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BOOK REVIEW

Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir. 2020. *Valkyrie: The Women of the Viking World* (London & Oxford: Bloomsbury)

Amy Jefford Franks

The 1990s saw a handful of monographs discussing Viking women, but since then there have been few monographs in English on the topic: in these twenty to thirty years, research on the Viking Age has continued to expand, but no monographs to date had followed the ground-breaking works of Judith Jesch and Jenny Jochens. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir's recent book takes this place and is the latest addition to the growing corpus on Viking women, giving a fresh take on the topic. Taking an interdisciplinary approach of textual, archaeological, and runic analyses, Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir demonstrates her expansive knowledge of the Viking world, and allows readers an in-depth and inclusive exploration into the lives of Viking women. Not only this, but the accessible language and excellent communication of ideas means that this text is suitable for academics of all levels, alongside casual enthusiasts.

Valkyrie follows the life cycle of Viking women, both within Scandinavia and throughout the diaspora, to explore what their lives would have looked like. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir includes the experiences of young girls, royal women, enslaved women, and a whole host more in a way that avoids the assumption of a hegemonic experience. It is my opinion that this book should not be seen as a text to explore the 'special interest' topic of Viking women, but should be seen instead as an essential text on the lives of Viking people: the author centres women in the day-to-day lives of Viking

society in the way that men often are (pp. 16, 75-82), and therefore provides a groundbreaking piece of work on the foundations of Viking society.

The book starts with infancy and childhood, in which the author considers the way Vikings perceived childhood, highlighting the high infant mortality rate and the deep emotional pain resulting from this. She also presents evidence of infanticide, and that this may have been more likely to happen to young girls due to structural inequalities. Moving on to exploring childhood, Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir considers the evidence for children both playing games and beginning training for work, noting their entrance into the social world.

Following this, Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir explores the experiences of teenage girls, which appear to centre around marriage. She highlights that we meet many saga characters as they are about to enter marriage, for example, arguing that this was 'clearly conceived as a pivotal moment in a woman's life' (p. 37). She continues to bring these elements to life. She notes that Unnr *djúpúðga*'s granddaughters are married off in Orkney and the Faroe Islands before the rest of the family leave for Iceland: 'Ólöf and Gró are left behind in a new place, never to see their family again' (p. 37). By reminding us of this reality, the author encourages readers to feel the emotions of these young Viking women in a way that many other historical works do not. Continuing from this, Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir also explores instances of rape and sexual assault; a topic rarely considered, and the author centres the emotional pain that these women experienced. The discussion of teenage women also explores women who break the mould. The author presents information on evidence of a female skald, before thoughtfully and robustly tackling the discussions around burial Bj. 581 and the concept of female warriors. In an excellent move toward queer inclusion in our academic work, Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir makes use of they/them pronouns when discussing the debated individual. Furthermore, she makes the necessary point that the focus on Viking warrior women reflects our own understanding of power as inherently connected to masculinity and strength, arguing that we need to be expanding our own understandings of power.

Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir uses her next chapter on adulthood, married life, and divorce, to centre women within the history of the Viking Age. Exploring their roles in textile production, geographic mobility, and providing advice to their husbands, the author demonstrates that women drove the Viking Age. Following this chapter, she explores pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood. By covering topics such as royal mothers in politics,

women goading their sons into revenge killings, and examples of stepmothers caring for their stepchildren, Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir continues to demonstrate the diversity of experience within the Viking Age, challenging the idea that Viking women were a monolith in the Viking world. Furthermore, the author reminds readers of the reflections upon our own modern world, and she highlights that many children in the diaspora were likely bilingual. This would have also been the case within Scandinavia, where many migrants lived. This is an important reminder for our field, as we continually face the racist narratives of white supremacists.

The final two chapters discuss widows, followed by old age and death. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir identifies the ritualised performance of grief and provides examples of when women did and did not follow this, again demonstrating the diversity of experiences of Viking women. She also discusses the rights of widowed women, exploring how they could, on occasion, thrive after the death of their husband. She then moves on to focus on old age, noting the perceived wisdom of older women, and the respect they seemed to receive in old age. She also considers possible *völva* burials, alongside the fabulous burial of the Oseberg ship and the two women interred inside. Finally, the author discusses the contentious issue of women and the afterlife, noting that Hel was likely viewed as a comforting place, creating an image of the afterlife that reminds us of the humanity of women in the Viking Age.

A key strength of *Valkyrie* is the consideration for the variety of experiences women had, and their importance in Viking society. Instead of pretending that ‘Viking women’ is a monolith of experiences that need to be lifted from an antifeminist space into a space of power defined through masculinity, the author delves into the lived reality of Viking society. In the introduction, she argues that:

Individual women no doubt sometimes broke glass ceilings and rose to positions of power, perhaps enabled by a particularly advantageous social network, but on a structural level, upper-class women were still less powerful than men. However, their lives would have been very different from those of peasants and servants, let alone slaves, who probably had dreadful lives, and elite women might not have shown much solidarity with their sisters across class divides (p. 14).

She demonstrates that textile work, being a large part of the adult lives of most women, was ‘not some quaint hobby but serious business’ (p. 82) by attesting to the value of the textiles produced and the time, labour, and skill required. She goes on to state that:

In fact, the Viking Age would not have been possible at all without the contribution of women — their labour and expertise yielded the sails that set the ships in motion and clothed the Vikings for their expeditions. They ran farms and raised children, keeping entire households prosperous, often without their husbands. And these children went out into the world and achieved great things in turn (p. 115).

This underlines her argument that we must shift the way we view power away from masculine strength, and instead considers the power Viking women had in enabling the Viking Age to be possible. Alongside this, Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir writes emotional intelligence and connection deeply into every story. She states that ‘the sagas communicate heart-breaking stories of girls’ and women’s traumatic experiences that resonate strongly today’ (p. 12). Throughout the text, the reader is reminded of gendered oppression and discrimination faced by Viking women, and how this affects the preservation of this knowledge. When reading this book, one cannot help but to feel connected to the women of a thousand years ago and to feel connected to their pain and joy in a way that many other monographs do not consider. For this, I highly commend Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir.

The only minor criticism that I have of *Valkyrie* is simply that it holds a few typographical errors and a handful of sentences with grammar and spelling mistakes — however, these are, of course, the publisher’s responsibility to correct. The fact that this is such a minor point, however, stands testament to the high quality of the book, and I applaud Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir for this. Overall, *Valkyrie* is an excellent text that should be an essential reference book for any academic working with the Viking Age. I maintain it should be recommended reading for all introductory Viking Age classes, and highly suggested to any non-academic but fascinated reader. The ability to write a book that appeals to all these markets is no mean feat, but Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir’s accessible writing, emotional intelligence, and deep understanding of the necessity of women to Viking society captures a comprehensive and enjoyable exploration of Viking women at the heart of the Viking Age.