were half-submerged in the ground and ritually filled in when their use was discontinued. The material space of the *dyngja* reflects the connection between weaving, female voice, and magic. Not only does the fatal weaving in *Darradarljod* happen in a *dyngja*, thus linking the space to the magical connotations of that particular weaving, archeological remains tell the story of an oddly liminal space. Milek notes that these structures were semi-subterranean, and that they were intentionally filled in when their use was discontinued.<sup>50</sup> The subterranean nature of these

<sup>50</sup> Milek, "The Roles of Pit Houses," 120.

buildings is odd for a space in which light was important to complete the work. Milek notes that the buildings had wooden walls, unusual in an era when most Icelandic buildings were built from turf, but helpful for adding windows to a structure. She also notes the presence of a large, enclosed stove, which would have provided light, heat, and kept sparks away from the textiles better than an open fire.<sup>51</sup> There is little functional purpose for the *dyngja* to be half-underground. Instead, the unique placement is highly symbolic of the *dyngja* as a liminal and secretive place. This is supported by analysis from Karen Bek-Pedersen who observes the link between the Nornir and subterranean spaces like wells. Though the *dyngja* was an everyday building and not a designated ritual space, it became a place “wherein certain magical or quasi-magical things could take place under certain circumstances.”<sup>52</sup> This notion of the *dyngja* as a space associated with supernatural themes, is also supported by the infilling of the pit houses around the conversion to Christianity. Milek notes that longhouses built in the Christian period do not show evidence of *dyngjur*, and that the *dyngja* on farmsteads were filled in with iron deposits and used for animal shelters when they fell out of use. The association between weaving and female supernatural knowledge was no longer relevant in the Christianized worldview of Medieval Icelanders.

## **Formation of Female-centric Community**

Social knowledge is based on space. In the public sphere, clothing and possessions are visual representations of social status. Because the people are all present in a shared social space, and on display to others, the visual aspects of clothing, such as cut and color become especially significant. When groups of people, such as female laborers on the farm are physically separated from the most public level of society, social access to information regarding them changes. As

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>52</sup> Bek-Pedersen, *The Norns in Old Norse Mythology*, 109.



textile labor was so heavily gendered, the space in which it was completed also became a gendered space, from which men were excluded. There were physical walls placed between groups of women and the rest of the farm. Access to information, shared visually or verbally, inside the *dyngja* was restricted to the women who worked in the space. This likely created a separate set of knowledge that was privy only to women and was created because of their role in making textiles. This shared knowledge also created a woman-centric community based around textile labor.<sup>53</sup>

Thorgunna's story is the primary example from *Eyrbyggja saga* which demonstrates this restricted community of knowers from the *dyngja*. As an outsider coming into the society of the Icelanders who live at Frod river, she provides a unique opportunity to view their women-centric culture. In a way, she allows the male perspective of the sagas to glimpse the restricted networks of women. The reason that there is not much mentioned in the sagas about women's textile labor or the *dyngja* community is because of the male perspective of the saga. While the saga does not mention a *dyngja*, it does state that "Thorgunna spent every day weaving" and that "she wasn't every easy to get on with and didn't waste much time on conversation".<sup>54</sup> Textile labor would have been performed at Frod river long before Thorgunna arrived as wool and cloth production were major income sources for Viking age Icelandic farms. Her introduction to the textile producing community disrupts the accepted social order, an action important enough to warrant mention in the saga.

Thorgunna is simultaneously part of the gendered community because she spends each day weaving, but she is also set apart from the group because she does not gossip and does not get along with the rest of the women. Thorgunna comes to Iceland alone, so the way in which she is

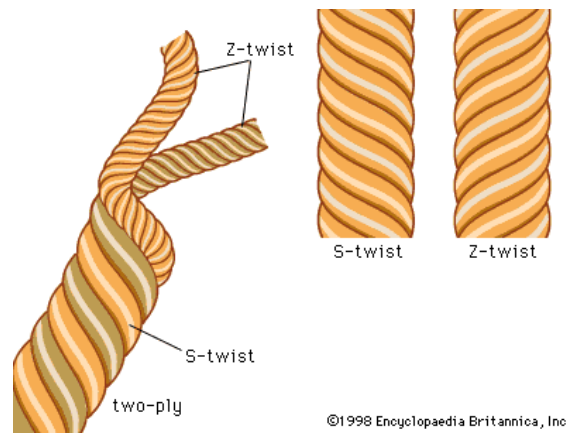
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<sup>53</sup> Cartwright, "Making the Cloth that Binds Us", 162.

<sup>54</sup> *Eyrbyggja saga*, 158.

perceived by the community at Frodriver is colored only by her actions and disposition rather than by her family and kinship networks. Thorgunna interacts with the social structure of Iceland in a different way than Katla and Geirrid because of her foreignness, knowledge, and lack of familial network. Because of the nature of textile production and location, Thorgunna's lack of full participation in the community emphasizes the discord between her and her hostess and influences Thorgunna's portrayal in the saga as a foreign woman.

The interaction between many ethnicities of textile makers in Iceland is evident in textile fragments from the Viking Age found on farm sites and in graves. Fragments of Icelandic textiles show many different spinning and weaving techniques. Norwegian cloth at this time was Z/Z-spun (using



yarn spun in a clockwise direction) whereas cloth from the British Isles was Z/S-spun (using yarn spun in both clockwise and counterclockwise directions).<sup>55</sup> Both of these types of textiles have been found in from Viking age sites in Iceland suggesting that ethnic origins of the women involved in cloth production influenced their spinning and weaving techniques. The variety of cloth types found in different parts of Iceland also shows that there was little standardization between farms and supports the idea that the *dyngja* cultures incorporated many different perspectives and did not have a single way of making cloth. Thorgunna is a literary example of how women of many backgrounds and ethnicities were incorporated into the communities of Icelandic textile makers.

<sup>55</sup> Hayeur Smith, *Valkyries Loom*, 39.

The skills required to produce textiles would have been taught from a very young age. Cartwright infers that “by the time practitioners reached adulthood many of the skills probably had become second nature.”<sup>56</sup> Today, spinners often only spin in the direction which they were taught, for no other reason than that it is tradition to spin a certain direction.<sup>57</sup> This is likely the cause of the differences in spin direction from the Viking Age. As Michèle Hayeur Smith has argued, “spin direction and the combinations in which differently spun threads are used are nonrandom, culturally informative attributes of textile assemblages. Conversely, major changes in regional patterns of spinning and weaving are also socially informative acts.”<sup>58</sup> Thorgunna came from the Hebrides, which likely had a slightly different method of weaving and spinning than the people at Frodriver. This difference in skills and tradition likely set her apart from the other female laborers. Because Thorgunna did not participate in the spoken culture as much, the difference in her material culture serves to further ostracize her from the community.

Spoken word was vital in a society which did not produce written texts, like Viking age Iceland. Poets, who were usually male, gained social status through their ability to craft the spoken word. The general conception is that men spoke while women wove.<sup>59</sup> Greater importance was placed on men’s ability to consistently verbally perform, especially in poetry. In a society dominated by the male voice, in law, history, and economy, it is difficult to see the female voice. However, arguments have been made that the best avenue for women’s voices was through their textile work. Lena Elisabeth Norrman’s *Viking Women: The Narrative Voice in Woven Tapestry*

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<sup>56</sup> Cartwright, *Making the Cloth*, 162.

<sup>57</sup> Jill C Minar. “Motor Skills and the Learning Process: The Conservation of Cordage Final Twist Direction in Communities of Practice.” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 57, no. 4 (2001), 388.

<sup>58</sup> Michèle Hayeur Smith “Weaving Wealth: Cloth and Trade in Viking Age and Medieval Iceland.” *Textiles and the medieval economy : production, trade, and consumption of textiles, 8th-16th centuries*, ed A. Huang and C. Jahnke. (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2015), 27.

<sup>59</sup> Hayeur smith, *Valkyries Loom*, 29.

explores how tapestry weaving in particular shows a unique female perspective.<sup>60</sup> I believe this has something to do with the time and labor put into textiles in the pre-Modern era. In an industrial, globalized society, we are not only separated from the process of making clothing, but machinery produces the vast majority of global textiles. In the Viking age, textile production was incredibly time consuming and as women did most of the labor in this field, the textiles they produced were undoubtedly influenced by their personal touches. Textiles were not only valuable material goods but were “the equivalent of a specifically feminine voice which does not speak in ordinary words and therefore cannot be heard, but which is nevertheless as effective and significant.”<sup>61</sup> Though women’s words were limited in the public sphere, the undoubtedly spoke to one another in their own space. The only way we have to perceive female voices is through male accounts of their public words or through material evidence that women produced.

Female culture was so entrenched in the private space of the *dyngja*, that it is little wonder that the male accounts from the sagas do not contain many descriptions of women doing that labor. Male saga authors were not only writing after weaving was moved from the *dyngja* into the central house in the early Christian era, but the male perspective which forms the majority of saga narrative would not have been privy to the process of women’s labor, even if they benefited from the products of such. The literary sources, like *Eyrbyggja saga*, do tell us how women interacted under the male gaze. For instance, Thorgunna is standoffish and unlikable with all the members of the farm, including the women. The texts also tell us that knowledge known only to women was treated with respect, and often had a supernatural connotation. The group of Valkyries in *Darradarljod* manipulate fate by weaving, and some magic rituals required songs only women

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<sup>60</sup> Lena Elisabeth Norrman. *Viking Women: The Narrative Voice in Woven Tapestries*. (New York: Cambria Press, 2008).

<sup>61</sup> Bek-Pedersen, *Norns in Old Norse Mythology*, 156.

knew, like Chapter Four of *Eirik the Red's Saga*. There is very little textual evidence of women's labor, which is partially why material evidence is so important for this subject.

## **Weaving and Prophecy**

Female knowledge is involved with the connection between weaving and prophecy. In *Eyrbyggja saga*, Thorgunna best embodies this concept because she spends her time weaving and has knowledge of omens, and events which are fated to happen after her death. Thorgunna's weaving, coupled with her fore-knowledge, indicate the connection between prophecy and weaving that is explored elsewhere in textual sources of Old Norse myth.

Unfortunately for scholars, while there is a connection between prophecy and textiles, it does not appear often in text sources. Karen Bek-Pedersen's *The Norns in Old Norse Mythology* is the most comprehensive study of female goddesses and their roles in destiny and prophecy. In it, she spends a chapter discussing the three instances of female supernatural figures actively engaged in textile work. The only one of these three texts which involves weaving is the oft-cited *Darradarljod*. The *Valkyrjur* as choosers of the slain in Old Norse myth had a significant connection with battle and death, and through this text, connect the act of weaving to fate. The literary aspects of the poem create a disengaged tone, viewing the battle "from a supernatural rather than a human perspective. If this is correct, then the poem shows a group of beings able to foresee, if not manipulate, what will happen to the human men fighting the battle."<sup>62</sup> Though this is only one instance, the poem is rich in symbols and is a fascinating clue as to this connection between weaving and knowledge or manipulation of the future.

Bek-Pedersen has also written about the use of weaving as a metaphor for fate. Regardless of the actual perspective of the pre-Christian Icelanders, the process of weaving matches their

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<sup>62</sup> Bek-Pedersen, *Norns in Old Norse Mythology*, 140.

interpretation of fate. Modern American conceptions of fate negate the impact of personal choice, but the ancient Icelanders believed that fate was intrinsic to human personality. It was not “some inexplicable supernatural power imposing itself on people from the outside, ... [rather] something that comes from deep inside of people and is lived out as an integrated part of the individual's personality.”<sup>63</sup> She relates this notion to the process of weaving where the pattern is set out in advance, and the primary set up of the loom dictates the bounds in which weaving can occur. The *Nornir* who dictate the fate of humanity are similar to the weaver who “has made a decision regarding the pattern, but the effects of that decision cannot yet be detected. Even so, its impact on the finished result is immense.”<sup>64</sup> Once the weaving has begun, the backbone of the pattern is created and influences the scope of the choices available to the weaver. Weaving and fate may only be tangentially related in the texts, but the symbolic and metaphoric similarities are significant. In the case of *Eyrbyggja saga*, Thorgunna is the only character who actively weaves in the entire text. Because of this metaphorical significance as well as the established mythical link, Thorgunna's prophecies can be connected to her weaving.

Voice is also a significant indication of magical knowledge which applies to Thorgunna. While men were usually the ones performing in public, that performance was socially modulated and monitored. Judy Quinn argues that women “did not stand by silently when male performance failed to pass muster, indeed [women's] words were what made the social gears shift.”<sup>65</sup> While women in the texts speak less than men, when they do speak, they have significant power through their words. One way for women to enact power was through goading their male relations, through speech. Thorgunna does not participate in normal social speech, like gossip. Instead, when she

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<sup>63</sup> Karen Bek-Pedersen. ‘Fate and weaving: justification of a metaphor’, *Viking Medieval Scandinavia* 5. 23–9. 2009, 37.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>65</sup> Quinn, “Women in Old Norse Poetry and Sagas,” 519.

does speak, she interprets omens and prophesies. The fact that Thorgunna weaves rather than speaking has social implications with how she is perceived by the community, but it also has magico-religious connotations. While the Norns never explicitly weave in the texts, they do speak fate into existence. Phrases like “‘fate to speak’ and ‘the words of Urdr [fate]’ show how the Norns connect fate and verbal speech.”<sup>66</sup> Though Thorgunna’s unwillingness to gossip makes her unlikeable to the other people at Frodriver, the link between speech and prophecy provides an alternative interpretation of her motivations. Her vocal expression of prophecy also indicates her knowledge to the public.

Weaving as a magical act informed the liminal characteristics in the construction of the *dyngja*. Magical knowledge, especially reserved for women, was so powerful in the pre-Christian society that it resulted in physical changes to the environment. The magical knowledge is present in the literary descriptions of spells and prophecies, but it also influenced the physical world. We have evidence, from the staffs of sorcery to the unique characteristics of *dyngjur*, that shows how knowledge is recorded in objects and spaces.

Iceland’s conversion to Christianity replaced magical knowledge and supernatural connotations of weaving with new religious perspectives. Shortly after the conversion to Christianity, archeological evidence of textile production can be found in the main houses. Karen Milek notes that on farms from the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries,

“the size and organization of space in the main dwelling houses had changed. Many of the same elements associated with textile production, including corner ovens, heated stones, small stake-holes in the floor, loom weights and other implements associated with spinning and weaving, had been relocated to rooms that had to be accessed via the central living rooms.”<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Bek-Pedersen, *Norns in Old Norse Mythology*, 182.

<sup>67</sup> Milek, “The Roles of Pit Houses,” 120.

Around the same time, pit-houses on older farms were filled in with kitchen rubbish and iron scrap then became the sites of barns or other animal shelters, rather than simply being abandoned. Milek concludes that the infilling was due to the fact that “pit houses were not only strongly gendered spaces, but were likely to have been symbolically charged and were probably linked — at least cognitively, if not actually — with pagan practices.”<sup>68</sup> When the people converted to Christianity, the supernatural association between weaving and fate and between women’s labor and magic, which had resulted in the separation of weaving from other daily activities in the *dyngja*, became irrelevant and the weaving was moved inside.<sup>69</sup> This movement of textile work also negated the separate female space. While women undoubtedly still talked with each other during their work, there wasn’t the same separation between male dominated dwelling house and female dominated *dyngja*. Though men did not participate in textile production, they gained control over the process of making textiles by moving it into a space which they already controlled. The private sphere of knowledge, created by separate spaces, was translated into a more public space which likely erased it.

## CONCLUSION

While each of these types of knowledge, public, secret, and women-only, have been presented as unique, it is impossible to draw concrete lines between them. All of these spheres of knowledge work simultaneously. Even when women were working in the *dyngja*, away from the oversight of men, they still wore clothing and had social hierarchies. The mistress of the farm was not placed on the same level as the slave women, even though the distinction between genders was

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 123

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.; Hayeur Smith, *Valkyries Loom*, 24.



removed. Class and perception are still very active in social situations. Simultaneously, magical knowledge was closely guarded and revered in society, but it was still passed between individuals. There weren't weekly witch meetings to discuss new spells and prophecies, but there is still shared knowledge. The distinctions between types of knowledge are useful categories to examine the relationships formed in society, but do not exist in a vacuum. Layering knowledge patterns creates more nuanced understandings of how people moved through society.

Just as knowledge categories cannot be disentangled, historical evidence is also more complex than presented. Archeological evidence is analyzed with context from written sources. The evidence for *dyngjur* being women-only textile workshops is based both on physical remains and literary sources. Presenting the different types of evidence as separate clarifies how they inform each other. Identifying relationships between sources leads to better awareness of their strength and limitations.

This paper combines close readings and specific details in sagas with scientific evidence of physical materials, to better understand saga literature, and vice versa. Many authors do use a combination of archeological evidence and text material, but often these scholars use the same significant details to prove points, rather than analyzing details in the context of the sources.<sup>70</sup> Descriptions of textiles are somewhat limited in the sagas and specific moments do provide important evidence for certain phenomena. However, I have shown that even small details, like the colors of clothing, or the fact that a character doesn't participate in gossip, have a wealth of meaning beyond what is stated in the text. Passages like *Darradarljod* and chapter four of *Eirik*

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<sup>70</sup> Nearly every discussion of weaving in the Viking age includes analysis of *Darradarljod*, and almost all spinning and *seidr* sources use Katla's illusion magic and Gudrun's dialogue about spinning and killing Kjartan in *Laxadaela saga* chapter 49. Few sources look at Thorgunna and her connection to prophecy and weaving and Geirrid's blue cloak, and none that I have found examine the color of Katla's magic tunic.

*the Red's saga*, have captured the imaginations of scholars for decades due to their wealth of unique information. When compared to that, single-word details may seem insignificant but can be useful gateways into the world of the sagas, especially when paired with knowledge of craft and material evidence.

Knowledge structures apply to many other concepts than women and textiles, however, they are useful for studying people who are not as present in the texts. Ordinary Icelandic women, especially those of lower classes, like slaves, are rarely ever mentioned in the source texts. Women unnamed in source texts bore the brunt of labor in Viking Age and Medieval Iceland.<sup>71</sup> These people had rich inner lives which are very difficult to access through traditional historic methods, especially considering the limitations of the source texts. By examining how women who are present in the texts exist in society, based both on literature and materials, in a framework, helps illuminate the lives and thoughts of people who are missing from the historical record.

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<sup>71</sup> Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 126.

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