

Private Women and Public Men? A Critique of the Gendered Dichotomy of the Viking Age

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THE USE of the public/private dichotomy to explain gender roles is pervasive. Originally proposed by Frederick Engels in his 1884 'The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State', the belief that the division of labour led to a differentiated work space for men and women was firmly embedded in western culture and academia by the time the concept was adopted by second-wave feminists in the 1960s.¹ The public/private dichotomy remains a persistent analytical construct for scholars of gender relations, including those of the Viking Age.² The popularisation of 'Viking studies' in the 19th century imposed the notion of the idealised Victorian housewife, whose influence resided within the domestic space of 'home and hearth', on the way gendered roles in the Viking Age were understood and represented.³ It is a construct that has proved hard to shake, despite the terms 'public' and 'private' holding different values and meanings during the Viking Age, and being mutable. This paper will argue that Viking Age gender ideology cannot be explained by the anachronistic public/private binary and that instead a fluid and adaptive model was in place that was deeply intersected with factors such as age, status and historical context.

Gender relationships are dynamic, both at the individual and the societal level.⁴ The Viking period was not static, but instead was a period of considerable change, including the emergence of towns and trading hubs, increasing social stratification, and a process of conversion from a pagan, non-orthodox religious and mythological system that varied over place and time,

1 Landes 2003, 28

2 Gilchrist 1999, 6

3 Moen 2010, 29

4 Jesch 2015, 87

to the orthodoxy of Christianity.⁵ It was also a time of significant population movement, marked by widespread expansion out of the Scandinavian homelands and the establishment of overseas settlements. Over the last two decades, the Viking expansion has increasingly been explained using diaspora theory, though the value of this analytical construct to understand gender must be qualified.⁶ Although the widespread geographic manifestation of Scandinavian identity, as represented through language, material culture or ancestral narratives, support the notion of a Viking Age diaspora in the sense of the bi-directional (and multi-directional) flow of trade, ideas and notions of an imagined homeland, the term has the danger of both implying 'pure' Scandinavian Viking Age gendered identities and glossing over the significant variation in how gender was imagined, lived and experienced over time and place.⁷

This paper will focus on three areas in assessing the value of the public/private dichotomy: the home, political and economic spheres. These areas will be examined using archaeological evidence of the mortuary landscape and of settlements, laws and sagas. All forms of evidence are problematic. The difficulty of gendering graves is well documented, with the inherent possibility of biased assumptions from the use of grave goods and the ambiguities raised through osteological sexing.⁸ The oval brooch and household keys are often defined as major markers of a woman's identity, with their presence in the context of female burials used to support a narrative around women's presumed role in the private sphere. It has been argued that in the context of large rural farms, which were the predominant form of social structure in the Viking Age, the 'Lady of the House' was presented with a set of keys on her marriage, which represented her role as the manager of wealth and its distribution.⁹ Similarly, the oval brooch was worn by the 'quintessential Viking housewife', who would run the farm in her husband's absence and have slaves under her care.¹⁰ Hayeur-Smith has argued that oval brooches took on a different symbolic and cultural meaning in the diasporic context of Iceland, becoming not just a marker of a woman's private role in the household, but a public symbol by which she could mark her status and ethnic identity.¹¹

However, the universality of the both the oval brooch and household keys

5 Hultgård 2008, 212; Ljungkvist 2008, 186; Raffield, Price and Collard 2017, 320

6 Abrams 2012; Jesch 2015.

7 Abrams 2012, 17, 37; Downham 2015, 370.

8 Moen 2010, 10–11; Mcleod 2011.

9 Moen 2010, 72.

10 Hayeur-Smith 2001, 230.

11 Hayeur-Smith 2001, 237.

as signifiers of Viking Age female gender identities has been convincingly challenged in recent years. Although Viking Age oval brooches have been found across a broad geographic area, from the Scandinavian homelands to Russia and Iceland, they gradually fell out of fashion and usage in the tenth century.¹² Nor were oval brooches universal geographically or socially. An analysis of grave furnishings in Denmark, where oval brooches appear to have fallen out of fashion earliest, suggests that neither the highest nor lowest status women wore oval brooches and on the Isle of Man no oval brooches were found in the two certain Viking Age furnished burials that contained women.¹³

The association of keys with the high-status women has also been questioned in recent analyses of the archaeological record. Only 5% of Viking Age graves excavated before 2011 and identified as female contained a key and nor were keys only associated with women.¹⁴ A study of Eastern Norway found that keys were found in the late Iron Age graves of thirty-seven females, but also thirty males, with seven male/female double graves and twenty-three not sexed.¹⁵ Within this context, the prevailing wisdom of keys symbolically signifying the high status housewife's power within the domestic context is open to challenge. Not only are key burials too rare to imply their universality as a gendered symbol, but their presence in male burial contexts implies that their symbolism was not gender related, but perhaps was associated more broadly with power and wealth.¹⁶

In addition to the issue of determining gendered identities by grave goods, it also does not naturally follow that biological sex is synonymous with gender identities. The second-wave feminists of the 1960s postulated that whereas biological sex was a fixed category, gender is socially constructed and based on learned behaviour that is determined by the social values and structures within different historical contexts.¹⁷ However, the supposed clear-cut distinction between biologically-determined sex and socially-constructed gender has been challenged by both cognitive scientists, who have evidenced that biology is a significant determinant in gender identity and by queer theorists, who argue that both sex and gender are socially constructed, particularly in the context of how biological differences are interpreted culturally.¹⁸ The example of a Viking Age individual in Iceland who was buried as a male warrior with a full array of weapons, despite osteological analysis showing that he had

12 Jesch 2015, 94–96; Stylegar 2007, 83.

13 Stylegar 2007, 83; Wilson 2008, 87.

14 Lund 2016, 34–35.

15 Berg 2015, 130.

16 Lund 2016, 35; Berg 2015, 131.

17 Gilchrist 1999, 14.

18 Gilchrist 1999, 9, 13.

reduced testosterone, exemplifies the dangers of assuming that biological sex is a fixed category. The lack of testosterone in the young man may have resulted in a lack of male physical characteristics and even the appearance of some female physical characteristics, such as a lack of facial hair and breast development. This raises questions around how this young man's gender was understood by himself and the society he lived within, both during life and in the rituals surrounding death, and how biological differences were socially understood. It also raises the possibility that there may have been more than two gendered identities within the Viking Age.¹⁹

There are also dangers in relying on saga literature as evidence of the earlier Viking Age. The extant written form of the sagas which are today used by academics to provide insight into the culture, beliefs and social structure of the Viking Age represent the end-point of a complex journey of oral and written transmission over time and place whereby the living texts were captured in the written form that academics today rely upon. Originating as oral stories, the sagas were organic and fluid, altered within different times and places to resonate with the social and cultural context of the audience and the motivations of the transmitter.²⁰ The written sagas as they exist today 'were at best a product of the 13th century, written by educated men of high social standing'.²¹ As 'intention-bearing discourses' the challenge is to separate what may have reflected the gender constructions of the Viking Age from those imposed later by Christian writers in the 13th and 14th centuries.²²

It has been argued that the strong female characters in the sagas were role models for negative behaviour, a narrative trope used by Christian writers to show the disastrous impact of women entering into the public and political spheres.²³ In *Orkneyinga saga*, when the mother and aunt of two rival brothers make a cursed cloak, their attempt to influence the earldom of Orkney backfires when the wrong brother puts on the cloak, leading to his death.²⁴ Similarly, when Earl Sigurd consults his mother about a difficult battle, she presents him with the dubious gift of a magic banner that will lead to the victory of the man it was carried before, but the death of the man carrying it, one can sense a strong Christian cautionary tale.²⁵ I would argue that the frequent references to women's magic and their ability to use this to influence

19 Jesch 2015, 99.

20 Price 2019, 5–6; Lewis-Simpson 2008, 9.

21 Magnúsdóttir 2008, 41.

22 Raninen 2008, 20.

23 Magnúsdóttir 2008, 41.

24 *Orkneyinga saga*, ch. 55.

25 *Orkneyinga saga*, ch. 36–37.

the public and political sphere both reflects an artefact of pre-Christian Viking Age gender and ritual ideology and the denigration of such roles in 13th century Christian ideology.

Nor is the portrayal of women in *Orkeyinga saga* one-dimensional: there are examples of women successfully entering into the public political sphere. In her analysis of the social meanings of the 'male signified' headdress worn by the female farmer Ragna when she met Earl Rognvaldr, Clunies Ross argues that Ragna gets the Earl to listen to her counsel by 'wrong footing him' through her deliberate subversion of gender norms.²⁶ Here Ragna enters the political stage both through her status role as a landowner, and through her intelligence and agency. One also sees Ragnhild, the daughter of King Eiríkr and Gunnhild, ruthlessly exploiting her marital value through her sexuality and the greed of her suitors when she plays three brothers off one against the other, even inciting them to murder, in a quest to achieve the most advantageous marital position for herself.²⁷ Ragnhild demonstrates her determination to control and exploit her own sexuality, thereby firmly entering the public domain of the political network establishment.²⁸

Auður Magnúsdóttir argues that the practice of sexual politics is dominated by men, both through the use of marriage and concubinage, to create political networks and power.²⁹ The exception she cites is Melkorka, the slave/Irish princess in *Laxdæla saga*, who marries a wealthy farmer to raise money for her son's Irish expedition.³⁰ In Ragnhild and Melkorka we have two examples of the daughters of kings engaging in sexual politics, entering the public sphere to influence their own and their family's situation. Their high status enabled these two women to move beyond traditional gender boundaries to influence their own position and relationships with men. Although the influence of later Christian ideals can be seen in the sagas, if one is mindful of later influences, the sagas can provide useful indications of cultural attitudes, if not of actual historical events, especially if used alongside archaeological evidence from the actual Viking Age.

The public/private dichotomy was rooted in the belief that the increasing division of labour after the development of agriculture led to the emergence of private property and a differentiated private sphere to which women were relegated.³¹ Within Engel's construct, it was this emergent private sphere,

26 Quinn 2005, 522.

27 *Orkneyinga saga*, ch. 9.

28 Magnúsdóttir 2008, 41.

29 Magnúsdóttir 2008, 41.

30 Magnúsdóttir 2008, 47.

31 Landes 2003, 28.

concerned with the family, reproduction and domestic work, to which women were relegated, in contrast to men, who through their control over agriculture and the domestication of animals assumed dominance and power within the public and political sphere.³² Developed by the feminist anthropologists Ortner and Rosaldo in 1974 as a supposed universal binary opposition that distinguishes gendered roles, the public/private dichotomy was harnessed as an analytical model by second-wave feminist academics who sought to establish how the subordination of women is based on the power relations intrinsic in universal underlying structural inequalities based around the division of labour.³³ Although later postmodern feminism is underpinned by a rejection of universal theories based on binary oppositions to explain women's subordinate position, the public/private dichotomy has proved persistent.

In the context of Viking Age studies, it is generally agreed that the threshold of the outer door of the house delineated ideal gender roles, with men responsible for outdoor tasks and women responsible for indoor tasks.³⁴ This idea of separation of men's and women's spheres, with the woman symbolised by the keys to the house at her belt within the household (*innan stokks*) and responsible for child care and cooking, whilst men were associated with politics, law and the higher valued economic tasks of trade and agriculture, is pervasive across traditional Viking Age scholarship.³⁵ In her 1986 'Women in Old Norse Society' Jenny Jochens argued that women in Old Norse culture had a weak public status both before and after Christianisation.³⁶ Jochen's arguments were based on the premise that women became more exploited and less influential in the social, political and religious spheres as the division of labour became more structured, with the wife becoming restricted to managing affairs within the house, whilst the man was in charge of everything outside.³⁷ Judith Jesch echoed, though with qualification, this sentiment, when she argued that 'women were substantially, but not entirely absent from public forms of expression.'³⁸

This approach can be critiqued at two levels. Firstly, the public/private dichotomy is a post-industrial construct that reflects a more rigid and hierarchical division of labour not seen in earlier societies.³⁹ Hence, it is

32 Landes 2003, 28.

33 Gilchrist 1999, 2; Johnson 2008, 8.

34 Short 2010, 36.

35 Clover 1993, 2–3.

36 Mundal 2001, 241.

37 Jochens 1986, 117, 169.

38 Jesch 2015, 102.

39 Gilchrist 1999, 33–34.

unlikely that people in the Viking Age would define 'public' and 'private' in our modern terms. Our notions of public/private are determined by our modern concept of the normality of the nuclear family. Most people in the Viking Age lived in households that consisted of more than just the nuclear family and in this context the distinction between public and private became blurred, with activities now attributed to the 'public' sphere, such as work and ritual, often taking place within the context of the home or wider farm.⁴⁰ The archaeological and saga record does provide some evidence of gendered space, but its existence is far from universal and there are significant exceptions, with even the traditionally accepted female occupations of textiles and cooking crossing accepted gender roles. For example, in her study of Western Norway, Liv Helga Dommasnes found that there was cooking equipment in 26% of female burials, but also 16% of male burials, which suggests that cooking was not a clear-cut private or female function.⁴¹ Secondly, there is an underlying assumption within the public/private distinction that the work of women in the 'private' sphere of the household is devalued and secondary.⁴² Where the existence of gendered space is supported by the archaeological and written record, for example in some areas of textile production, the values attributed to the 'domestic' sphere do not have the same negative value associations.

I will now consider the extent to which the public/private dichotomy can be used to explain gendered roles in the political sphere. Traditionally, this has been viewed as an 'exclusively male arena', but some women could engage in political assembly meetings.⁴³ In both Norway and Iceland, the ability to participate in the *Thing* was largely determined by land ownership and status.⁴⁴ Only women who owned land (for example, as widows who had inherited or 'ring women' who took on the traditional 'male' role and legal rights in a family in the absence of any male relatives) were legally permitted as political actors, but the same provision held for men. Slaves, 'foreigners' and those who did not hold sufficient possessions could not participate.⁴⁵ In this sense, the 'public' arena of politics was also closed to many men, suggesting that land ownership and status were more fixed stratifying lines than gender. Alexandra Sanmark estimates that up to 10% of people who participated in the *Thing* could have been women.⁴⁶ Hence, though it is possible to see that women in the Viking Age could play a more

40 Moen 2010, 69; Jesch 2015, 112.

41 Jesch 1991, 19–20.

42 Moen 2010, 9.

43 Short 2010, 36; Sanmark 2014, 89.

44 Sanmark 2014, 94.

45 Sanmark 2014, 90–92.

46 Sanmark 2014, 93.

active political role than the strict public/private binary suggests, we should not overstate this. The majority of women, and significant sections of the male population, were not political actors.

The accessibility to this form of political activity for women was changeable over time, with the increasing influence of Christianity from the 11th century diminishing women's ability to engage in political activity.⁴⁷ Access to the assembly for women was largely dependent on marital status (for example, widows and certain women up to marriage). However, in the earliest Norwegian laws, marriage was not mentioned as a restrictive factor in 'ring women's' rights to their own property, whereas the later Norwegian and Icelandic laws stress the opposite.⁴⁸

The changing laws surrounding child abandonment also reflected the redefinition of gendered public and private roles over time. In early Norwegian law, if a child was to be abandoned this had to be done before this symbolic first meal and in this sense, women literally had the power of life and death. The growing influence of Christianity gradually outlawed the old tradition of infanticide, thereby moving decisions over the lives of infants from the female sphere within the home, to the public sphere of the church.⁴⁹

The political arena was marked by a distinctive public space, the assembly, and it has been demonstrated that although this was ideologically gendered as male, the boundaries of this space were porous enough that women could physically and actively enter it under certain circumstances. However, not all power in the Viking Age resided within physically public space, with the ritual environment providing an example of a domestic space that was used to enact power relations by both men and women. Although there was no universality to where communal ritual activity was enacted, the sagas and archaeological record support the theory that the halls in farmsteads acted as cultic centres, within which the master and lady could preside over ritual activity, both for their own household and across a wider locality.⁵⁰ In *Kristni saga* there is an example of the wife of the household, Friðgerdr, sacrificing at the *hof* when her husband is away at the assembly and another example is seen in the poem *Austrfararvísur*, written by the Icelandic poet Sigvatr Þórðarson in the first half of 11th century, which refers to a sacrifice being performed indoors, by a woman of the farmstead.⁵¹ Similarly, in the poem *Völsa þattr* one sees a woman leading a fertility ritual within the household itself, with

47 Sanmark 2014, 90.

48 Sanmark 2014, 94.

49 Mejsholm 2008, 47–49.

50 Moen 2010, 5, 72; Jesch 2015, 133; Ljungkvist 2012, 60.

51 Jesch 2015, 133–134.

the ritual performer requesting that she be lifted above the door frame in what has been interpreted as a way of seeing into another world to view the future through the symbolic barrier of the door.⁵² What is significant about each of these examples is that cultic activity took place within the domestic setting of the house and that women are represented as leading ritual activity, though there are both male and female participants.⁵³ In this example of cultic activity, not only is the public/private distinction called into doubt, but also the assumption that activity that takes place 'indoors' was less valued.

I will now consider gendered roles in the domestic and economic spheres, with a focus on textile production. The majority of people in the Viking Age were craftspeople, with goods such as textiles produced in the household.⁵⁴ In this context, the distinction of public and private becomes problematic. Though grave goods found in both rural and town contexts often point to a differentiation of gender roles in the production of handicrafts, with carpeting, woodwork and smithing associated with males, and textiles mainly associated with females, this is by no means a clear-cut distinction. John Ljungkvist suggests that it was not impossible that gender-boundaries would be crossed by men, women and children if necessity demanded, but one could argue that gender boundaries in fact became more permeable in trading contexts where textile production moved from a domestic task towards commercial craft production.⁵⁵ With the growth in seaborne expansion and the development of trading centres in Viking Age Scandinavia, the demand for textiles would have been significant, from the time-consuming production of ship sails, through to the production of the high-quality prestige textiles demanded by an increasingly stratified society.⁵⁶ The Viking Age saw the introduction of technical innovations in textiles, which both enabled and catalysed the Viking expansion and allowed greater output and hence the generation of a surplus that could be sold.⁵⁷

The ability of women to operate in the more public sphere of trade has been examined in studies of the trading centres of Hedeby, Birka and Kaupang, where there is a high ratio of female graves in comparison with other parts of Scandinavia.⁵⁸ Ingvild Øye notes that the male/female sex ratio for burials in rural Norway is 80:20, in contrast to 58% of inhumations and 61% of

52 Price 2019, 125.

53 Price 2019, 178.

54 Ljungkvist 2008, 186.

55 Ljungkvist 2008, 186.

56 Øye 2011, 269.

57 Larsson 2008, 184.

58 Øye 2011, 268.

cremations being female in Viking Age Birka.⁵⁹ As well as the difference in male/female ratio Nancy Wicker has also pointed out that in rural areas the graves of women tended to be of lower status and reference has been made to the differences in the types of textile production-related burial goods of women in rural and proto-urban centres.⁶⁰ In rural locations women tended to be buried with spindle whorls, but in the trading centre of Birka, women were seen with implements that suggest more fine sewing and coins, indicative of trade.⁶¹ In the trading centre of Kaupang women and men were buried alongside each other, with no discernible differences in location or ritual deposition, indicating that women's roles may have been more public than those commonly ascribed to them.⁶² It is also significant that although the majority of burials that included textile-production equipment were female, there were also some male burials which included such equipment with no clear patterns of difference between the male and female burials containing textile production equipment.⁶³

Although there has been speculation as to whether the high-status female burials in trading centres represent the wives of merchants, it has been convincingly argued that the high number can actually be explained by the central role that these women played in the commercial textile production process.⁶⁴ A striking feature of the high-status female burials in the trading centre contexts was the high frequency of the inclusion of textile-production equipment, which supports this assessment.⁶⁵ Large-scale commercial textile production required significant amounts of labour, administration and supplier / consumer network development and it has been argued that women played a specialised and central role in this important trade.⁶⁶ From this perspective, one can interpret the high-status female graves in trading centres as belonging to women who were at the top of gendered labour hierarchies, directing a diverse and complex female workforce and capitalising on the form of social and economic systems emerging within new trading centres to become property owners and commercial traders in their own right.⁶⁷ It is clear that for textile production, not only were traditional gender roles more fluid, but textile production itself transcended the public/private divide.

59 Øye 2011, 268.

60 Larsson 2008, 183.

61 Larsson 2008, 184.

62 Moen 2010, 78.

63 Øye 2011, 269–270.

64 Øye 2010, 299–300; Øye 2011, 269.

65 Øye 2011, 269.

66 Øye 2011, 269–270.

67 Wicker 2012, 246; Øye 2011, 269; Sindbaek 2007.

There is merit in the argument that the apparently egalitarian nature of high-status gendered graves in Kaupang and Birka indicates more potential for social mobility in a trading centre than a rural society.⁶⁸ However, the public/private distinction does not necessarily represent a clear-cut town/rural divide. At one farm in rural Norway, six of the nine graves were gendered female, but also contained grave goods more commonly associated with males. The finds on the farm indicated trading or raiding in the British Isles and Dommasnes has argued that the women in the graves achieved higher status by managing the farm whilst their male relations were away.⁶⁹ The examples from both the trading centres and the rural area suggest that gender roles were fluid and adaptive and within this context the public/private separation becomes porous. A public/private gendered divide may have been ideal, but it was expected that these ideal roles would yield to practical necessity and the 'greater good' of the family.⁷⁰ However, it is clear that status, wealth and land ownership were the primary factors that affected women's ability to operate in the public economic sphere, both in rural and trading centres.

I will now consider the different values that may have been attributed to the private sphere. The public/private dichotomy is not just about physical space but symbolic space: it is not just about what people did, but the cultural values surrounding how identities were formed and enacted in that space. Karen Milek convincingly argues that the 'pit house', a semi-subterranean building on homesteads that was common in parts of Scandinavia and Iceland, were distinctive female spaces with strong symbolic value.⁷¹ All women of the household would have been involved in textile production and this took place in the pit house, separate from the main dwelling. The use of pit houses was abandoned from the late 10th century and Milek argues that as this timeframe coincides with the Christian conversion in Iceland, there was a desire to move away from the pre-Christian symbolic association of pit house with women's perceived magical abilities.⁷² She points to the frequent mythological connection in Old Norse mythology of female supernatural beings, the *nornir*, and the symbolic connection of women's weaving with magic.⁷³ Hence, in this gendered 'private' space, women's work took on a high value and symbolically powerful importance.

68 Moen 2010, 67–68; Wicker 2012, 256.

69 Jesch 1991, 30.

70 Clover 1993, 6.

71 Milek 2012.

72 Milek 2012, 120.

73 Milek 2012, 121.

During the 11th century, homespun wool also gained increased economic importance as an export, barter and legal payment commodity.⁷⁴ As seen in the trading centres of Hedeby, Birka and Kaupang, Milek argues that the growing commercialisation of textile production would have increased the economic power and value of women, as the production of textiles moved into the main household.⁷⁵ However, one could argue that this change could have resulted in the removal of the symbolically powerful role of women in the ritual space. When examined alongside the evidence from the trading centres of Birka, Hedeby and Kaupang, one sees an interesting dynamic, whereby the development of textiles as a tradable commodity provided some women (that is, those with wealth and status) with the opportunity to enter the public sphere of economic power relations, whilst the movement away from gendered textile production space seen in the Icelandic pit houses may have signified an erosion of ritual power enacted within the domestic space.

One of the intrinsic problems of using the public/private dichotomy to explain Viking Age gender roles is that the 'male' is hard to find in the private sphere. Our ideas about what constitutes masculinity have tended to focus on the public sphere, on 'seafarers, warriors and lordship' because these are easier to identify in the physical and written record.⁷⁶ The sagas represent an ideal of masculinity that is firmly within the public sphere. Through her 'one-sex' model, Carol Clover argues that there was only one gender ideal, that of high-status masculinity, and that this was both attainable by women and losable by men.⁷⁷ The one-sex model is based on 'ideal' identities, but I have shown that across the full spectrum of life, both men and women did not or could not conform to these ideals much of the time. In a stratified society, where status and landownership were the primary markers of roles and identities, only high-status people could conform to the ideal of 'masculinity' that Clover outlines. As Judy Quinn points out, 'social and sexual impotence were synonymous with effeminacy, which as a category seems to have embraced cowardly men, old men, and most women most of the time'.⁷⁸

The notion of the 'public' sphere and the ability to enact the ideal of 'masculinity' within this is inherently tied to issues of power, with the non-

74 Milek 2012, 122.

75 Milek 2012, 121.

76 Jesch 2015, 87.

77 Clover 1993, 13.

78 Quinn 2005, 518.

masculine or 'effeminate' category linked to the condition of powerlessness.⁷⁹ Hence, both categories were fluid: women could act in an assertive and powerful way and achieve the masculine ideal, but men who lost power, through old age or disability, moved to the category of 'effeminate'.⁸⁰ The much-cited example from saga literature is that of Egill Skallagrímsson, who after living life in the public sphere of trading, warfare and political intrigues, is denigrated to the company of women '*innan stocks*' when he becomes frail and elderly.⁸¹ Yet, the 'one-sex model' was neither 'monolithic nor static'.⁸² The introduction of Christianity impacted notions of ideal gender identities for both women and men and this can be seen in *Njáls saga* where a different notion of 'heroic masculinity' to the one of aggressive warrior and the ability for men to maintain a public role even in old age is seen.⁸³ The notion of power residing in the 'public' sphere also disregards more subtle forms of influence and implies that power must be measured by male standards.⁸⁴ Else Mundal highlights the role of the family, and specifically women, in instituting the very 'public' act of revenge in saga literature.⁸⁵ She argues that women were the guardians of family honour: they decided whether or not blood revenge was necessary, and also goaded their male relatives into taking revenge by impugning their masculinity if no retaliatory action was taken.⁸⁶ This exemplifies the differing value associations of the 'private' family space, and the ability for women to exert influence from within this space to impact on the wider 'public' sphere.

By looking at the archaeological and saga evidence, I have demonstrated that the gendered roles of women and men were fluid, adaptable and contextual. Not only were the concepts of 'public' and 'private' different to our modern definitions, they were changeable over time and within different contexts. Gender as an analytical construct cannot be used in isolation to explain the roles, identities and relationships of individuals within and across Viking Age societies. Socio-economic context, age, marital status and place of origin had a complex inter-relationship with gender, but it was status, particularly the ownership of land, which was the determining factor of an individual's position within society, and their ability to act with agency across

79 Clover 1993, 13.

80 Clover 1993, 14.

81 Clover 1993, 15; Sigurðsson 2008, 234.

82 Clover 1993, 18.

83 Clover 1993, 15; Jakobson 2007, 210.

84 Moen 2010, 68.

85 Mundal 2001, 245.

86 Mundal 1994, 7.

it.⁸⁷ During a period marked by considerable social, political, geographical and religious change, the roles, identities and relationships between men and women were not static. The underlying gender ideology of Old Norse society was one that was fluid and adaptive, highly functional, yet infused with symbolism. Inherently practical, this fluidity was seen not just in laws, but permeated the ritual, economic, and social roles of men and women. Ideal gendered roles may have been based around a public/private divide, but the reality was somewhat different and only became more solidified with the advance of Christianity.

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