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Women, War and Words: a Verbal Archaeology of Shield-maidens

Abstract

Scholarly discussions of the question of the participation of women in war in the Viking Age have based their arguments on a variety of evidence, including both archaeology and texts. However, even those scholars who make substantial use of the textual evidence have not paid sufficiently close attention to (a) the vocabulary used in the representations (whether historical or fictional) of women acting in the supposed male role of warrior and (b) the literary-historical contexts in which the texts were produced, including potential relationships between texts.

To further these discussions, this paper proposes a method which might be called the ‘stratigraphy of texts’ to demonstrate how a careful sifting of the cumulative textual evidence can enrich discussion about this important question. With close attention to the vocabulary used by the texts, and by considering the date, genre and sources of, and – importantly – the relationships between, texts in Old Norse, the discussion will demonstrate what can and what cannot be deduced from these textual representations of female warriors in the Viking Age.

The paper will focus on tracing the development of the Old Norse concept of the *skjald-mær*, ‘shield-maiden’, through a variety of texts in which this term occurs, and also suggest a probable origin for the concept. There will also be a brief consideration of the term ‘valkyrie’ (ON *valkyrja*).

Introduction

With the arrival of History Channel’s drama series *Vikings* in 2013, the character Lagertha presented 21st-century viewers with a fully-formed image of what a shield-maiden, or Viking warrior woman, might have looked like, and also embedded the historical existence of such figures in the minds of many. She was not the first: an interest in the possibility of armed women in the Viking Age can be traced at least as far back as the Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus, writing shortly after 1200, and the topic has been discussed intermittently by scholars since then. A brief and selective list might include Præstgaard Andersen

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1982: 78–101, 2002; Jesch 1991: 176–80, 2015: 104–7; McLeod 2011; Gardela 2013, 2018; and Raffield 2016: 316–7. There are also many scholarly contributions which focus on medieval literary texts only, with little or no consideration of any possible Viking Age reality behind the texts. However, discussion of the possible Viking Age reality intensified in 2017 with the revelation that the occupant of grave Bj.581 in Birka was female (Hedenstierna-Jonson et al. 2017; Hedenstierna-Jonson 2018; Price et al. 2019; for discussion see e.g. Androshchuk 2019; Edberg 2019; Sayer et al. 2019: 557–61; Friðriksdóttir 2020: 58–60, 63–4).

The purpose of this paper is however not to re-open the discussion about the Birka grave and its occupant, nor to rehearse some or all of the Old Norse and other texts that imagine armed female figures of various kinds, but rather to return to first principles, namely to consider what is the appropriate terminology for the phenomenon under discussion. It is noticeable that a wide variety of terms is used just in the titles of some of the publications already cited, so Present-Day English (PDE) ‘female viking’, ‘female Viking warrior’, ‘warrior woman’, ‘Amazon’, ‘armed female’, ‘shield-maiden’, ‘valkyrie’ (and their equivalents in other languages). This variety of terminology suggests a certain amount of confusion about the phenomenon under discussion. Sometimes the terms are used more or less synonymously, at other times there seems to be a distinction being made but it is not always clear what that distinction is. This paper will focus on ‘shield-maidens’ to show how a close attention to textual sources can clarify some matters in the wider discussion, particularly in the distinction between actual, historical phenomena, and imagined phenomena.

Methods and materials

Possibly the biggest question raised by this varied terminology is what is meant by ‘warrior’, even before we consider the possibility of female warriors. Is a warrior one who is distinguished by a particular type of training? Is it a full-time occupation? Is it an organised profession? Is it paid? These questions are however more to do with our understanding of what is encompassed by PDE ‘warrior’ and its equivalents in other languages, and will therefore not be touched on here, though they are relevant and deserve further attention. It is for instance important to recognise that there is no one word in Old Norse (ON) that corresponds exactly to PDE ‘warrior’, though there are many words that could be translated in that way in particular contexts. In skaldic poetry from the late 9th to the early 12th century, for example, the words most commonly translated as ‘warrior’ are *drengr*, *rekkr* and *seggr*, or as ‘warriors’ *bragnar* (Clunies Ross et al. 2009–17), but all have other meanings as well. The wide variety of words used to designate men who are armed and fight suggests that people may have had different concepts of such men that cannot be reduced to a single word, perhaps because we are talking about a society in which most men were armed but not all were ‘warriors’. This, too, is a topic that deserves further detailed investigation. One could also raise similar questions about PDE ‘woman’ or ‘female’, or even ‘Viking’, all requiring a rather different kind of discussion (though for ‘Viking’, see Jesch 2015: 4–8 and earlier work cited there). Rather than discussing these modern terms, this paper is instead concerned with the use of historical terms which have been borrowed from medieval texts. In particular, this paper will consider ON *skjaldmær* (f. ‘shield-maiden’) and how it is used in Old Norse texts, primarily the *fornaldarsögur*, though it does occasionally appear else-

where. I will also pay some brief attention to ON *valkyrja* (f. ‘valkyrie’), a term which is sometimes considered to have the same meaning, but which represents a completely different concept. The aim is to provide a clearer sense than hitherto of how medieval texts can or cannot be used to shed light on Viking Age phenomena, and to try to introduce some much-needed acknowledgement of terminological and conceptual complexity into the wider discussion.

Shield-maidens

The PDE term ‘shield-maiden’, a direct translation of ON *skjaldmær*, and its equivalent in other languages, is sometimes used to describe a hypothesised historical Viking Age phenomenon of warrior women. In many cases the term is used fairly unthinkingly as a synonym for a variety of types of armed females (warrior women, valkyries, etc.) and it is particularly common in discussions that focus on the literary, rather than the historical, phenomenon (e.g. Præstgaard Andersen 1982, 2002; Layher 2007). However, some scholars, while recognising its literary origins, also choose to extend it to the historical phenomenon, as when Neil Price et al. (2019: 198, Online supplementary material (OSM): 19, 23) make a distinction between ‘textual shield-maidens’ and ‘literal shield-maidens’. The purpose of the discussion below is to explore whether there is in fact any direct connection between ‘textual’ and ‘literal’ shield-maidens and so whether this term helps or hinders the discussion.

Since we do not have a complete concordance of all ON texts, the discussion below cannot be an exhaustive analysis of all occurrences of ON *skjaldmær*, though I believe the vast majority of instances have been covered. The citations in the *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose* can be considered a good representation of the prose corpus, while the poetic corpus is well covered by a variety of resources, so the discussion below will track every example it has been possible to find by these means, in both poetry and prose.

Shield-maidens and Amazons

In the 1260s, Brandr Jónsson, Bishop of Hólar in the north of Iceland, translated a long Latin poem, Walter of Châtillon’s *Alexandreis* (composed around 1180), into ON prose and this survives as *Alexanders saga* in manuscripts from around 1300 onwards. One episode describes Alexander’s meeting with a certain queen (Jónsson 1925: VIII, 9–11, my translation):

Þá kom til herbúða konungs dróttning sú af Amazonia er Kalestris heitir; ok .cc. meyja þeira með henni er á danska tungu megu vel heita skjaldmeyjar.

Then came to the war-booths of the king that queen of Amazonia who is called Kalestris, and 200 of those maidens with her who could well be called ‘**shield-maidens**’ in the Danish tongue.

This is here a very clear equation between the classical Amazons and the ON term *skjaldmær*, a theme that will grow stronger in the following discussion (on the use of the term ‘Danish tongue’ for the common Scandinavian language, see Janson 2018: 427–37). It is however worthy of note that the Latin original (Colker 1978: VIII, 9–10) uses only the term *uirgo* ‘virgin, maiden’, with no mention of shields. *Skjaldmær* is thus not a direct translation of any Latin term and Brandr’s wording could be interpreted to indicate that he considered

it a novel expression. So it is legitimate to ask whether this is a traditional ON term repurposed, or whether it is a neologism created in the textual encounter with Amazons.

Shield-maidens of ancient time

Other than in *Alexanders saga*, with its origins in classical learning, ON *skjaldmær* is mainly used in the genre known as *fornaldarsögur*, or ‘sagas of ancient time’, where it appears in a number of such sagas. The dating of these sagas is a tricky business since some of them contain material that is indeed ancient, but mostly they seem, in their present form, to be a phenomenon of the late 13th, or more commonly the 14th, century (Jakobsson et al. 2003: 7–8). After a survey of the instances in which the term *skjaldmær* is used, a hypothesis for the origins of this term in the *fornaldarsögur* will be proposed.

In *Orvar-Odds saga*, a shield-maiden makes a brief appearance during the hero’s adventures in Russia at the court of a king called Herraodr (the episode is analysed in some detail in Clunies Ross 2010: 117–22). As Oddr sets out to collect some taxes for the king, the latter gives him a gift (Boer 1892: 87–8, my translation):

Lítlu síðar safnar konungr liði handa Oddi, ok eptir þat búa þeir herinn, ok sem Oddr er búinn, tók hann orlof, ok mælti konungr: ‘Hér er gjöf, Oddr! er ek vil þér gefa; þat er ein skjaldmær, er hon orugg í bardaga ok hefir mér jafnan vel fylgt.’

Oddr segir: ‘Sjaldan var ek þar, er konur hafí staðit fyrir mér; ok svá mun enn vera, en af því at þér gerit fyrir göðu, þá skal ek þiggja.’

A little later the king musters a troop for Oddr, and after that they prepare the army, and when Oddr is ready, he took his leave, and the king said, ‘Here is a gift, Oddr, I want to give you; it is a **shield-maiden**, she is reliable in battle and has always accompanied me well.’

Oddr says, ‘I have never been in a position where women protected me, and that will continue, but since you do it with good intentions, I will accept.’

In their translation of a different version of the saga (but with essentially the same text at this point), Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (1985: 110) actually translate *skjaldmær* as ‘amazon’. Whatever her nature, this unnamed female character soon disappears from the story as she is unable to live up to Oddr’s expectations of her fen-jumping skills. She does make a brief reappearance in a poem quoted in the saga, ostensibly an autobiographical poem by Oddr himself (Boer 1888: 207). The stanza in question is recorded only in late manuscripts of the saga and seems to belong to a later medieval layer of the poem as it grew by accretion (Clunies Ross 2017: 807, 943) and is thus likely to be dependent on the prose anecdote rather than its source.

One would expect to find plenty of shield-maidens in a saga that is usually known by the name of a heroine who acts in a man’s role, *Hervarar saga* (rather than *Heiðreks saga*, the name given it in some editions), however there is only one instance. The second Hervor, granddaughter of the first heroine of that name, is introduced in this way (Tolkien 1960: 30):

Heiðrekr konungr lætr þá efna til veizlu mikillar ok gengr at eigna dóttur Garðakonungs. Dóttir þeira hét Hervor; hon var skjaldmær ok fæddisk upp á Englandi með Fróðmari jarli.

Then King Heidrek had a great feast prepared, and he married the daughter of the king of Gardar [Russia]. Their daughter was named Hervör; she was a **warrior woman**, and she was brought up in England with Fróðmar the jarl.

Christopher Tolkien's translation of *skjaldmær* as 'warrior woman' is likely motivated by the fact that Hervor (who incidentally is half-Russian) is shown later in the saga as a military commander who falls in one of the skirmishes preliminary to the great battle of the Goths and Huns which is the climax of the saga. The action of this part of the saga takes place entirely on the European continent and so is not in a Viking Age or Scandinavian setting.

Also appearing as military commanders are the shield-maidens said to have led some of the armies at the great battle of Brávellir somewhere in Sweden and just on the cusp of the Viking Age. The mustering of troops supporting the Danish king Haraldr *hilditönn*, 'War-Tooth', is described in some detail in a fragmentary text known as *Sögubrot af fornkonungum* (Guðnason 1982: 61–2, my translation):

Þar var skjaldmærin Visina ok önnur Heiðr, ok hefir hvártveggja komit með mikinn her til Haralds konungs. Visina bar merki hans. [...] Vébjörg hét enn skjaldmær, er kom til Haralds konungs með mikinn her sunnan af Gotland, ok fylgðu henni margir kappar. [...] Visinu skjaldmeyju fylgði mikill Vinðaherr. [...]

Ok í annan fylkingararm Haralds konungs var Heiðr skjaldmær með sínu merki, ok hefir hon með sér hundrað kappi. [...]

Present were the **shield-maiden** Visina and also Heiðr, and each of these two had come with a great army to King Haraldr. Visina carried his standard. [...] Vébjörg was the name of another **shield-maiden**, who came to King Haraldr with a great army from the south from Gotland, and many combatants followed her. [...] A large army of Wends followed the **shield-maiden** Visina. [...]

And in one flank of King Haraldr's troops was the **shield-maiden** Heiðr with her own standard, and she has with her one hundred combatants.

The manuscript preserving this text is from around 1300, the text itself perhaps half a century older, according to its editor. He also suggests that this chapter is an insertion from a different source than the rest of the text; it is a 'gamansaga' (entertaining tale) in the *fornaldarsaga* style and not intended to be historical. The material in it is derived from a poem reconstructed as *Brávallapula*, the same source as used by Saxo Grammaticus (Guðnason 1982: xxxvi–xl; Friis-Jensen 2009: 72–3).

Here, a brief digression on Saxo, a Danish historian writing in Latin in the early 13th century, is required, since he is the source for many later preoccupations with Viking Age warrior women, particularly in contemporary popular culture. There are many warrior women in Saxo and it would take far too long to analyse all the relevant episodes. However, it is noteworthy that, as far as I can discover, Saxo does not use a term comparable to 'shield-maiden', or indeed 'Amazon', rather his tendency is to emphasise the transgressive femininity of his female warriors (Jesch 1991: 176–80). The Brávellir episode in Saxo can be compared with its *Sögubrot* analogue (Friis-Jensen and Zeeberg 2005: I, 510–2; Fisher and Davidson 1979–80: I, 238–9):

At Sle oppido cum Hacone genam scisso sub Hetha Wisnaque ducibus Tummi Uelificator excesserat. Quorum muliebri corpori natura uirilem animum erogavit. Webiorgam quoque eodem spiritu præditam Bo Brami filius et Brat Iutus belligerandi cupidine prosequuntur. [...]

Wisnam uero, imbutam rigore foeminam reique militaris apprime peritam, Sclaua stipauerat manus. Cuius præcipui Barri ac Gniqli satellites agnoscuntur. [...]

At Hetha promptissimis stipata comitibus armatam bello centuriam afferebat. [...] Itaque memoratæ uirgines non modo comiter, sed etiam pugnaciter cultæ terrestres in aciem copias ductauerunt.

From Schleswig issued Haki Scarface and Tummi the Voyager under their leaders Hetha and Visna, whose **female** bodies Nature had endowed with manly courage. Vebiorg, too, instilled with the same spirit, was attended by Bo, Bram's son, and Brat the Jute, who were both longing for the fray. [...]

Visna was a **woman** hard through and through and a highly expert warrior. Her chief followers among the band of Slavs who thronged about her are known to have been Barri and Gniuzli. [...]

Now Hetha, encircled by ready comrades, brought to the war a century of armed men [...] So the two **women** I have mentioned, graceful in battle-gear, led their land forces to combat.

Rather than any term that might correspond to 'shield-maiden', Saxo deploys common terms for 'female' and 'woman' (*muliebris, foemina*), though he does also call them *uirgines* 'maidens, virgins'. This raises the likelihood that the common source for both Saxo and *Sögubrot* did not use the term *skjaldmær* and that in the latter this term is therefore a product of the influence of classical learning on the *fornaldarsögur*, as discussed below.

Another classic *fornaldarsaga* is *Völsunga saga*, likely one of the earliest ones and perhaps composed in the 13th century (Würth 2003: 101). In this the well-known heroine Brynhildr once describes herself as a shield-maiden in resisting her lover Sigurðr (Finch 1965: 43):

Hann mælti, 'Sá kæmi bezt dagr yfir oss at vér mætum njótask.' Brynhildr svarar, 'Eigi er þat skipat at vit búim saman. Ek em skjaldmær, ok á ek með herkonungum hjálm, ok þeim mun ek at liði verða, ok ekki er mér leitt at berjask.'

'The day we wed would be our happiest', he said. 'We're not fated to share our lives together', Brynhildr replied. 'I am a **shield-maiden**, wearing a helmet along with warrior-kings. I help them and I don't find battle distasteful.'

Like many other *fornaldarsögur*, *Völsunga saga* is based on older poetry, in its case following quite closely a collection of Eddic heroic poems very like the surviving Codex Regius of the Poetic Edda (Finch 1965: 85–9). It is therefore important to note that the term *skjaldmær* is not used in any Eddic poetry about Brynhildr or indeed any other figure. Indeed, it has been argued that, in this scene, Brynhildr is presented as a shield-maiden in order to make a contrast with her transformation into a courtly maiden engaged in needlework, in what Agneta Ney has called the 'courtly' half of the saga (2003: 118–20), which reflects 13th-century norms.

The final example from the *fornaldarsögur* is from a rather different kind of text, *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs*, which is not based on older material but rather tends towards pastiche (Clunies Ross 2010: 122). Certainly the shield-maiden in this saga is described in quite a parodic way (Jónsson 1959: 284; Pálsson and Edwards 1985: 200):

Maðr er nefndr Þvari ok var kallaðr Bryn-Þvari. Hann bjó skammt frá konungs atsetum. Hann hafði verit vikingr mikill inn fyrri hlut ævi sinnar; ok þá er hann var í vikingu, mætti hann skjaldmey einni er Brynhildr hét. ... Þau börðust, ok bárust sár á Brynhildi, þangat til at hún var óvig. Tók Þvari hana þá til sín ok mikinn fjárhlut með henni. ... Þvari gerði brúðlaup til hennar; ok sat hún á brúðbekk með hjálm ok brynju, en þó váru ástir þeira góðar.

There was a man called Thvari, or Bryn-Thvari, who lived not far from the king's residence. He had been a great viking in his younger years and during his fighting career he had come up against an **amazon**, Brynhild ... They had set about one another, and soon Brynhild was wounded and unable to carry on fighting. Then Thvari took her into his care, along with a great deal of money. ... Thvari made her his wife, and although she wore a helmet and coat of mail at her wedding, their married life was a happy one.

Once again, note the translators' choice of the term 'amazon' for *skjaldmæ*r. Indeed a variety of translations (including Tolkien's 'warrior woman') have been cited in the discussion above in order to demonstrate the different possible interpretations of this term. However, although it seems preferable to translate *skjaldmæ*r consistently as 'shield-maiden', there is no doubt that overall these figures are influenced by the classical concept of the female warrior-figures known as Amazons, as outlined below.

Amazons and the learned origins of the 'fornaldarsögur'

Although many of the texts in this genre are based on ancient, usually poetical, traditions, the prose narratives known as the *fornaldarsögur* are nevertheless very much a phenomenon of the High Middle Ages in Iceland and have been shown also to have learned origins. Recent scholarship (Jensson 2009, Lassen 2012) has demonstrated that when Icelanders first wrote *fornaldarsögur* they used the Latin models of the Icelander Oddr Snorrason and the Dane Saxo Grammaticus, and that this genre was originally a form of learned historiography, an Icelandic version of European chronicles of the origins of peoples. Jensson (2009: 90) goes so far as to say that 'these learned Latin origins were a necessary precondition for this class of literature to arise'. In this context it is worth looking more closely at what learned Latin authors knew of shield-maidens, or rather Amazons, in Scandinavia.

Already in the 11th century we find a link being made between Viking Age Scandinavians and Amazons, in the following passage from Adam of Bremen's *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen* (Tschan 2002: 126–7; Jensson 2009: 84):

Et primuo quidem filius regis nomine Anund, a patre missus ad dilatandum imperium, cum in patriam feminarum pervenisset, quas nos arbitramur Amazonas esse, veneno, quod illat fontibus immiscuerunt, tam ipse quam exercitus eius perierunt.

First, indeed, when one of the [Swedish] king's sons, named Anund, was sent by his father to extend his dominions, he came into the land of the women, who we think were **Amazons**, and he as well as his army perished there of poison which the women mingled in the springs.

While this passage introduces the idea of contact between Scandinavians and Amazons, the otherness of the latter is made clear, though there is no explicit reference here to their martial capacities. Jensson associates this passage with a Latin remnant in chapter 14 of the Old Icelandic translation of Oddr's *Yngvars saga víðförla*, his Latin original otherwise lost (Jensson 2009: 82–4):

Fertur, quod Emundus, rex Sueonum, misit filium suum Onundum per mare Balticum, qui postremo ad Amazonas pervenient ab eis interfectus est.

It is claimed that Eymundr, king of the Swedes, sent his son Önundr across the Baltic sea, who, arriving finally to the **Amazons**, was killed by them.

From Adam to Oddr to the Icelandic translation demonstrates one possible conduit for ideas about Amazons into the later *fornaldarsaga* genre. As the extract from *Alexanders saga* quoted above demonstrates clearly, by the 13th century Icelandic authors were using the term *skjaldmæ*r specifically for Amazons.

Saxo's interest in female warriors can also be traced back to the classical Amazons, though he does not use that term of them. Although he was familiar with Walter of Châtillon's *Alexandreis* (Friis-Jensen and Zeeberg 2005: I, 59, II, 628), he appears to have modelled his female warriors rather on the heroic figure of the woman warrior Camilla in books VII and

XI of Virgil's *Aeneid* (Fisher and Davidson 1979–80: II, 7, 40, 131–2; Jesch 1991: 178). While Camilla is not an Amazon, classical scholars assume that she 'is the poet's own invention, based ... on the tradition of Amazons in Greek epic' (Sharrock 2015: 159). As has been noted above, Saxo also contributed to the development of the *fornaldarsaga* genre. While both his work and some of the traditions behind the *fornaldarsögur* have ancient origins, possibly dating back to the Viking Age, the evidence is increasingly pointing towards warrior women having been inserted into those traditions as a result of classical impulses reaching Scandinavia from the 12th century onwards, with an ultimate ancestor in the Amazons.

Before turning to other kinds of texts, it is worth summarising what the texts discussed so far suggest about ON *skjaldmær*. It is used for Amazons and enters Old Norse texts in the 13th century, deriving from learned historiography. Amazons themselves are already mentioned in Latin texts about Scandinavian contacts with the East in the 11th century. And it is of interest that most of the examples associate shield-maidens with the East, either the eastern part of the European continent or the large region we might designate as Russia.

Poetic and onomastic shield-maidens

If *skjaldmær* is not a direct translation of any Latin term, then the possibility remains that it was an older ON term repurposed to refer to the Amazons once knowledge of those reached Scandinavian shores. However, this is difficult to demonstrate, since the evidence is very slim indeed. In the prose texts cited above, several of which contain quotations from older poetry, it is noteworthy that with the exception of *Qrvar-Odds saga* the term does not appear in the poetry, but rather only in the prose, reinforcing the suggestion that it does not necessarily belong to the oldest layers of these texts, which in some cases might go back to the Viking Age. Apart from some runic inscriptions, Old Norse poetry survives only in manuscripts of the same date as the prose literature. Nevertheless, it is likely to be a more reliable indicator of early vocabulary than prose because of the way in which poetic metre acts to preserve texts in their more-or-less original form. Apart from *Qrvar-Oddr's* poem already discussed, there appear to be only three references (in two poems) to *skjaldmeyjar*. These will be considered after a couple of examples of how the term is used in names.

A famous Icelandic poet of the 10th century, Einarr *skálaglamm* 'Loud in the Hall', is said in *Jómsvikinga saga* to have earlier had the nickname *skjaldmeyjar*-Einarr 'of the shield-maiden' (Whaley 2012: 278), though, as with most nicknames, it is not very clear why. However, this nickname does not occur in any other text about this well-known poet, and the nickname may not be any older than this saga. Another stray, and similarly inscrutable example is the fleeting reference to a ship called *Skjaldmærin* 'The Shield-Maiden', owned by Ormr, a half-brother of King Ingi, referred to in *Sverris saga* (Indrebø 1920: 92). This fits in with a tendency for ships to be given the name of female figures from the mid-12th century onwards (Jesch 2001: 52) and seems to be evidence for the burgeoning interest in shield-maidens from that period as outlined above.

The Eddic poem *Atlakviða* is often considered to be one of the oldest surviving of the heroic poems of the Edda, possibly going back to the 9th or 10th century (Kristjánsson and Ólason 2014: II, 133–4). Though we cannot be sure that the surviving written version is anything like such a hypothetical oral original, the two references to (*Húna*) *skjaldmeyjar* 'shield-maidens (of the Huns)' in stanzas 16 and 44 (Kristjánsson and Ólason 2014: II, 376,

79.

Nu mæri lættu alyer vafa greppa gull scatur mæ gunga
 hondu. Þær mæri mæri æri nylunga gamlar gunga ei
 gongur mæsi brenn blaemillar bita þær tæri gæna gung
 stöpi ei gungar ne hōraþ. Þeiddo land ragna þær oner
 þær geatende gung hvarra ær gærdi huna. þa quæþ þær ær
 erja vof hōgna heilir rarric nu z hōse hvarþ yet hōgve
 ys. Þeiddo lættu þær v froll at þær maerina mel grey
 po tære vif m okonja. Hættu vll hūn mære þær e hærþ
 mōþþ þero rako þær vaf þyova vollo al gona. Land sa þær
 æta z lylfialgar dūpa bueca grepar stænda abōg m hā
 sal v fode þroþō flegræt sel mēþō þvndō rōndō bleico sa
 aldo daga dæraþ ei þær drac ætt vū valthallo vþ læto vū
 at vafþa þær gung. ei þær h vicia gūm m gærū gallæda
 at vektia gūm hūdi. Sytt þær þær stætt at þær ital gūm
 broþ hær hær þær v hō lte drevctm. rāþm ættu av gūþ
 lte mættu rægt vūþa vif hūna hær m brægdō hall gæþv æ
 snema. Þær hærþ þær broþ at þær ibrymo þær se hialmom
 armgreyþo at hā hær æta se þær vllæþō tol hærþa daga mæ
 nōþ rōlva lættu mæri gæta. Hūna scald mættu hær vllæþa
 ei æta stalyd lættu þær vllættu gærd vā. nu ei sa ætt gærd
 yet v rōlgrū. Sættu e nu llytt at lamma nylvōgōm lættu
 ei at lættu lya hūtt. til ei rōlmo vllættu rinar vllættu onessā.
 J. engo þær gungar rōlmo lættu vū hōgunda z bundo þættu.
 vū. hūo hūgn lveþu hūso ei ætt vū. hūtt hūtt hūtt
 s lte rōlmo stættu vūtt. Hūgn vūtt hūtt gūtt.
 þær rōlmo ei rōlmo vllættu. gōttu þættu gūttu vūtt. Hūtt
 tætt m hūgn ihūtt hūtt bloþtt ær bōttu scōttu ball
 driþa. lættu llytt hūttu hūttu þættu. Sættu þær hūttu
 hūttu ær bōttu bloþtt z abōttu lættu z bōttu j. gūtt
 Þa ætt þær gūttu gūttu dættu hūttu ei hūttu hūttu mæ
 blættu olett hūttu hūttu mættu ei mōttu hūttu ei
 a bōttu hūtt. hūttu hūttu mættu ei bōttu la. Hūttu hūttu
 gūttu ei hūttu scōttu hūttu hūttu llyttu hūttu hūttu
 hūttu bloþttu þær bōttu lættu z bōttu j. gūtt. Hūttu

Figure 1. Extract of 'Atlakviða', from the Codex Regius of the Poetic Edda (GKS 2365 4to, 40r). Húna skjaldmeyjar can be read in l. 19. Image from handrit.is. CC BY-SA 4.0

382) may be our earliest examples of the ON term. However, even if this is the case, it is not very informative regarding Viking Age warrior women for two reasons. Firstly, both references are in passing, without any indication of who the shield-maidens were, or what they did. Secondly, these shield-maidens are Huns, associated with Atli, originally a historical king in present-day Hungary in the mid-5th century, and so located on the European continent and not in Scandinavia. How and when the material of *Atlakviða* reached Scandinavia is impossible to say, but its continental origins are indubitable (Kristjánsson and Ólason 2014: II, 130–1). This chimes quite well with much of the evidence already discussed which tends to locate shield-maidens on the European continent or in Russia (note that, according to Clunies Ross 2010: 121, the shield-maiden of *Orvar-Odds saga* ‘belongs in the world of the Huns’).

Another poetic reference to shield-maidens occurs in a warrior-kenning *skjaldmeyja skjóma skerðendr* ‘notchers of the shinies [= swords] of shield-maidens = warriors’. This is quite a different matter from *Atlakviða*. The kenning occurs in a poem cited in *Stjörnu-Odda draumr* (Vilmundarson and Vilhjálmsson (1991: 478, my translation). This text, though it has *fornaldarsaga*-like elements, is not strictly speaking of that genre, rather it concerns the dream of a certain historical Icelandic astronomer Star-Oddi, in which his alter ego Dagfinnr encounters a *skjaldmær* Hléguðr (the term is used once of her in the narrative prose), a character who operates in the Scandinavian sphere (here a romanticised Götaland) and who seems to have ‘Viking warrior woman’ written all over her. However, this text is highly unusual in its construction, and this serves to emphasise its playful fictionality. The author has created a complex envelope narrative and the overall effect ‘is to give this entertaining saga-within-a-saga and its ... verses an air of cliché, as if we have all heard this kind of story before’ (O’Connor 2002: 28). The text is likely from the 14th century, the verses perhaps a bit earlier (O’Connor 2002: 27), and here we are very much in the realm of the literary shield-maiden, deriving from the *fornaldarsögur* characters discussed above.

The Lord’s shield-maiden

Once shield-maidens have become a cliché, they can enter other textual genres, as illustrated by an anecdote from the miracles of Jón, who was bishop of Hólar in the early 12th century. The story concerns a pious young woman called Hildir, who wishes to become an anchoress. When this is refused by her elders, she disappears and is only discovered when some women remember having gone berry-picking with her the previous summer and her saying that the berrying-place would make a good location for the life of a hermit (Steingrímsson et al. 2003: 246, my translation):

Því fara menn skyndiliga til þess staðar, sem konurnar höfðu til berjanna farit, ok fundu þar skjaldmey Dróttins, vápnaða með bænum ok búna til bardaga í mót fjáðanum ok hans flokkum ok brynjaða með heilagri trú, en hjálmaða með váninni ok skjaldaða með psálmasongum.

Then people quickly went to the place where the women had gone berrying, and they found the Lord’s **shield-maiden** armed with prayers and prepared for battle against the devil and his hosts and armoured with holy faith, and helmeted with hope and shielded with psalms.

She is returned to Hólar and the bishop himself gives permission for her to become a nun and anchoress, though not in the berrying-place. Although Hildir appears in other versions of the bishop’s miracles, this particular anecdote appears only in two fragmentary recensions, in slightly different versions. The recension cited above survives in a manuscript of

the 17th century, the other, a longer and ‘florid Latinate’ version, probably rewritten from an earlier version of the former, survives in a 14th-century manuscript. Peter Foote (2003: 124*, 181*, 207*–8*) has suggested that they both derive from an exemplar written around 1300. These texts are particularly associated with Hólar, where Jón was bishop, but also where, forty years earlier, Brandr Jónsson was bishop and used the term *skjaldmær* for Amazons in his *Alexanders saga*, as discussed above.

The idea of the saint as a warrior is common in medieval hagiography, based on biblical precedents (Steingrímsson et al. 2003: 246–7n.). Given that the berry-picking Icelandic anchoress has the typical valkyrie-name of Hildir, one can compare a similarly mythological reference to *berserkr guðs* ‘God’s champion’ (translating Latin *athleta*) in *Barlaams ok Josaphats saga* (Rindal 1981: 85).

Valkyries

As already noted, shield-maidens are quite a different category of beings from valkyries, though the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably by modern scholars, or indiscriminately when the texts being discussed do not use the ON equivalents (e.g. Finch 1965: 93–4; Jochens 1996: 90; Self 2014). Valkyries have been more intensively studied in their own right than shield-maidens, though they would still benefit from the kind of detailed study of text and vocabulary, tracking down all the instances, as done here for the shield-maidens. This would be a much bigger undertaking, since valkyries appear extensively in Old Norse texts and particularly in skaldic poetry, where they appear in a variety of guises. These guises can be in the use of ON *valkyrja*, or of the names of individual valkyries, such as Hildir or Gunnr, or in a wide variety of kennings in skaldic poetry, both as base-words in woman-kennings, and as determinants in battle-kennings (some examples in Jesch 1991: 154, 160, 2015: 105–6). Although their roles and characteristics are as wide-ranging as these examples, our own understanding of what a valkyrie was or did is heavily dependent on the very useful summary definition provided by Snorri Sturluson in his *Edda*, a handbook of poetry and mythology from the early part of the 13th century (Faulkes 1982: 30; my translation):

Sól ok Bil eru talðar með Ásynjum ... Enn eru þær aðrar er þjóna skulu í Valhöll, bera drykkju ok gæta borðbúnaðar ok ólgagna. ... Þessar heita valkyrjur. Þær sendir Óðinn til hverrar orrostu. Þær kjósa feigð á menn ok ráða sigri.

Sól and Bil are counted among the female *Æsir* ... There are those others whose job it is to serve in Valhöll, carry drink and look after table-settings and ale-vessels. ... These are called **valkyries**. Óðinn sends them to each battle. They determine the mortal fate of men and decide victory.

Here, Snorri covers their two main functions, that of allotting victory on the battlefield, and of serving dead warriors in the afterlife. This short passage about valkyries comes embedded in a list of the *Ásynjur*, the female members of the Norse pantheon, indicating that Snorri saw them as mythological beings, as their association with Óðinn and Valhöll also makes clear.

As mythological beings, and as their presence in a very wide range of skaldic and other poetry indicates, the valkyries are beings that belong to a Scandinavian tradition, one that goes back at least to the Viking Age. That they go back even further than the Viking Age is suggested by the occurrence of the Old English (OE) cognate *wælcyrrie* in a glossary from

the 8th century (Hofmann 1955: 123, 190). Both etymology and the complex nature of this compound suggest an ancient, Common Germanic derivation for this word (Bjorvand and Lindeman 2019: 1414), in contrast to the simple compound *skjaldmæ*r, a more recent concept the meaning of which is straightforwardly deducible from its component parts. In Old Norse mythology, the valkyries clearly have a military function and many sources make it clear that they were armed, though almost never with that most masculine of weapons, the sword (Jesch 1991: 170–4, 2015: 105–6). They are not depicted as warriors as such, and their function seems to be mainly a psychological or conceptual one, as they are (Quinn 2007: 95):

... a potent force in the imagining of life after death for a warrior culture, offering comfort for those chosen to die in the guise of a glamorous escort to Valhøll and the affirmation that they were the chosen ones; perhaps for others she accommodated the hope of being able to avoid pre-ordained death by being granted the valkyrie's protection and favour in the theatre of war.

The valkyries show that people in the Viking Age were capable of imagining armed females, whether or not such females existed in real life. But it seems that when they imagined armed females, they imagined them not as warriors themselves, but rather in a supporting role to armed and fighting men. The shield-maidens, on the other hand, represent quite a different concept, as exemplified in the analysis above.

Conclusions

The ‘textual shield-maidens’ discussed here, certainly those in texts which use ON *skjaldmæ*r, do not provide any conclusive evidence for ‘literal shield-maidens’, or warrior women in the Viking Age. Indeed they suggest that in the Viking imaginary, any such creatures were most likely to be foreign or, like the valkyries, mythological. While shield-maidens are perhaps a rather special example, I would suggest that similar exercises on other sources not discussed here would also show that there are in fact no medieval texts that provide conclusive evidence for warrior women in the Viking Age. That includes those non-Scandinavian sources that are often cited in these contexts (Price et al. 2019: OSM, 23–4; Raffield 2016: 317). These would require a separate study, though many of the same principles would apply and there is plenty of scope for further work in conjunction with archaeologists, historians and specialists in other disciplines. In the meantime, it would be best to avoid the term ‘shield-maiden’ in such discussions and stick to more neutral terminology such as ‘female warrior’ or similar, having of course first defined what is meant by ‘warrior’, or perhaps even more neutrally, ‘armed female’, especially when discussing visual representations (Croix et al. 2020). Such further discussion is especially important given the strong interest in, and even desire for proof of, the existence of Viking warrior women that is currently widespread in popular culture and even in large swathes of academe, and not just among undergraduates. While such discussion is necessary and drives understanding forward, it is important to be careful when it is driven by contemporary desires concerning the past.

In this paper, I have attempted to demonstrate what I call a ‘stratigraphy of texts’, a method to determine how Old Norse (and other) literary texts, written after the Viking Age, may, or may not, be used to illuminate Viking Age concepts, or their absence. This method goes beyond just source criticism, as it is important to be fully aware of the words used to

describe the concepts being discussed, both then and now, including a history of usage and etymological considerations. The texts concerned need to be evaluated both for their possible contemporaneity with the Viking Age and for later influences. They also need to be assessed for their possible derivation from earlier texts, to track changes in the usage and meaning of the relevant concepts. The study of such ancient texts is just as much of a skill requiring training as is digging an old grave or analysing bones with the latest science.

There is no doubt that human beings are capable of most things, and it cannot be denied that the existence of female warriors or military leaders in the Viking Age remains a possibility. Indeed I have always acknowledged this possibility even though I have also argued that the strongly binary emphasis on gender distinctions in a variety of evidence from the Viking Age itself means that it remains unlikely (Jesch 2015: 93–107). What this paper has attempted to do is to contribute to further discussion by setting out a model for how to use the rich textual and linguistic evidence to address these questions in a systematic and informed way, using here just the one example, that of the shield-maidens, who in themselves are not evidence for the existence of female warriors in the Viking Age. It remains to be seen whether other concepts or episodes in Old Norse and other texts will provide this evidence.

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