

# SHIELD MAIDENS

The female Viking warrior is a recurring character in stories through history as well as in modern films, books and tv- but did they really exist in dark age society?

Women certainly held an important position in society, with more privileges than their counterparts elsewhere in Europe at the time. They were considered to be the head of the household, looking after family farmland, especially while men were away. They could own and inherit property, act as traders or have a religious role. The Oseberg ship, one of the richest and most elaborate Viking - age archeological discoveries, was the burial of 2 women. There are instances of female explorers and settlers, such as Aud the Deep Minded, who had a ship built and captained it to Orkney and Iceland.



Ancient standing stones carved with runes are found throughout Scandinavia, some of which are dedicated to, or commissioned by women. For example a Norwegian runestone from Dynna has carved into it: " Gunnvor Thririk's daughter made the bridge after Astrid her daughter. She was the most skillful maiden in Hadeland". Although these show their degree of freedom, respect and status within society, unlike those stones carved in honor of men, none of them make any mention of women involved in warfare.

Shieldmaidens, (the word can sometimes also refer to the mythical Valkyries) are mentioned in Norse sagas and stories, most of which probably have elements of fact and fiction. There is the legend of Brynhildur, which may be based on older Germanic stories, and Freydis Eriksdottir, a fierce character in the Vinland sagas. The annals written by Irish monks mention a Viking leader known as "Inghen Ruaidh", a 'red haired maiden'. Saxo Grammaticus describes women who fight and 'act like men', in his history of Denmark, the "Gesta Denorum", which tells stories of great female warriors and military tacticians, such as Veborg, Hetha and Wisna, and the legends of Alfhild, and Lagertha. These, as well as the male characters he wrote about, may be fictional, based on history, or a combination of many different warriors.

In past archeology, the gender of a buried person has been assumed based on the goods they were buried with. However, there is more debate on the subject now, with more different interpretations.

In the vicinity of Repton in Derbyshire, there are graves from around the time of the great heathen army. Analysis of the remains in one grave mound found them to be female, buried with parts of a sword and shield. At Santon Downham, a pair of the oval brooches worn by women have been found in close proximity to a sword.

At Kaupang in Norway, there are female burials with shield bosses, axe heads and the remnants of spears, in Bogoveg in Denmark a woman was buried alongside a battle axe, and in Asnes a young woman was buried with a horse and a collection of weapons. And in 2017 it was widely reported that an analysis of bones from a warriors grave in Birka were those of a woman. This was an exceptionally rich grave, containing a sword, shields, arrows, spear and the skeletons of 2 horses.

It may be that they were indeed "shieldmaidens". There are, however, a number of other ideas about these finds. The grave goods may be symbolic- the spear in particular is associated with "seers" and mysticism. Perhaps the weapons were to indicate that they were a person of very high social status- the Birka individual was indicated to have travelled widely. It is possible that the grave goods only show how they or their family wished them to be portrayed in death. It has



also been hypothesised that there may have been differing views of gender at the time, that they could have assumed a role 'as a man' (and vice-versa: in the pectoral stones of Gotland, there are bearded figures in female dress). The woman at Asnes was about 18, very small and slightly built, and it is unlikely she would have been able to use the weapons she was buried with effectively- one suggestion is that she may have been a human sacrifice, perhaps to deliver the weapons to the afterlife. As with male remains that have been found with 'female' objects, such as oval brooches, they may have been the possession of someone else, given to the person as they were buried.

It is what we don't know that makes this a fascinating time period- every new discovery adds to our understanding of it.