



Women in Norse Culture

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Introduction

This is a brief overview of the role and status of women in the Norse culture. As with most things regarding this time period the archeological evidence is not as strong as in the later periods studied in the Society of Creative Anachronism. We have rune stones, sagas, burials, and some written accounts from visitors to the Norse world during this time period. The information presented is based on research done by the author with some personal interpretations. By no means is this a "right answer." This is a presentation of research. In the past 10 years there has been a renewed interest in the Norse world. The Norse countries and Universities are currently published new information and archeological findings every day. Tomorrow they could find something that completely changes our view of the Norse woman. If you have information or resources that contradict anything presented here please share them with me.

Overall the Norse woman is viewed as independent, strong, wise and an important part of the Norse society. Norse women were central to the home, had legal rights, were valued for their intelligence, and held status in their own right. The average free Norse woman had more independence than the average central European free woman. It was not uncommon for women to own property, choose their husbands, divorce their husbands, and partake in trading partnerships. Many rune stones were raised both by women and for women indicating their value in the Norse culture.

Women in Society

- Women Exercised independent authority and were respected as members of their own social class.



Runestone raised by Gunvor in honor of her daughter, Astrid

Women Exercised independent authority and were respected as members of their own social class.

Roesdahl p.59-60

- Rune stones all over Scandinavia were raised by women or in memory of women.
- Some of the largest runic monuments mention women.
- Royal descent on the mother's side was sufficient to establish a legitimate claim to the throne.
- Women's graves were often just as splendid as men's graves.

Marriage and the Home

- Marriage was an alliance between equals and between their families
 - How Marriages were arranged.
 - How the culture supported legal marriages
 - Restrictions on Marriage
- The widow



Marriage was an alliance between equals and between their families. Roesdahl p. 60

How Marriages were arranged.

Marriages were arranged to ensure the orderly passing of property from one generation to the next. Jochens p.21

The engagement was arranged between the fathers or the closest male relative of the couple. The father of the prospective groom would visit the father of the perspective bride in order to arrange the marriage. The woman had the right to refuse marriage. Jochens p. 25

How the culture supported legal marriages

Laws were in place to allow property to be passed only to children born in legal marriages.

Women had the right to divorce their husbands. 'Roesdahl p 61

Both men and women were punished for adultery. Men with death and women by being sold into slavery. Roesdahl p. 61

The term hjon, not only designated the martial couple but the entire household, including servants. Jochens p. 116

Restrictions on Marriage

Kings and powerful men were allowed several wives. Jochens p. 20

Marriage had to be between two people of the same or similar social class. A free person could not marry a slave for example. Jochens p.21

Men and women could not marry if they did not meet minimal property requirements. For example the couple had to prove that they would be able to support a family in order to marry. Jochens p.22

The widow

If still in her reproductive years, women often remarried after divorce or the decease of their husbands. Jochens p. 61

Older women did not remarry and enjoyed increased independence.

She was not under the guardianship of father or husband and could speak on her own behalf.

Jochens p.62

Marriage and the Home

- The Country Home



- The Town Home



The Country Home

The wife managed the farm and the household.

Jochens p. 116

The woman by law managed all the affairs of the household that took place inside the home. Such as weaving, food preparation and storage, sewing, dairy work, laundry and bathing, storage of supplies for the winter, preparation of wool and wool products for trade, and other household duties.

Jochens p. 117 - 140

The Town Home

The wife managed the home and helped with the family craft.

Jesch p. 38

When the men were gone trading, the women managed the family craft
Some of the families living in towns were full time merchants and craftsmen.

Jesch p 118

Work and Trade

- Homespun Cloth
- The craftswoman
- Women in Travel

Homespun Cloth

Women were primarily responsible for the spinning and weaving. Much of which was used in trade. Jochens p 141
 Silks from the East were rewoven to double and sometime quadruple the length of cloth that was then traded to Europe.
 Women wove the sails for the ships from both wool and linen. Jochens p. 142
 The cloth for sails was woven in three primary weaves, which were variations of twill fabric.

Andersen p 18

Tablet weaving was used extensively in decoration of all Norse garments.

In the Queen Aesa burial tapestries were woven and used to decorate the halls.

Crafts women

Women did own property and could support trade and expeditions monetarily.

Some female graves contain scales and other items of trade so there is some evidence that women participated in trade and had active partnerships with men. Jesch p.205

There is also archeological evidence that women could be craftsmen working alone or with others. The only implements found exclusively in the graves of men were blacksmith's tools. Weapons, hunting equipment, carpentry tools and other typically "male" items were found in a small number of female graves. Jesch p.21

Since the men were often gone for long periods of time the husband's craft or trade agreements fell on the woman to manage.

There are four named Norse women who were remembered by medieval Icelanders as poets and whose verse is preserved in historical sagas. Jesch p 161

Women in Travel

There is evidence in place names and a few runic memorial stones in England and other European countries that some women did travel with the men in trading and war. Jesch p. 75

Women were also colonists in Iceland, Scotland, Ireland and Europe. The women generally traveled with the men when the expedition was long or when the men had an expectation to stay in the new area and establish a colony. Jesch p.80

Women are depicted traveling on their own and in the company of men in several of the sagas including the Vinland Saga, Helgi Thorisson, Arrow Odd, and the Laxdaela Saga.

Images in Myths, Legends, and Sagas

- Goddesses and Other Supernatural Women.
- Women in Sagas and Legends



Goddesses and Other Supernatural Women.

Frigg (Lady) Guerber p.42-46

Wife of Odin and mother of the God Baldr

Goddess of the atmosphere or the clouds.

Has her own palace called Fensalir, where she invited husbands and wives who had led virtuous lives on earth to her hall after death.

Takes an active interest in the affairs of men.

In one tale she outwits her husband Odin.

Freyja (woman) Guerber p.131

Goddess of beauty, love and fertility.

Queen of the Valkyrs. She often led the Valkyrs down to battlefields, choosing and claiming one half the heroes slain.

Women in Sagas and Legends

Brunhild In some stories she is warrior maiden and in others she is a Valkyr.
In both cases the hero Sigurd awakens her.

Gudrun She personally avenged the honor of her brothers. Signy
 Sister of the hero Sigmund. She saves Sigmund and hides him from
his enemies. She also sends two of her sons by Siggeir whom she hates to die at
Sigmunds hands.

Conclusion

- The Norse woman was a strong, intelligent, and independent person having an active role in both her own home and in the society.



Conclusion

Overall women in Norse Society had much more influence and independence than was regularly observed in Europe. Women were still subject to men and had to rely on men to speak for them in most legal matters. The fact remains that women could and did own property, participated in trade, managed the running of the house hold, and were honored in runic monuments both by men and other women. In some rare instances a woman could be a craftsman and trader in her own right. Women also had a right to refuse marriage and divorce their husbands, which gave them a great deal of power in deciding their own fate. The Norse woman was a strong, intelligent, and independent person having an active role in both her own home and in the society.

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