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Ritual and Violence in Viking Society

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ABSTRACT

Two components central to understanding any culture throughout history are ritual behavior and violence. In many instances, these two components overlap, namely in the context of warfare and inter-personal violence. Ritual behavior is used to prepare warriors for battle, reward them for their heroic deeds, and in some instances heal warriors from the traumatic experiences of war. Archaeological and literary evidence suggest that ritual played a key role in inter-personal and coalitionary violence within Viking society. Such ritual behavior often came in the form of magic known as *seiðr* or through the use of physical objects such as swords or talismans. This paper will analyze the form and function of rituals related to both inter-personal violence, such as dueling, and coalitionary violence, such as warfare. This analysis will draw upon both material evidence and literary evidence from primary sources such as the sagas.

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INTRODUCTION

One aspect of Viking society that is often overlooked is the importance of ritual within inter-personal and coalitionary violence. These rituals took on a wide variety of forms and served both legal and religious functions. Rituals in inter-personal violence often took on the form of dueling, specifically *holmganga* a highly ritualized style of dueling that was used to settle legal disputes. Ritual in coalitionary or inter-group violence was conducted through a wide variety of mediums, most notably through physical objects such as weapons or amulets or through *seiðr* a form of magic commonly mentioned in the sagas. These rituals are not only depicted in literary sources such as the sagas but there are also representations of ritual in Viking art and material evidence. It should be noted however that much of the literary evidence comes after the Viking Age and is written in a Christian context. This should be kept in mind when literary evidence is used to discuss pre-Christian Scandinavian society.

This paper will present and analyze these rituals in four chapters. The first will deal with those rituals related to *seiðr* and mysticism. The various forms of *seiðr* will be discussed as well as their relation to the *völva* (plural. *völur*) or seeresses. These seeresses served as ritual specialists in a manner similar to shamans found within other cultures. The *völur* are said to have assisted warriors in battle by placing protective spells on their allies and casting deadly hexes on their enemies. This section will also discuss the historicity and reality of the legendary berserkers. The second chapter will present ritual in inter-personal violence in the form of dueling. Dueling was an immensely ritualized process in Viking society and was used for a variety of reasons, such as settling legal disputes. The third chapter will provide archaeological evidence for warfare-related rituals in Viking society. Material evidence will include amulets,

both runic and non-runic, weapons, and art. Such evidence can be used to test the historical authenticity of rituals found within Norse literature.

The main purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that ritual played an important role in violence within Viking society. If warfare-related rituals can be found in contemporary societies, such as contemporary pastoralists in Africa, as well as pre-modern societies then it should be expected that similar rituals occurred in medieval societies, such as Scandinavian society during the Viking Age. By extension, this paper will also demonstrate that ritual is an intrinsic aspect of violence within human society and is vital for preparing soldiers for battle and reintegrating them into normal society.

CHAPTER 1: MAGIC AND MYSTICISM IN WARFARE

A common motif found in the sagas is the use of magic known as *seiðr* in violent acts. In some instances, it is used for revenge or to win a duel, in others, it is used to decimate entire armies. While men could use *seiðr* it was considered dishonorable and therefore women were the main practitioners of this form of magic. *Seiðr* was said to be practiced by women known as *völur* who served as ritual specialists akin to shamans. The *völur* were attributed with being powerful practitioners of magic as well as possessing the ability to divine the future. While not all female practitioners of magic were *völur* they are perhaps the most frequently mentioned. The existence of the *völur* has also been supported by archaeological evidence, most notably that from the site of Fyrkat, where a grave of a woman containing grave goods such as a staff and henbane seeds (items often associated with the *völur*) is located. Another aspect of Viking warfare that tethers between mystical and reality is that of the *berserkir* (berserker) and *ulfheðnar* (wolf-warriors). These are the legendary warriors that are said to have worn bear or wolf skins into battle, or in some accounts are said to have actually transformed into said beasts. Their other notable characteristic is the frenzied trance-like state they were said to have entered during battle. There are numerous depictions of “wolf warriors” in Germanic art, such as the Torslunda plates, dating from the Migration Period to the 12th century such as the Torslunda plates. However, the best information regarding the berserkers comes from sagas and skaldic poems. It is important to understand these concepts if we are to understand the Viking perspective of the world as well as their view of warfare.

***Seiðr* and Magic in the Sagas**

Seiðr and other forms of magic are commonly found within the sagas as well as poems such as the *Hávamál*. It is used both by the gods and mortals, ranging from female seeresses to male heroes. It is important to note that *seiðr* is not the only category of magic and that there is a division within the category of *seiðr* itself. Neil Price provides a comprehensive description of *seiðr* in his book *The Viking Way: Magic and Mind in Late Iron Age Scandinavia*. On a basic level, Price divides *seiðr* into two major categories, that used for “domestic” purposes and that used to fulfill violent means (Price 2019, 34; 272). In terms of the specific functions of *seiðr* Price provides the following examples:

- Divining the future
- Killing
- Inducing sickness
- Inflicting misfortune
- Depriving people of their wits or strength
- Revealing the hidden (Price 2019, 57)

These are just some categories of the uses of *seiðr* as well magic as a whole. While magic other than *seiðr* could be used for violent means, *seiðr* will be the primary focus of this chapter; other forms of magic, such as runic magic, will also be discussed. Furthermore, this paper will only present *seiðr* in relation to inter-personal and coalitionary violence and therefore the “domestic” applications of such magic will largely be omitted.

As previously mentioned *seiðr* was very diverse in its form and function and could be used to engage in violence against an individual or entire armies. *Seiðr* was not always used to

directly harm or outright kill an individual, it could also be used to cause misfortune, which in turn could lead to indirect injury or death. Such magic could also be used to protect warriors in battle, both from physical and magical threats (Price 2019, 272-273). As stated by Price the Vikings believed the battlefield was a place of the supernatural; where demons and monsters fought alongside mortal men and where warriors could transform themselves into powerful beasts such as bears (Price 2014, 116-117).

We will begin our discussion of magic and violence with the use of *seiðr* in battle. Price provides an example of such magic being used to decimate an army. In *Styrbjarnar þáttr Svíakappa* the Swedish king Eiríkr defeats the army of Styrbjörn with the help of Oðinn. Eiríkr is given a reed by Oðinn and is told to throw it over Styrbjörn's army and call out '*Oðinn á yðr alla*' (you all belong to Oðinn). When Eiríkr does this, Styrbjörn's army is blinded and crushed by a falling mountain (Price 2019, 294). This is not the only instance in which Oðinn is associated with magic on the battlefield. A section of the *Hávamál* known as the *Ljóðatal* "Count/Account of Songs" recounts the various spells known by Oðinn, many of which are related to warfare. The following stanzas describe some of the spells that may have been used in battle:

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>148. Þat kann ek þriðja:
 ef mér verðr þörf mikil
 hapti við mína heiptmogu,
 eggjar ek deyfí
 minna andskota
 bíta-t þeim vápni né velir.</p> | <p>I know a third spell;
 If I have a great need
 to thwart my enemies,
 I dull the edges
 of their weapons,
 and none of the blades will bite.</p> |
| <p>150. Þat kann ek it fimmta;
 ef ek sé af fári skotinn
 flein í fólki vaða,
 flýgr-a hann svá stinnt</p> | <p>I know a fifth spell
 if I see a spear cast
 into a crowd of battling foes,
 it cannot fly so fast</p> |

at ek stöðvi'g-a'k,
ef ek hann sjónum of sé'k

that I can't stop its flight,
as long as I can see it.

156. Þat kann ek it ellipta;
Ef ek skal til orrustu
leiða langvini,
undir randir ek gel
en þeir með ríki fara;
heilir hildar til,
heilir hildi frá.
Koma þeir heilir hvaðan.

I know an eleventh spell
if I lead old friends
into a battle,
I enchant their shields
so that they will have the victory;
they will go to battle unharmed,
and return from battle unharmed.
They will come home without harm.

Hávamál 148; 150; 156; translated by Jackson Crawford 2019: 76-81.

These are just a few of the spells that are mentioned in the *Ljóðatal*, there are also those that mention spells related to runic magic and “counter magic”. Both of these concepts will be presented later in this chapter. As for the aforementioned spells they share similarities to other forms of *seiðr* and what Price classifies as “battle magic”. Most notably these three spells involve weapons being augmented by magic. In particular, Óðinn’s third spell involves the dulling of weapons, a common magical augmentation in Norse mythology. In *Sögubrot af fornkonungum* King Haraldr is protected by a “great *seiðr*”, which prevents any iron from biting him (Price 2019, 295). In *Njals saga* a similar enchantment is described. “Hallgrím has a halberd on which he has worked a spell, so that no weapon save that halberd itself shall ever inflict a deathblow upon him. Furthermore, one can foretell when a man is going to be slain, for then the halberd makes a loud sound, and it has great power of magic in it” (Bayerschmidt and Hollander, 70). Hallgrím is killed with his own halberd by Gunnar who uses this enchanted weapon throughout the saga.

The spells of *Ljóðatal* also reflect another important characteristic of Viking warfare: the importance of luck in battle. As previously mentioned *seiðr* could be used to inflict misfortune or deprive people of their wits and strength. As such *seiðr* could be used to change the course of battle. Such augmentation of luck appears to be represented by Óðinn's eleventh spell. By having their shields enchanted the warriors will be invulnerable to damage and will be granted victory in combat. The thirteenth spell of the *Ljóðatal* presents a similar grant of invincibility:

158. Þat kann ek it þrettánda; ef ek skal þegn ungan verpa vatni á, mun-at hann falla þótt hann í folk komi; hnígr-a sá halr fyr hjörum.	I know a thirteenth spell; if I throw water upon a young man, he will never be killed even if he goes into battle; that man will not die from violence.
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Hávamál 158; translated by Jackson Crawford 2019: 81-83.

These spells demonstrate how *seiðr* be used to enhance one's luck or strength as well as diminish the combat prowess of their enemies.

While *seiðr* is often mentioned in relation to warfare it could also be used in inter-personal violence. There are numerous examples in the *Laxdæla saga* of *seiðr* being used against individuals. Many of the misfortunes that occur in the saga are the result of a family of *seiðr* practitioners. This family consisted of Kotkel and Gríma and their sons Hallbjorn and Stígandi. It is interesting to note that Kotkel, Hallbjorn, and Stígandi are men who practice *seiðr*, something that was considered as being unmanly and taboo. The relation between unmanliness and *seiðr*, however, will be discussed in another section. The family is asked by Thorleik to shame Hrút as an act of revenge. They lay a *seiðr* on Hrút's home which leads to the following scene:

Hrút had a son, Kári, who then was twelve years old and the most promising of Hrút children and Hrút loved him very much. Kári scarcely fell asleep at all, for it was against him that the spell was cast. He felt very restless and jumped up and looked out. He walked out toward the place where they were holding the incantations and at once fell down dead (*Laxdæla saga*, 37. trans. A. Margaret Arent, 94).

Kotkel and Gríma are then captured, stoned to death, and buried at a place called Skrattavardi (Sorcerers' Cairn). Their sons are killed not long after with their deaths being particularly interesting. Before he is drowned by Hrút and his sons, Hallbjorn gazes toward the shore and utters the following curse: "That was an unlucky day for us when we kinsmen came to Kambsnes and met up with Thorleik. May he enjoy but few pleasant days there from this day forth, and may life be made difficult for anyone there who settles in his place" (*Laxdæla saga*, 37. trans. A. Margaret Arent, 95). When Stígandi is captured, a bag is placed over his head to prevent him from cursing the land like his brother. However, a small rip in the bag allows him to gaze upon a hill to the following effect: "There the lay of the land was fair and covered with thick grass. But suddenly something like a whirlwind started up and stirred up the earth so that never did grass come up there again. This place is now called Brenna (Burnt Spot)" (*Laxdæla saga*, 38. trans. A. Margaret Arent, 96).

The story of Kotkel and his kin provides us with some key insights into how *seiðr* related to interpersonal violence as well as how it was perceived in Viking society. One aspect depicted in this story is the belief that sorcerers could kill or inflict harm with their gaze alone. Neil Price recounts a story in which the dwarf sorcerer Mǫndull takes precautions when killing the evil sorcerer Grímr. Such precautions include thrusting a stake in Grímr's mouth to prevent him from uttering a curse, not cutting off his limbs as they will turn into snakes, and lastly

covering his face with a shield because his gaze is fatal (Price 2019, 297-298). Not only was it a common belief that a sorcerer's gaze was lethal, but it also seems to have been a common belief that certain precautions needed to have been taken when killing one, such as covering their face. Price also notes how stoning and drowning were common methods of execution for practitioners of *seiðr*. He mentions how the sorceress Auðbiörg was stoned to death and buried in a cairn much like Kotkel, Gríma, and Stígandi. Meanwhile, Rognvaldr *réttilbeini's* grandson was drowned in a manner similar to Hallbjorn (Price 2019, 298). Lastly, Kotkel and his sons should be kept in mind when we discuss the perception of male sorcerers and their relation to the concept of unmanliness.

Alternate Forms of Magic

While *seiðr* was the main form of magic to be used in warfare and inter-personal violence it was not the only type. Other types of magic include *galdr*, a kind of chanting or singing, and runic magic. There is also counter-magic which could come in the form of *galdr*, *seiðr*, or runes.

Of the aforementioned forms of magic, *galdr* seems to be the one with the least amount of information known to us. What is known is that the central component of *galdr* was high-pitched singing combined with a special rhythm known as *galdralag*. Some of the spells of the *Ljóðatal* fall under the category of *galdr*. Furthermore, Price suggests that *galdr* fulfilled many of the same functions of *seiðr* and as such, they were often used in combination. One such function is laying a curse upon an individual to induce sickness or death. In instances where *galdr* and *seiðr* were combined *seiðr* set the pattern for the ritual to take place, while *galdr* was only a secondary component. Price concludes that when *seiðr* is combined with any other form of magic that it is

the primary element and magical forms such as *galdr* are simply the technique used to perform said rituals (Price 2019, 35-36). While *galdr* has many similarities with *seiðr* it also has some differences, most notably male practitioners of *galdr* did not hold the same social stigma as those who practiced *seiðr* (Price 2019, 83).

One form of magic that is more well-known than *galdr* and is perhaps one of the most well-known aspects of Viking culture is that of runes. Runes refer to the series of alphabets used in various ancient Germanic languages. In numerous written sources, such as the *Hávamál* or the sagas, the runes serve as conduits of magical power. Runic sorcery, like *seiðr*, is often associated with the god Óðinn. The previous section discussed the *Hávamál* within the context of its final chapter, the *Ljóðatal*, and *seiðr*. However, the *Hávamál* also contains one of the most important stories in Norse literature. In the section of the *Hávamál* known as the *Rúnatal*, we are given a description of Óðinn's sacrifice on a tree and his acquisition of the runes.

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>138. Veit ek at ek hekk
vindga meiði á
nætr allar níu,
geiri undaðr
ok gefinn Óðni,
sjálfr sjálfum mér,
á þeim meiði
er manngi veit
hvar's hann af rótum renn.</p> | <p>I know that I hung
on a wind-battered tree
nine long nights,
pierced by a spear
and given to Óðin,
myself to myself,
on that tree
whose roots grow in a place
no one has ever seen.</p> |
| <p>139. Við hleifi mik sóldu,
né við hornigi.
Nýsta ek niðr,
nam ek upp rúnar—
óþandi nam—
fell ek aprt þaðan.</p> | <p>No one gave me food,
no one gave me drink.
at the end I peered down,
and I took the runes—
screaming, I took them—
and then I fell.</p> |

Hávamál 138-139; translated by Jackson Crawford 2019: 71-73.

While Price considers the runes to be one of Oðinn's most important attributes and a notable ritual tool, he does not consider it a form of sorcery in its own right. However, Price also notes how other scholars such as Raudvere believe runes played a role in magic second only to *seiðr* itself.

Examples of runic magic appear in *Ljóðatal* and sagas such as *Egils saga*. In *Egils saga*, the famed poet and warrior Egil Skallagrímsson comes into conflict with King Eirík and Bard, the lord of Atley Isle. Eirík and Bard intend to poison Egil after he makes slanderous remarks at a banquet. The following scene occurs after Egil receives the horn full of poison: "Egil drew out his knife and stabbed the palm of his hand, then took the horn, carved rune on it and rubbed it with blood. After that he made this verse:

*Carve runes on the horn,
Rub them with red blood,
With these words I bewitch
The horn of the wild ox;
Let's swallow and sup
This slave-girl's brew,
With the blessing of bard
This beer should do much for us.*

Then the horn split apart and the drink poured onto the straw" (*Egil's Saga* trans. Edwards and Pálsson, 101). Runes are often associated with protective or healing magic, in this instance shattering a drinking horn full of poison. It is also interesting to see how Egil recites a verse after carving a rune. This may demonstrate how runic magic could be combined with other forms of magic such as *galdr*. While neither the saga nor scholars such as Price state that this verse is an example of *galdr*, the incantation of a poetic verse in association with magic does match the description of *galdr*.

There is another scene in *Egils saga* in which runes are used to heal a sick woman. Egil's friend Thorfinn tells him that his daughter is sick and that a farmer's son carved runes to hasten her recovery. The runes seem to have the opposite effect with the girl getting sicker. Thorfinn asks Egil if he can help, which he does.

This was done, Egil searched the bed where she had been lying and found a whale-bone there with runes carved on it. After he had read them, he scraped them off and burnt them in the fire. He burnt the whole bone and had the bedclothes she had been using thrown to the winds. Then he made this verse:

*None should write runes
Who can't read what he carves:
A mystery mistaken
Can bring men to misery.
I saw cut on the curved bone
Ten secret characters,
These gave the young girl
Her grinding pain.*

Egil carved some runes and placed them under the pillow of the bed where she was resting, and it seemed to her as if she had woken from sleep. She said she was well again though still a little weak (*Egils Saga* trans. Edwards and Pálsson, 191).

Unlike in the story of the drinking horn, the verse uttered by Egil here does not appear to be *galdr*. In the drinking horn story, Egil says "With these words I bewitch" implying there is a magical aspect of his verse, i.e., *galdr*, yet such a statement is missing in this verse. Rather the verse presented above appears to be a warning rather than a *galdr*. Those who are not well versed in the runes may cause the opposite effect they intended. In this instance, there are "*Ten secret characters*" that lead to the girl's worsening sickness as opposed to recovery. Egil is able to

identify and correct this mistake due to his mastery in using runes. Egil's mastery of the runes is said to have been a gift from Oðinn who blessed Egil with runic and poetic knowledge but also took away his two sons. It is important to note this relationship as Oðinn is often depicted as a poet and a master of magics such as the runes.

More examples of runic magic can be found in the *Ljóðatal*. One spell explicitly mentions runes while the other can only be assumed to be an example of runic magic. The two aforementioned spells are:

151. Þat kann ek it sétta; ef milk særir þegn á rótum rás viðar, ok þann hal er milk heipta kveðr þann eta mein heldr en milk.	I know a sixth spell; if a man carves a curse against me in the roots of a gnarled tree, I call this spell down upon that man, and this curse harms him instead of me.
157. Þat kann ek it tólpta; ef ek sé, á tré uppi, váfa virgilná svá ek ríst ok í rúnum fá'k, at sá gengr gumi ok mælir við milk.	I know a twelfth spell; if I see, hanging from a tree, a dead man's corpse, I carve some runes and paint them, and then that corpse will walk and speak with me.

Hávamál 151;157; translated by Jackson Crawford 2019: 78-79; 80-81.

The first spell involves the resurrection of the dead which was a common function of battle magic according to Neil Price. There are also similarities between this Oðinn's eleventh spell and the drinking horn story from *Egils saga*. They both make mention how the runes must be painted after they have been carved. In the case of *Egils saga*, Egil paints the runes with his own blood. The eleventh spell makes mention of painting the runes but does not specify if it must be done with blood.

The sixth spell is interesting in regard to how it is used to reflect the effects of a spell onto its caster, thus bringing us to the concept of counter-magic. It is unclear if this spell is worked through runes or *galdr*, as like all the spells of the *Ljóðatal* the exact method of casting the spell is not specified. This spell is clearly used to counter a runic spell as shown by the phrase “if a man carves a curse against me”. However, the line “I call this spell down” implies magic more akin to *galdr* or *seiðr*. It can therefore be assumed that counter-magic could come in any form and did not need to match the category of the original spell. A similar use of counter-magic can be found in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* where Mǫndull counters the *seiðr* of twelve male sorcerers with a carved spell¹ (Crawford 2019, 134-135). There is also a second counter-magic spell in the *Ljóðatal*:

155. Þat kann ek it tíunda;
 ef ek sé túnriður
 leika lopti á,
 ek svá vinn’k
 at þær villar fara,
 sinna heimhama,
 sinna heimhuga.

I know a tenth spell;
 if I see witches
 at play in the air,
 I can cast this spell
 so that they get lost
 so they can’t find their skins,
 so they can’t find their minds.

Hávamál 155; translated by Jackson Crawford 2019: 80-81.

Once again there is no mention of what method is used to cast this spell, only a description of its effect. This lack of description however can be used to infer the general category of magic to which this spell belongs to. There is no mention of rune carving, suggesting that this is not runic magic, and there is also no mention of chanting or singing which are the key elements of *galdr*. As mentioned, this verse does not tell us how to cast the spell but it does mention its effect. In this case, it makes a spell caster unable to “find their skins” or “find their minds”. Jackson

¹ Crawford notes that while Mǫndull uses a carved spell, runes are not explicitly mentioned.

Crawford interprets these two lines as references to the Norse belief in a separable consciousness. If a sorceress projects her consciousness (*hugr*) this spell can be used to prevent her from rejoining with her physical body or skin (*hamr*) (Crawford 2019, 136). This is similar in description to one of Price's functions of *seiðr*, that being depriving people of their wits and strength. It is, therefore, possible that Oðinn's tenth spell is an example of *seiðr*.

The final part of this section will focus on miscellaneous forms of magic that do not seem to fall into any of the previously mentioned categories. It is important that these instances of magic do not go unmentioned as they further illustrate how important the supernatural was to the Viking concept of violence and warfare.

One example of miscellaneous magic is the nithing pole which was used to cast a curse. The best-known use of the nithing pole comes from *Egils saga*.

They prepared to sail, but when they were ready to set out Egil went ashore onto the island, picked up a branch of hazel and went to a certain cliff that faced the mainland. Then he took a horse head set it up on the pole and spoke these formal words: 'Here I set up a pole of insult against King Eirik and Queen Gunnhild' – then, turning the horse head towards the mainland – 'and I direct this insult against the guardian spirits of this land, so that every one of them shall go astray, neither to figure nor find their dwelling places until they have driven King Eirik and Queen Gunnhild from this country'. Next he jammed the pole into a cleft in the rock and left it standing there with the horse head facing towards the mainland, and cut runes on the pole declaiming the words of his formal speech.

Egils saga 57; trans. Pálsson, 148.

While runes are used to declaim ‘the words of his formal speech’ the ritual described here is unlike any other previously discussed. The runes are a part of the ritual but they are not the main component. There is no chanting so this is not *galdr* nor is there anything to categorize this ritual as *seiðr*. Instead, this seems to be a category of magic of its own. The most important aspect of this ritual however is not the category it belongs to but rather the ritual’s connection to the concept of *níð* (hatred). To declare *níð* was one of the most serious insults that one could direct at another. So much so that Price states that “in legal terms it was equated with murder and rape, and similarly punishable by outlawry and liability to blood revenge” (Price 2019, 173).

Practitioners of Magic

The types of magic as well as their purposes and effects have been discussed at great length, it is now time to discuss those who wielded magic. Much like there are many forms of magic there are also a variety of magic practitioners. Categories of magic practitioners include *galdrmaðr* (*galdr* man), *seiðmaðr* (*seiðr* man), and perhaps the most important and well respected the *völur* (also spelt *vǫlur*). The *völur* were female sorcerers who also held the power of foresight. They seem to have held a high status in Norse society due to their knowledge of *seiðr* and the ability to see into the future. In fact magic, especially *seiðr* was seen as feminine and as will be discussed in the next section men who practiced *seiðr* were often seen as *ergi* (unmanly). It is therefore women in Norse society who are associated with the violent magic known as *seiðr*.

We will first discuss the *völur* (sing. *völva*). as they are the most prominent wielders of magic and seemingly the most powerful. The term *völva* means ‘Staff-bearer’ referring to the wands or

staves they used when conducting magic rituals. This section will provide a description of the *völur* as well as analyze how they are depicted in literature. Archaeological evidence for *völur* and shamanic figures will be presented later in chapter 3. We will begin with the *völur* since it is women who are most often associated with the use of *seiðr*. It is the *Vanir* goddess Freyja who first introduces *seiðr* to the *Æsir* such as Oðinn (Heimskringla trans. Hollander, 8). It is also the *völur* with whom Oðinn consults to gain knowledge of the future and *Ragnarøk*.

As indicated by their namesake the main tool of the *völur* was the staff. However, they also used other equipment in their rituals such as a platform and assistants who would take part in the ritual. Their duties covered a wide range of functions. They could tell a person their future, warn of misfortune, and predict the health of crops. This was their primary function, to act as a prophetess. This is best depicted in the *Völuspá* where Oðinn revives a dead *völva* who then foretells the events of *Ragnarøk*. The *völur* are also associated with the dead and necromancy. One of the abilities of *seiðr* was to resurrect the dead. An example of this is found in *Hrólfs saga kraka* where the sorceress Skuld reanimates her fallen warriors in a battle to defeat Hrólfr kraki (Price 2019, 296). Such use of *seiðr* would also have carried negative connotations and the *völur* were often distrusted for their relationship with the dead.

The reputation of the *völur* is a curious matter, on the one hand, they appear to have held high social status and in numerous literary sources, they are invited to feasts. On the other hand, they were treated with the same distrust and ill-repute as other practitioners of magic (Price 2019, 72-73). This mixed reputation may be related to their function as prophetesses and *seiðr* abilities. They were respected for their power of foresight and knowledge yet were disdained for their use of *seiðr* and relationship with death.

To reiterate once more, the *völur* were not the only ones to practice magic and in Viking, literature *seiðr* is used by gods such as Oðinn and simply farmers such as Kotkel. First, it is important to note that there is a variety of names used for women who practice *seiðr*. Such names include *seiðkonnur* (*seiðr* women), *spákonur* (prophecy women), and *vísendakonur* (wise women). Price states that Thorbjorg from *Eiriks saga* falls under all three of these categories; he also notes the time of the sagas composition may be a possible explanation. While there does not seem to be many differences between these categories, it is interesting to note the variety of terms used to describe sorceresses. Within the prose, *spákona* appears twenty-two times while *vísendakona* appears eight times (Price 2019, 75-76).

Much like how we use ‘witch’ and ‘sorceress’ interchangeably, these terms may have been used in a similar manner (Price 2019, 76). The time of composition may also offer a different explanation. Since many of the sagas were written in a Christian context it is possible their authors did not understand the distinction between these titles. There are also numerous derogatory names for a sorceress such as *fordæða* (witch) and *skass* (ogress). These terms appear to have been connected with the stereotype of the ugly and evil witch bringing ruin in her wake (Price 2019, 77). These words depict how users of *seiðr* were viewed as untrustworthy and at times outright evil. It is also interesting to note how all the aforementioned names refer to women. This further highlights the idea that women were the main practitioners of magic, *seiðr* or otherwise. Another idea that is reinforced is that the *völur* held a special place amongst magic users. The *völur* unlike other types of sorceresses were able to use their foresight to maintain a more neutral reputation. While society may have disdained their use of *seiðr*, they relied on their prophecies and ritual specialties

One notable description of a *völva* is found in the *Eirik the Red's saga*. In this saga, there is a woman named Thorbjorg Litolvolva (little *völva*) who is described as a spae-queen, an alternative name for a sorceress. She is described as a travelling spae-queen who offers prophecies to the people of Greenland. One man, Thorkell seeks out the *völva* to gain knowledge regarding the food scarcity in Greenland. “He invited, therefore, the spae-queen to his house, and prepared for her a hearty welcome, as was the custom wherever a reception was accorded a woman of this kind. A high seat was prepared for her and a cushion laid thereon in which were poultry-feathers” (Sephton 1880, 6). In this instance, we see how the *völur* were revered as sources of knowledge and were greeted with lavish feasts and respect. The ‘high seat’ mentioned likely refers to the *seiðr* platform used when divining the future or casting magic. It is likely that those who sought out the *völur* were aware of the tools of their trade and may have had them prepared before their arrival.

A detailed description of Thorbjorg is provided after the previous excerpt.

Now, when she came in the evening, accompanied by the man who had been sent to meet her, she was dressed in such wise that she had a blue mantle over her, with strings for the neck, and it was inlaid with gems quite down to the skirt. On her neck she had glass beads. On her head she had a black hood of lambskin, lined with ermine. A staff she had in her hand, with a knob thereon; it was ornamented with brass, and inlaid with gems round about the knob. Around her she wore a girdle of soft hair, and therein was a large skin-bag, in which she kept the talismans needful to her in her wisdom. She wore hairy calf-skin shoes on her feet, with long and strong-looking thongs to them, and great knobs of latten at the ends. On her hands she had gloves of ermine-skin, and they were white and hairy within. Now, when she entered, all the men thought it their bounden duty to

offer her becoming greetings, and these she received according as the men were agreeable to her (Sephton 1880, 6-7).

Once more it is shown that this individual is well respected and clearly of high social status. This is not a stereotypical witch in ragged clothes but rather a ritual specialist whose services have brought them wealth and influence. Her wealth is indicated by the quality of her clothes and is highlighted by the gems inlaid in her clothes and staff. The staff is also important to note as it is the most important item in her tool kit and the major indicator that she is a *völva*.

The process of divination itself is elaborated upon in the next passage. Thorbjorg asks that any women who know the “Weird-songs” be brought to her. One woman, Gudrid states that she knows the songs but is reluctant to participate in the ritual as she is a Christian and the *völur* are associated with the dead. Despite this religious difference, Gudrid partakes in the ritual and sings “so beautiful and excellent a manner, that to no one there did it seem that he had ever before heard the song in voice so beautiful as now” (Sephton 1880, 7). While Gudrid and the other women chant they form a ring while Thorbjorg sits upon a seat atop a scaffold. Once Gudrid’s song is finished, the spae-queen tells the audience that the future has been revealed to her. She tells them that the scarcity will disappear with the coming of spring and that the epidemic of fever will soon end. This comes to pass as the weather improves after spring begins ending the food scarcity. As a reward for her assistance, Gudrid receives a personal prophecy; she will travel to Iceland and bear a long line of descendants (Sephton 1880, 7-8).

In this way, the *völva* acts not only as a representation of Norse shamanism but also as an important literary device. The prophecies that the *völur* give in literature are often foreshadowing of events that are to come. Furthermore, the account in *Eiriks saga* provides us some insight into how old Norse traditions interacted with the rise of Christianity. While Gudrid participates in the

ritual she does so reluctantly stating she feels that she can be no assistance as she is Christian. Despite being the one to invite the spae-queen and urging Gudrid to participate in the ritual, Thorkell waits outside with Thorbjorn as they did not want to be home while “heathen worship” was being performed (Sephton 1880, 8). This episode demonstrates two things; firstly, pagan traditions continued throughout and after the Christianization of Scandinavia. Secondly, Thorkell’s welcoming feast shows how the importance and social status of pagan ritual specialists continued to be respected by some Christians.

While the account from *Eiriks saga* does not demonstrate how the *völur* and *seiðr* relate to violence, it demonstrates something more important. The previous sections demonstrated how rituals related to magic were used to fulfill violent means; the relationship between the *völur* and violence is already presupposed by their position as the main users of *seiðr*. This episode instead demonstrates how the *völur* differed from other practitioners of magic. Magic could be used by individuals regardless of gender or class as demonstrated by Kotkel’s family from *Laxdæla saga* who are a family of outcasts and farmers as opposed to one of high social status. The *völur*, however, were not simply wielders of magic but rather important ritual specialists who were both respected for their gift of prophecy and disdained for their use of *seiðr*. The high status of the *völur*, therefore, highlights the importance of magic within Viking culture and literature. Chapter three discusses how archaeological evidence may provide evidence for a ritual specialist similar in description to the *völur*.

Lastly, there are male magic users. A male user of *seiðr* was known as a *seiðrmaðr*. By and large, they performed the same functions as sorceresses. They appear to have been akin to magic-wielding mercenaries often serving as support troops or bodyguards. Examples of *seiðrmenn* as troops can be found in multiple works of literature including *Óláfs saga*

Tryggvasonar and *Ynglinga saga*. They could also be *spámaðr* who possessed the ability of prophecy similar to the *völva*. The largest category of names for male sorcerers refers to those who used *galdr*. Such terms include *galdramaðr* (galdr man), *galdramiðr* (galdr smith), and *galdraraumr* (great galdr man) amongst others. Price believes this implies that there was a hierarchy amongst *galdrmenn* (Price 2019, 81-82). It also may indicate that *galdr* was the more common form of magic for men to practice; the reasons for which will be discussed shortly.

Seiðr* and *ergi

In our discussion of *seiðr*, there are some reoccurring themes and motifs that have formed.

1. *Seiðr* is associated with women more than men.
2. Men who practice *seiðr* are often viewed as evil, more so than women who practiced *seiðr*.
3. *Seiðr* appears to have carried more negative connotations than other forms of magic.

While women who practiced *seiðr* often had a negative reputation they were still respected for their abilities. Men on the other hand were always demonized and often were killed for practicing *seiðr*. It was not considered acceptable for men to practice *seiðr* due to its connection to the concepts of *ergi* and *níð*. *Ergi* refers to the Norse concept of unmanliness and deviancy. Its adjective is *argr* and the metathesis is *regi/ragr* (Price 2019, 173). The term is difficult to define as it seems to encompass a variety of behaviors that were seen as unacceptable for men. *Ergi* has been translated as “lewdness, lust, and wickedness” (Jakobsson 2008, 40). On the one hand, the concept is connected with ‘sexual deviancy’ and ‘passive’ homosexuality, while on the other it refers to a general set of behaviors that could be considered unmanly, the use of *seiðr* being

included (Jakobsson 2008, 40; Price 2019, 135; 172). Numerous sources, such as *Ynglinga saga*, attest to the fact that *seiðr* was not to be used by men.

Óthin had the skill which gives great power and which he practiced himself. It is called *seith* [sorcery], and by means of it he could know the fate of men and predict events that had not yet come to pass; and by it he could also inflict death or misfortunes or sickness or also deprive people of their wits or strength, and give them to others. But this sorcery is attended by such wickedness that manly men considered it shameful to practice it, and so it was taught to priestesses.

Ynglinga saga 6, trans. Hollander, 11

Being labeled as *ergi* could also bring on *níð* or hatred (a person labeled with *níð* is known as a *níðingr*). This could lead to the individual being ostracized or even killed with any legal repercussions. Not even the gods were safe from the social stigma that came with *seiðr* use. In *Lokasenna* Óðinn is lambasted by Loki for his use of *seiðr*.

En þik síða kóðo
Sámseyio í,
ok draptu á vétt sem vǫlur.
Vitka liki
fórtu verþioð yfir,
ok hugða ek þat args aðal.

But you, they said, preformed *seiðr*
on Samsø
and tapped on a *vétt* [drum] like the *vǫlur*
Like a *vitka* [sorceress]
you went over the world of men,
and that I thought to be *argr* behavior.

Lokasenna 24, trans. Dronke with edits by Price and author.

He accuses him of acting like a *völva* by beating on a drum used by the sorceresses and practicing *seiðr* which is “an emasculate quality” (Borovsky 1999, 22). The relationship between *ergi* and *seiðr* is also depicted in *Gísla saga* through the sorcerer known as Þorgrímr nef. Much

of the misfortune that befalls Gísla is a result of the *seiðr* cast by Þorgrímr nef. One of the curses cast on Gísla is similar to the ones we have previously mentioned in which his luck is stripped and he is prevented from finding shelter or rest. The ritual itself is described as such:

Þat er næst til tíðenda, at Þorkr kaupir at Þorgrími nef, at hann seiddi seið, at þeim manni yrði ekki at björg, er Þorgrím hefði vegit, þó at men vildi duga honum. Oxi níu vetra gamall var honum gefinn til þess. Nú flytr Þorgrímr fram seiðinn ok veitir sér umbúð eptir venju sinni ok gerir sér hjall, ok fremr hann þetta fjölkynngiliga með allri ergi og skelmiskap.

The next thing that happened was that Þorkr paid Þorgrímr nef to perform a magic rite, to bring it about that the man who killed Þorgrímr should receive no shelter, even if people were willing to help him. A nine-year-old gelding ox was given to Þorgrímr for this purpose. He then went ahead with the rite and made his preparations according to his custom, built a platform and performed this magic in the most queer and devilish manner.

Gísla saga, 56-57.

In this passage *ergi* is translated as meaning ‘queer and devilish’. It is difficult to determine if *ergi* in this context implies homosexuality, lustful behavior, or simply unmanliness. The most likely scenario is that *seiðr* is viewed as feminine and therefore is considered an unmanly pursuit. Therefore a man who practiced *seiðr* could be seen as effeminate, weak, cowardly, and all the other insults that were connected with *ergi*. The only male practitioner of *seiðr* who was able to escape its stigma was Óðinn. Óðinn was able to retain his manliness despite his use of *seiðr* for a variety of reasons. First and foremost Óðinn was the *Alfǫðr* (All-Father), the strongest of the gods and their patriarch. Not only was he the father of the gods but he was also *Valfuðr* (father of the slain) to those killed in battle. He was the one to whom warriors prayed to for protection and victory; he was also the lord of the berserkers. It is also important to note the Óðinn was not only a master of *seiðr* but also a master of all magics. In the

Hávamál, it is shown that he is also a master of *galdr* and runic magic. Lastly, Jakobsson proposes that the concept of *ergi* did not apply to Oðinn or the gods because they are not bound by the same morals and taboos as mortals. Instead, Oðinn represents both good and evil as well as those aspects that define both humanity and the mystical (Jakobsson 2008, 55-63).

Mortal men, however, did not have the luxury of moral ambiguity that was afforded to the gods. In the literature male sorcerers are almost always tortured or killed for their use of *seiðr*. In some instances, the method of execution was specifically designed for sorcerers. We have already seen two examples of this; the first being the death of Kotkel's family and the second being Grímr's death at the hands of Mǫndull. In both instances, we see how the eyes of a sorcerer were covered so as to prevent their death gaze from doing harm. The use of stoning or drowning, as in the case of Kotkel's family, seems to have been a common method of execution. Not even kings' sons were safe from the *ergi* and *níð* brought from using *seiðr*.

In *Haralds saga Hárfagra* a large group of *seiðmenn* led by Rǫgnvaldr *réttilbeini* are killed. Rǫgnvaldr's execution is ordered by none other than his father King Haraldr hárfagra (Harald Finehair) and is carried out by his brother Eiríkr Bloðøx (Erik Bloodaxe). Eiríkr "burned his brother Rognvald in his hall, together with eighty wizards, and people praised this deed greatly" (Heimskringla, 88-89). The hatred Haraldr had for sorcerers causes him to order the death of one of his own sons. Not only that but in this instance, Eiríkr is praised for slaughtering his own brother. In a society where kin-slaying was one of the most heinous crimes one could commit, it is interesting to see that it could be justified if the victim carried some form of social stigma such as *ergi*.

Rǫgnvaldr's grandson, Eyvind Kelda also becomes a sorcerer who quarrels with the king of Norway, Óláfr Tryggvason. Óláfr orders that all practitioners of magic be exiled or killed. The

sorcerers are gathered, given drinks until they are drunk, and finally are burned in a house similar to Rognvaldr. Eyvind manages to escape and gather a host of sorcerers and a warship. The *seiðmenn* summon a magical fog to cover their ambush but are surprised when the spell obscures their vision instead. Óláfr's troops are able to capture the sorcerers and bound them to "skerries which were covered with water at high tide where they are all drowned" (Heimskringla, 201-203).

These accounts suggest that while sorcerers could be of any social status such as king's sons or simply farmers, they were all viewed with a base level of disgust and hatred. Rarely do *seiðmenn* receive a happy ending. More often than not that are labeled as evil criminals that must be killed. In some instances, such as with Eyvind, their own magic turns against them, perhaps a lesson to those men who would practice *seiðr*. In any case, it is evident that men were greatly discouraged from practicing *seiðr* and those that did would have to face the *ergi* and *níð* that it brought.

These tales, however, do not tell us about the social standing of men who practiced *galdr* or runic magic. We can speculate that the consequences of men for using *seiðr* did not exist when using other types of magic. It was previously mentioned that there were more terms for a man who used *galdr* than those who used *seiðr*. Furthermore, it was suggested that this large variety of terms indicated that a hierarchy existed amongst *galdramenn*. If an organized structure did exist it may indicate that groups of *galdramenn* were able to exist without facing the same persecution as *seiðmenn*. It also appears that runic magic did not bring *ergi* since it is used freely by men and women. Egill Skallagrímsson was a renowned warrior, berserker, and poet as well as a master of runic magic. Yet he is never depicted as being weak, feminine, or cowardly, nor is he ever criticized for his use of magic. In fact, he is praised for healing a sick woman through the

use of runes. From this, we can assume that runic magic and *galdr* were considered acceptable forms of magic for men.

The relationship between *seiðr* and *ergi* highlight how the context and performer of a ritual were just as important as the ritual itself. While all forms of magic could be used by men in theory; by using *seiðr* men risked breaking a social taboo which in turn could cost them their social standing or even their life. Instead, *seiðr* was only meant to be practiced by women and ideally by a ritual specialist such as a *völur*. With the *völur*, we also see how an entire group can be defined by the rituals they perform. Rituals can be used to define groups and strengthen bonds between individuals. Likewise, social groups can be differentiated based on the rituals they partake in.

This chapter has provided a survey of rituals related to Norse mysticism. The rituals presented in this chapter have primarily been within the context of magic, specifically that of *seiðr*. While we do not know exactly how these rituals were conducted, we do have information on their intended effects. We also get an idea of how these rituals worked within Viking society as well as the social consequences that came with those rituals. While the aforementioned examples of ritual have thus far only been demonstrated through literature and not material evidence, it is important to note that literature often reflects the behavioral and social norms of the culture they originate from. Ritual in Viking society, however, was not only linked to the religious and mythical but also was an important part of legal systems as will be demonstrated in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 2: DUELING RITUALS

Dueling was common in Germanic societies including Scandinavia and that of the Anglo-Saxons. Duels were often used to resolve legal disputes or settle matters of honor. While there is some evidence for informal duels, most instances of single combat were highly ritualized and subject to a set of rules and traditions. Two major forms of dueling have been identified in Viking society, the highly ritualized and formal *holmganga*, and the more impromptu and informal *einvingi*.

Holmganga

The more formal form of dueling in Viking society was known as *holmganga*. This duel appears to have been particularly popular in Iceland, which is suggested by its appearance in the Icelandic sagas such as *Kormaks saga* and *Egils saga*. It was fought to settle legal disputes or interpersonal feuds. It was also highly ritualized, and its participants had to abide by a strict set of rules and traditions. A complex description of *holmganga* can be found in *Kormaks saga* when Kormak challenges Bersi to *holmganga*. Their combat is described:

It was the law of the holmgang that the hide should be five ells long, with loops at its corners. Into these should be driven certain pins with heads to them, called *tjosnur*. He who is made it ready should go to the pins in such a manner that he could see sky between his legs, holding the lobes of his ears and speaking the forewords used in the rite called “The Sacrifice of the *tjosnur*.” Three squares should be marked round the poles,

called hazels; when this is done, it is a hazelled field. Each man should have three shields, and when they were cut up he must get upon the hide if he had given way from it before, and guard himself with his weapons alone thereafter. He who had been challenged should strike the first stroke. If one was wounded so that blood fell upon the hide, he should fight no longer. If either set one foot outside the hazel poles “he went on his heel,” they said; but he “ran” if both feet were outside. His own man was to hold the shield before each of the fighters. The one who was wounded should pay three marks of silver to be set free (*Kormaks saga* trans. Collingwood and Stefansson, Chapter Ten).

There is a great deal of information here. Firstly, it tells us how the dueling area was set up. The fighters fought on a cowhide “five ells long” (twelve feet) with a border that was marked by three squares with hazel poles. If a combatant stepped outside this area, they forfeited the fight and if they ran, they were deemed a coward. Each combatant was allotted three shields and was forced to defend themselves with only their weapon if all three broke. Lastly, we see that not all duels in this society were to the death, in this instance it is to the first blood. Kormak is wounded in the thumb and concedes victory to Bersi. As per the rules of the duel Kormak is forced to pay “three marks of silver to be set free”. Based on this instance the loser of a *holmganga* was forced to pay the victor money akin to *weregild*. It also implies that those who refused to pay the victor were captured or killed.

Bersi is challenged to another *holmgang* later in the saga. His wife Steingerd divorces him and requests that her brother, Thorkel Toothgnasher, retrieves her dowry and goods. When Thorkel comes to collect, Bersi refuses to pay and is challenged to *holmgang* by Thorkel. During the duel, Thorkel accuses Bersi of using a sword that is “longer than lawful”. The types of weapons that could be used in a *holmgang* were regulated and often determined before the duel

started. Bersi then exchanges his sword for another which he promptly uses to take Thorkel's life. After Thorkel's death, his shield-bearer Vali challenges Bersi but is stopped by Thord who makes peace between the two men.

Two more *holmgangs* take place in *Kormaks saga*, both between Kormak and Thorvard who had married Kormak's love Steingerd. Both duels are interesting as they shed more light on the traditions of *holmgang*. Furthermore, they contain examples of *seiðr* mentioned in the previous chapter. During the first challenge, Thorvard refuses to show up to the *holmgang* opting instead to file a lawsuit against Kormak. When Thorvard refuses to show up, Kormak says, "Let him be every man's nithing if he come not!" *Nithing* refers to the Viking concept of *níð* (hate) which was a term used to denote shame or loss of honor. When Thorvard proposes his lawsuit at the Thing he is refused as by refusing to show up to the *holmgang* he has shamed himself and his kin. Having no other option Thorvard accepts Kormak's challenge to *holmgang*. Fearing for his life Thorvard goes to seek the help of Thordis the spae-wife (sorceress). Hearing about this act of deceit Kormak also goes to Thordis. Thordis makes it so that blade can bite either of them. While both are impervious to being bit by a sword, Kormak is able to deliver a blow that breaks Thorvard's ribs forcing him to surrender. Kormak celebrates his victory with the sacrifice of a bull.

After Thorvard recovered from his wounds he challenged Kormak to another *holmgang*. Once more Thorvard seeks help from Thordis, who blunts Kormak's blade with magic. As before, this does not prevent Kormak's victory who breaks Thorvard's collarbone with a blunt force blow. Once more Kormak celebrates his victory with the sacrifice of a bull. Thorvald is also forced to pay a ransom of two rings, one for each *holmgang* he lost.

Another instance of *holmganga* can be found in *Egils saga* where Egil is challenged by Ljot, a man who uses *holmganga* as a way to gain loot. As with the duels found in *Kormaks saga*, the duel here takes place in a designated area and Egil wins the first round by pushing Ljot outside the boundary stones. The second round ends with Egil cutting off Ljot's leg thus killing him. While *Egils saga* does not provide as in-depth a description of the actual *holmgang* when compared to *Kormaks saga*, it does provide us with more information about the aftermath. *Egils saga* states the following:

It was a rule at that time for duelling that when the challenger won, he was to get everything at stake, but if he lost he had to redeem himself by paying the previously-agreed sum; and if he were to be killed in the duel, he forfeited all his property, which was inherited by the one who killed him in combat. It was also the law then that if a foreigner died without an heir in the country, all the money he left was to go to the King's treasure (*Egils Saga* trans. Edwards and Pálsson, 171).

As demonstrated *holmgang* was a complex and strict process. While some variations did exist such as whether it was fought to the death or first blood. Many elements adhered to a strict set of rules. The place in which the *holmgang* was fought had to be specified and marked with special objects such as the cowhide and hazel poles. Each combatant was allotted three shields and was forced to fight with only their weapon if they lost all three. *Holmgang* was also something that was not taken lightly since refusing a challenge could lead to *níð* and therefore loss of social status. Dueling was also encoded in law and a person's right to duel was dependent on the area where they lived. All of the aforementioned examples of *holmgang* come from Iceland, in which the right to *holmgang* was guaranteed to any free-man. Egil challenges a man called Atli during a legal assembly concerning a dispute between the two men. In the saga, it

says “What Egil had said was law and ancient custom. Every man who went to law had the right to challenge his opponent to a duel, whether he was the plaintiff or the defendant” (*Egils Saga* trans. Edwards and Pálsson, 174).

Icelandic law also allowed the combatants to set the terms of the *holmgang*; in the case of *Egils saga*, the winner takes all of his opponent’s property. Marlene Ciklamini notes that these laws were largely unique to Iceland. In Friesland, the common man could not partake in a duel, and while he could in Denmark, he was at a great legal and martial disadvantage since they were only allowed to use short clubs while the nobles used swords (Ciklamini 1963, 176-177).

Icelandic and Norwegian law would eventually abolish *holmgang* in 1006 and 1014 respectively (Ciklamini 1963, 190-191). The abolition of the duel was two-fold, first, it was meant to prevent further bloodshed, mainly that of the nobility, and secondly to end legalized robbery. In Iceland, they used a court of appeals as a way to settle disputes between individuals without resorting to legalized killings. Ciklamini states that the abolition of duels in Norway was largely motivated by their use as a way to accumulate wealth. As previously mentioned, the victor of a *holmgang* could legally claim all of his opponent’s property leading many to abuse the system by praying on the weak and unskilled fighters. This abuse of law is demonstrated by the dueling berserker, Ljot in *Egils saga* who used *holmgang* as legalized robbery (Ciklamini 1963, 191).

It is important to note that ritual is not necessarily religious. Ritual is simply an organized set of behavior resulting from cultural tradition. *Holmgang* is a ritual bound in tradition and defined by law, and while it had some religious aspects such as sacrifice it was not in itself a religious ritual. The gods played no part in the outcome of the duel rather it was solely determined by the strength and courage of its participants. Gwyn Jones notes that there is not a single instance in the sagas in which an individual relies on divine help to win a duel (Jones

1932, 308). While a combatant may turn to sorcery to help win a duel, such as in *Kormaks saga* they will never seek the help of the gods. Jones further notes that the only religious elements connected with *holmgang* are that of sacrifice which appears to have been a general dedication to the gods rather than an appeal for assistance (Jones 1932, 311).

Einviqi

An alternate form of dueling in Viking society is what is known as *einviqi*. Sadly there is not as much information on *einviqi* as there is *holmgang*, most likely a result of the informal nature of *einviqi*. What we do know is that *einviqi* was an informal duel and was not bound by the same legal constraints as *holmgang*. It is also suggested that *einviqi* required less skill than *holmgang* and therefore allowed less skilled fighters to be on equal footing with their opponent. Scholars also have suggested that *einviqi* is an older form of dueling perhaps explaining its lack of tradition and rules.

The most notable separation of *einviqi* and *holmgang* occurs in *Kormaks saga* during the duel between Kormak and Bersi. Before the duel begins Bersi tells Kormak, “Thou, Cormac, has challenged me to the *holmgang*; instead of that, I offer thee to fight in simple sword-play [*einviqi*]. Thou art a young man and little tried; the *holmgang* needs craft and cunning, but sword-play, man to man, is an easy game” (*Kormaks saga*, 10). As previously stated *einviqi* seems to have been viewed as a form of dueling that did not require much skill when compared to *holmgang*. This is most likely a result of the circumstances in which these two forms of dueling took place. In *einviqi* one did not have to worry about fighting in a confined space with specified weapons as they did in the *holmgang*. The repercussions also differed between the two

dueling styles. In *holmgang*, if an opponent was cut down it was classified as a legal killing and therefore brought about no social, legal, or financial consequences. However, if an opponent was killed in *einvgi* the one who killed him could face *eptirmál*, prosecution, or revenge against an illegal killing. Since a death in *einvgi* was not considered to be a legal killing it was expected that the one who did the killing would pay *weregild* or be prepared to face vengeance from the family of his opponent (Jones 1933, 217).

The ritualization of dueling in Viking society shows us how rituals are not restricted to a religious context. While magic and animal sacrifice may have been associated with *holmgang* they were by no means core components. Rather dueling was primarily a legal affair and a show of strength. The victor was not determined by the gods or some other mystical force but instead by a person's skill and bravery. We also see how such rituals played a role in one's social standing and influence. Refusal to partake in a duel once challenged could lead to one being labeled with *níð* for their cowardice. Likewise, challengers were expected to follow up their words with actions. It was one thing to challenge someone to *holmgang* and it was another to actually fight. The victor was allowed to ransom his opponent if he still lived, and if his opponent died he could claim the opponent's property as his own. It was these aspects of dueling that created its ritualized nature. The ritualized nature of dueling in turn led to its importance in Viking society and law.

CHAPTER 3: ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE FOR RITUAL

The evidence for ritual in relation to violence has thus far been from literary sources and has largely been dependent on the interpretation of translators and scholars. While literature often reflects the beliefs and values of the culture it originates from, it is also susceptible to hyperbole and bias. While the sagas provide us with an insight into Viking social values and taboos, as well as how their perception of magic and the mystical, their contents should not be taken as indisputable fact. Therefore, it is important to look at the material evidence provided by archaeology to solidify the existence of those rituals mentioned in the sagas and to shed light on those rituals that have been omitted by literary sources.

Amulets and Runic Artifacts

The first group of material evidence discussed is amulets and runic artifacts, such as swords or amulets, as these are the most common. They are also the artifacts whose usage is less speculative and more supported by evidence when compared to the artifacts discussed later in this chapter. In a way, the Viking amulets are no different from the amulets found in many cultures throughout history, such as contemporary and later Christian European societies. In many instances, amulets appear to have been apotropaic items used to protect or heal the wearer. These functions are often reflected in the shape of the items themselves, often that of Þórr's (Thor's) hammer or a shield. This section shall examine these artifacts in greater detail, both their structures, functions, and archaeological contexts.

Between 1974 and 1988 a series of excavations took place in Derbyshire, England to unearth the Viking site of Repton. The site served as a winter quarters for the Viking Great Army that invaded England in the mid to late 9th century (Biddle and Kjølbye-Biddle 1992, 36). Repton's use as a Viking military encampment remains evident in the archaeological record with a variety of weapon depositions and graves that have been interpreted as those of warriors. The most well-known burial is Grave 511. The grave was the burial of a man, aged 35-40 years old who appears to have been killed by a cut to the head of the left femur. A wide variety of items were found in the grave such as a necklace of two glass beads and a silver Thor's hammer, the tusk of a wild boar (*Sus scrofa*), and the humerus of a jackdaw (*Corvus monedula*). There was also a Petersen Type M sword, an iron folding knife, and a wooden-handled knife (Biddle and Kjølbye-Biddle 1992, 40-41). The presence of a sword and the manner of the individual's death suggest that they were most likely a warrior. What is more interesting however is the necklace and animal remains deposited within the grave.

The grave at Repton is not the only site where amulets have been found. An article by Gardela and Odebäck provides a survey of amulets in the shape of military equipment such as shields. Much like the shields themselves, these miniatures are often found within the context of graves. Furthermore, they are not limited to one time period and region but have been found across Scandinavia and Russia, both before and after the introduction of Christianity within these regions. The miniatures found at Birka, one of the largest finds of such objects, were often made out of silver. Many scholars view these items as pendants or amulets, although Gardela and Odebäck dispute this claim stating of miniatures found in Russia that "it is incorrect to say that all these miniatures served the role of pendants because not all of them have suspension loops or perforations (Gardela and Odebäck 2018, 85-88).

While Gardela and Odebäck are cautious about referring to all shield miniatures as ‘pendants’ or ‘amulets’ they seem to agree with the academic consensus that these items were of an apotropaic or ritual nature. However, they disagree with those scholars who believe that miniatures were Christian symbols or a way to continue pagan beliefs within a Christian context. Their evidence for this counterclaim is that the majority of shield miniatures are found in a pre-Christian context, often alongside pagan objects such as Thor’s hammers (Gardela and Odebäck 2018, 103). It should not be surprising that shield miniatures are more common within a pagan context than in a Christian one. As pointed out by researchers, the shield is commonly used within a ritual context in Viking society. In Norway burials often contain individuals with shields placed over or under them. There is a scene in *Baldrs draumar* where a shield is placed over a drink, an act which Gardela and Odebäck interpret as apotropaic intent (Gardela and Odebäck, 2018, 103). In chapter one we saw how a shield could be used to cover a sorcerer’s eyes before killing him as so to avoid his death gaze.

Much like how a full-size shield could be used to protect its owner from physical harm, it seems that the miniature was intended to protect the individual from magical or spiritual harm. Those miniatures which could be worn as amulets may have been used to protect the wearer from harm in combat while those in graves could be used to protect the deceased from evil spirits or other supernatural harm. This statement aligns with that of Gardela and Odebäck who conclude “the accounts from *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* and *Baldrs draumar*, as well as other textual examples of the fear of the evil eye recorded in Old Norse literature, lend credence to the argument that miniature shields protected against other people’s evil gaze and curses or, alternatively, that in funerary contexts they protected the living from the dead.” (Gardela and

Odebäck, 104). Amulets such as these were most likely worn into battle to protect the wearer from the *seiðr* and other forms of violent magic.



Figure 1. Miniature shield (2-3 cm) from Södermanland, Sweden (Gardeła & Odebäck 2018, 94).

Amulets however are not only associated with their protective properties against *seiðr* but also their occasional use of runic inscriptions. It is possible that the use of the runic inscriptions on items such as amulets or swords was to imbue the object with the magical properties that the runes were said to have. However, it should be noted that runes were not believed to be intrinsically magical and that their alleged magical properties were only one of their many uses. Therefore, it is important not to jump to the conclusion that every single runic artifact was thought to have been magical.

Rikke Steenholt Olsen provides a survey of runic amulets from Medieval Denmark. Like the shield miniatures, runic amulets were often made of metal. While the majority of these were made of lead they could also be made of silver, bronze, copper, or even wood. Some wooden and metal amulets had a hole pierced through them while other metal amulets were found with an attached loop. These piercings and loops may have been used to attach the amulets to a necklace (Olsen 2010, 163).

Of those with runic inscriptions, only half have anything linguistically meaningful, partially a result of damage and corrosion. Despite this, some inscriptions have been reconstructed into recognizable words or phrases. One copper amulet has been reconstructed into the following: *Lyf[r]únar rí[st] [e]k, bótrúnar* which Olsen translates as “Healing runes I cut, runes of help and recovery” (Olsen 2010, 170). Olsen takes particular interest in the noun *lyf* (charm/magic remedy) stating it is associated with the practice of magic as well as providing another example where it is used. A copper amulet from Sigtuna is inscribed with *Njót lyfja* “Make good use of the healing (charms)” (Olsen 2010, 171). Since this noun, as well as its verb *lyfja* (heal/cure), appears on numerous amulets it would seem that these items would be used in an attempt to heal the sick. While not in the shape of an amulet a similar practice occurs in *Egils saga* when he heals the sick girl with carved runes that he has placed under her pillow.

Much like how the shield miniatures were used to protect both the living and the dead from evil spirits and magic, it would appear that those presented in Olsen’s study held a similar purpose. The pierced holes and ring attachments suggest that such items could be attached to a necklace, perhaps to protect them from harm. Some inscriptions indicated that amulets were also made to heal the sick through some form of runic magic. Lastly, some of these items were

deposited in places that were potentially sacred in nature further illustrating the connection between these artifacts and ritual behavior (Olsen 2010, 174).

Rituals of the Forge

In recent years research has been conducted on the use of osteological material in the process of carbonizing iron during Iron Age Scandinavia. While this period is earlier than the Viking period, which is the focus of this paper, the use of bones in the forging of weapons may have some connection with Norse magic and mysticism. Regardless of the time period, if this hypothesis is correct it would further demonstrate how deeply ritual and violence were intertwined.

In 2004 an experimental study was conducted by archaeologist Terje Gansum and Hans Johnny Hansen, a blacksmith. The purpose of the study was to test the process of making steel by carbonizing iron with bone-coal. The researchers proposed that this process may have been used in Iron Age Scandinavia and that it would have been a deeply ritual and symbolic process. Gansum repeatedly states that the forge was where ritual, mythology, secret knowledge, and history meet. Furthermore, he hypothesizes that bone-coal was used to imbue a weapon with the spirit of the human or animal to which the bone belonged to.

In terms of archaeological evidence for such a ritual, forges in Sweden and Norway have been uncovered with bones in the forges themselves or in graves of close proximity. Four forges from Gene, Sweden were revealed to contain significant amounts of burned bone. Two forges contained 84g and 64g of burnt bone with another forge, C7, containing 156g. The remains originated from a wide range of animals including sheep/goats, pigs, oxen, horses, and rabbits.

There are also remains in graves that suggest they belonged to smiths; however, Gansum does not elaborate on the type or quantity of bone found in said graves. He also notes that it is unknown if human bones were used in the smithing process stating that “symbolically and ritually it seems likely” (Gansum 2004, 44). There is also evidence for burials in furnaces as well as evidence for iron production in and around cemeteries.

When conducting their experiment Gansum and Hansen used crushed ox bones and burnt them with reduced oxygen in a metal container for three hours. Then they combined their bone-coal with an equal amount of charcoal and a piece of iron. After putting the mixture through a smelter the researchers found that they had in fact made steel by transferring carbon to bloomery iron. In theory, a similar process could have been used in Iron-Age Scandinavia (Gansum 2004, 42-43). This however is the only material and experimental evidence Gansum has to support his hypothesis. The rest of his evidence comes from interpretations of literary sources.

The two main aspects of Norse mythology that Gansum attempts to connect to the use of bone-coal are ‘animal style’ art and the importance of named swords in the prose. Many of the heroes and legendary figures of Norse mythology carried a named sword; often forged by mythical figures such as dwarfs and imbued with magical abilities or deadly curses. One of the most famous of these swords is *Tyrving*. The dwarfs Durin and Dvalin were forced to make this sword by the hero Svafrlami. It would never break or rust and could cut stone and iron as though they were cloth. However, the dwarfs also cursed it so misfortune would follow it. In this way, we see how swords could be imbued with magical properties. These properties often included augmenting the luck of the user so they would always be victorious. In some cases, these abilities may have been the result of infusing a weapon with the spirits of ancestors or animals with bone-coal (Gansum 2004, 49-52).

Lotte Hedeager supports Gansum's theory elaborating upon the relationship between magic or hidden knowledge and the blacksmith. She however offers no new material evidence to support this theory instead relying on abstract interpretations of Norse mythology and literature (Hedeager 2011, 137- 144). While this theory is interesting it is also very speculative; even Gansum recognizes this stating "This is only a scratch at the surface; more research has to be done to gain a more detailed picture" (Gansum 2004, 53). Hopefully, future research will shed light on the historical authenticity of this claim.

If the Vikings did use bone-coal it would demonstrate how ritual could be used in the preparation of battle as well as the act of battle itself. The production of bone-coal appears to be a lengthy and expensive process. The time, energy, and resources put into this process would stress the importance of any ritual in relation to it. This ritual would also extend onto the battlefield. By imbuing them with the spirits of their ancestors, the weapons produced by this process would fulfill a similar function to the amulets mentioned in the previous section. The warriors who could afford such weapons would surely have been willing to pay if they believed that it would improve their luck in battle. In this way the use of bone-coal encompasses two rituals; the first ritual is the production of the weapon and the second is its use in battle and the benefits it brings. However, if we are to accept these rituals as historically authentic, further evidence must be collected, both material and literary.

Material Evidence for *völur*

A focus of this paper has been how ritual behavior is expressed in Norse literature and mythology. Archaeological evidence may be used to prove whether there is any truth behind the

myths. Did the *völur* and berserkers really exist? Perhaps not as they are depicted in the literature; but it is possible that ritual specialists and frenzied warriors did play a role in Viking society and warfare. This section will provide evidence for such individuals and compare it to their literary counterparts.

The main difficulty with proving the historical authenticity of these figures is that there is a lack of archaeological evidence. We also must be careful not to jump to conclusions when examining what evidence we do possess. Much of the evidence that supports the existence of the *völur* comes in the form of grave goods, specifically staves found in the graves of women. The most notable of these graves are found at the sites of Birka and Fyrkat; although ‘*seiðr*-staves’ have been found all across Scandinavia.

At Birka graves Bj. 760, Bj. 834, and Bj. 845 are of significance. Bj. 760 is a small cremation grave containing two beads, fragments of iron nails, a small ceramic vessel, and an iron staff. The staff lacks any indication of burning, suggesting that it was not involved in the burial ritual itself or placed in a layer separate from the cremation deposit. Apart from containing one of the best-preserved iron staffs from the Viking Age, the grave contains little other material evidence (Price 2019, 84-85).

Bj. 834 is a double inhumation of a man and a woman. This is suggested by the presence of two sets of shoes, jewelry, and other ‘sexed’ objects. The grave itself is quite large, 4m long X 2m wide X 1.95m deep. It is divided in two, the first section being the burial chamber and the second consisting of a raised platform, 1.4m deep and 0.3m high. On top of the platform were the remains of two draught horses along with brindles, draught harnesses, ornamental rings, strap-distributors decorated with mounts, and a whip mounted with rattles (Price 2019, 88-89).



Figure 2. Reconstruction of Bj. 834 by Þórhallur Þráinsson (Price 2019, 91).

Within the main burial chamber, we find the remains of two individuals and several grave goods. The proposed plan of the Bj. 834 relies heavily on evidence from Bj. 644 as the only surviving remains are the teeth of the woman. In Bj. 644 the position of the remains suggests that a man and a woman were seated in a chair with the woman being placed on top of the man. As the grave goods from Bj. 644 and Bj. 834 are positioned in a similar manner, it has been proposed that the occupants of Bj. 834 must-have been placed in a seat similar to Bj. 644. The theory of two bodies being positioned in a chair seems to be supported by several scholars including Arbman, Gräsland, and Price (Price 2019, 89- 90). Among the grave goods, there are iron staff, knives of various types, bronze and silver brooches, a shield, two pairs of crampons, and a lance. Oðinn's connection with spears, and the act of throwing them, and the relationship between staves and the *völur* suggest that the occupants of the burial were in some way related to *seiðr* (Price 2019, 94-95).

Bj. 845 much like Bj. 834 is a chamber grave. It contains a nearly intact skull believed to be a woman. Much like in Bj. 644 and Bj. 834, it is suggested that she sat in a chair, and much like those graves any chair that did exist no longer survives. Like the other graves, there were numerous grave goods. A small iron knife with a silver wire on its handle was discovered with an accompanying whetstone. There are also pendants, beads, coins, brooches, and a silver-embroidered silk band, many of these elements most likely have been worn with her clothing. An iron staff was discovered resting in a wooden bucket with an iron handle and nails. There is also an ornamented iron box similar to that of the Oseberg ship burial, although no material was found inside (Price 2019, 95-96).

Similar graves have also been found in Denmark. One such is the grave at Tre Kroner-Grydehøj four miles east of Roskilde. The site contains numerous graves dating back to the Late

Neolithic Period. Of the graves at this site 27 dates to Viking Age, roughly around the 8th or 9th century. The most interesting of these graves is grave A 505 in which the remains of three individuals were found. Analysis of the remains suggests that Individuals I and III were women while Individual II was a man. Many of the artifacts found in the grave are in poor condition. An iron handle was found believed to have belonged to a wooden bucket. Other wooden artifacts are thought to have been in the grave but they have either degraded severely or disintegrated entirely (Ulriksen 2015, 229-232).

Remains from a variety of animals were also found in the grave including the cranium and hindleg of a goat or sheep, a dog's jawbone, another dog the size of a pointer, and lastly the remains of a horse. There is evidence of two knives being placed in the grave as well as a "copper alloy piece cast together with a short iron blade or point" (Ulriksen 2015, 229-232). Many of the items in grave A 505 are reminiscent of those found in the graves at Birka; such as the knives, drum, and horse remains. The individuals in all four graves are also all of high status as indicated by the quality of their grave goods. The question is however were they the graves of *völur*?



Figure 3. Staff from grave Bj. 760 (Price 2019, 139).

Price and Gardęła support the belief that the iron rods discovered at Birka are *seiðr*-staves. Ulriksen believes that the copper alloy piece with the iron point discovered near Roskilde is also a staff or some other tool of the *völur*. It should however be noted that the usage of the iron rods is contended by scholars. Alternative interpretations include meat-spits, whip shanks, or blacksmith tools (Gardęła 2008, 53). Others such as Duczko suggest that these items were multifunctional. This does not mean the *seiðr*-staff interpretation should be discounted; it is important to understand the context in which these artifacts are found as well as how their appearance compares to descriptions in the literature. While these may appear as ordinary and everyday objects they may have held a special purpose to their owners, as noted by Gardęła

Finally, we must realize that the iron staff became a tool for sorcery only when its bearer decided to use it in such a manner and when other participants of the ritual believed in her (or his) power and the magic with which the *seiðr* paraphernalia were enchanted. It was all ‘real’ because the minds of Viking-Age peoples considered it real. Additionally, the atmosphere of the place, the time of the day, costumes, and words and songs chanted by the performers all no doubt enriched the spiritual experience (Gardęła 2008, 54).

The graves at Birka provide a compelling argument for the existence of the *völur*. The manner in which the individuals were buried and the grave-goods which the burials contain indicate that they were of high status. Similarly, we see how Thorbjorg from *Eiriks saga* holds a special social status as shown by the clothes she wears as well as the staff she carries. It should also be noted that these staves are often found within female graves. As previously discussed *seiðr* was used primarily by women so it would make sense to find a tool associated with *seiðr* if these graves did belong to a *völva*. An interesting point is raised by Gardęła which further solidifies the relationship between staves and the *völur*. *Seiðr* is often connected with the action

of spinning or weaving. This appears to be both metaphorical and literal. A *völva* ‘spins’ or ‘weaves’ magic while an ordinary woman weaves textiles. While the acts themselves may be different, the social implications and taboos appear to have been the same. In discussing this relationship Gardela notes how the activities in a ‘spinning room’ reflect those that occurred in *seiðr*. He also quotes Hilda Ellis Davidson who says that spinning rooms “were centres of feminine activity; in some areas men did not dare to enter” (Gardela 2008 50). The simple fact that these objects occur mainly in female graves, often those of high status, suggests that there is an inherent relationship between the two; a relationship similar to that between a *völva* and her staff.

The last ‘*völva*’ grave we shall look at comes from the site of Fyrkat in Jylland, Denmark. It will end our discussion on the *völur* and transition us into the material evidence for the existence of the *berserkir* (berserker). Material evidence for berserkers is rarer than that for the *völur*, and outside of depictions in art, there is little concrete evidence to suggest their existence. However grave 4 from Fyrkat has led to some interesting theories on the authenticity of these mythical warriors.

Material Evidence for Berserkers

Fyrkat is a tenth-century fortification located in Jylland. While the entire site is of archaeological importance our focus is on the burial designated grave 4. The grave consists of a single woman placed inside the wooden body of a wagon with several grave goods. She was buried in high-quality clothing which contained gold threads. She also wore jewelry, most notably two silver toe-rings. In the grave was found a “gilded bronze box-brooch with silver and

niello decoration” containing a white lead paste, possibly used as make-up. It is believed that a fragment of this box was found in a fortress at Borgring near Køge. Silver pendants and amulets were also discovered including a silver pendant with three suspended ‘bird’s feet’. Pendants such as this are not from Denmark but rather from Finland and Russia. The aforementioned artifacts are all uncommon in Scandinavia rather they are more commonly found in the Baltic region (Price 2019, 109-111). Therefore, this woman was either very well-traveled or wealthy enough to afford imported goods of this caliber. The former would fit with the motif of the travelling *völva* although it is impossible to tell which interpretation is true.

There are also grave-goods that are consistent with other possible *völur* graves. One of the silver pendants discovered in the grave is in the shape of a miniature chair. A staff was discovered although it is heavily fragmented. When discovered it was in two pieces, one 7cm long and the 2.5cm, and corroded. While it is identified as a staff by Price, its poor condition makes it hard to ascertain the object’s true nature. One of the more unique finds was several hundred henbane (*Hyoscyamus niger*) seeds.

H. niger has medical properties as well as containing alkaloids such as atropine and scopolamine which are psychoactive (Fatur 2019, 3). In recent years it has been suggested that henbane may have been used to induce the psychological state known as *berserkerang*. It is this state that is believed to cause the trance-like frenzy of the berserkers. Consumption of the alkaloids found in henbane can result in a variety of symptoms that one may be associated with *berserkerang*; such as delirium, rage, decreased pain sensitivity, inability to recognize the faces of people they know, and decreased “humanity and reasoning” (Fatur 2019, 4-5). While this does not prove that the berserkers used drugs to induce their frenzied states, it must be said that the similarities between the effects of henbane and *berserkerang* are striking. It should be noted

that the indigestion of henbane does not always lead to the aforementioned side effects. A review of Fatur's article states that while there are similarities between *H. niger* intoxication and berserkerang there are also symptoms that would hamper combat effectiveness. They state that those who ingested atropine and scopolamine were more likely to develop lethargy than aggression (11.6% vs. 2.3%). While *H. niger* may lead to increased aggression there is also the chance that it will make warriors unfit for combat (Blumenberg & Horowitz 2020). As both of these studies are recent it would be wise to wait for more research and archaeological evidence before drawing conclusions.

The berserkers in popular culture are often associated, egregiously, with the consumption of mushrooms. This concept has its origins in the writings of the 18th-century writer Ödmann who theorized the berserkers consumed *Amanita muscaria* to induce *berserkerang*. However, the use of *A. muscaria* to induce such a state is both illogical and without any archaeological evidence. The indigestion of *A. muscaria* would cause side effects opposite those of *berserkerang*. Such side effects include nausea, dizziness, paralysis, sleep, and coma. Consumption of this mushroom would not increase a warrior's frenzy or strength but rather render them incapable of fighting (Fatur 2019, 2-3; Kolberg 2018, 905-906). The use of *A. muscaria* is so counterintuitive that Kolberg writes "As for the outcome of battles, it would probably have been a better idea to get your enemy to eat fungi rather than eat it yourself" (Kolberg 2018, 906).

While *H. niger* would be a better candidate for inducing berserkerang than *A. muscaria*, it would appear that both would be ineffective for inducing *berserkerang*. As such it is unlikely that either plant was used by Viking warriors. As noted by Kolberg the most likely explanation for the berserker is that they were elite infantry and war veterans. Their mental state may have been a result of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as opposed to drug usage. This does

however raise an important question. If the henbane seeds discovered at Fyrkat were not used to induce *berserkerang* what were they used for? Why was a psychoactive substance discovered in the grave of a woman believed to be a ritual specialist? Perhaps henbane was used in a ritual unrelated to the berserkers. Until new evidence comes to light the truth will remain uncertain.

The other form of material evidence that concerns the berserkers is art. While art may not prove the existence of berserkers it does show us that they were an important part of the Viking concept of war. This tradition also seems to have been a long-lasting one as we find depictions of berserker-like figures in art from the pre-Christian Migration Period to the twelfth century. While there are numerous examples of art that have been associated with berserkers, two more notable examples are the Torslunda plates and the Lewis chessmen.

The Torslunda plates date to the seventh century during the Vendel Era. The plates, discovered in Torslunda, Sweden, would have been mounted on a helmet. One of the plates depicts two figures; one carrying two spears and a sheathed sword, and wearing a horned helmet. The other figure is some bear-human hybrid carrying a spear and sheathed sword (Kolberg 2018, 907-908; Price 2019, 308). Similar plates have been discovered at Gutenheim and Obrigheim in Germany; once more we have a human figure holding two spears while flanked by animal-human hybrids carrying spears and swords. Price labels the human figure holding two spears a “weapon dancer” while stating the animal-human hybrids are *ulfheðnar* (sing. *ulfheðinn*) or “wolfskin-wearers”. The “weapon dancer” in the Torslunda plates appears to be missing an eye, potentially a depiction of Oðinn who is associated with the berserkers and *ulfheðnar* (Price 2019, 308-309). In reality, the berserkers may have been part of a warrior cult dedicated to Oðinn. The use of bearskins may have been a ritual related to this cult or to denote their status as elite warriors (Kolberg 2018, 908).

Berserkers continued to be depicted in art even after the Christianization of Scandinavia. In 1831 a hoard of highly decorated chess pieces, known as the Lewis chessmen, was discovered in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland. They date between 1150 and 1200 and are carved out of walrus tusks and whales' teeth (Robinson 2004, 5; 14). In total there are seventy-eight pieces, twelve of which belong to the warder or rook category. The rooks are depicted as infantrymen with swords and shields and all but one (BM 125) wears a helmet. I point out the rooks in particular, as four of them (BM 123, 124, 125, and NMS 29) bite the top of their shields (Robinson 2004, 26-27). This matches the description of the berserkers in the *Heimskringla*. "His [Oðinn's] own men went to battle without coats of mail and acted like mad dogs or wolves. They bit their shields and were as strong as bears or bulls. They killed people, and neither fire nor iron affected them. This is called berserker rage" (*Ynglinga saga* 6, trans. Hollander, 10). While the rooks of the Lewis chessmen may not be unarmored like in the *Ynglinga saga* their frenzied faces and shield biting clearly denote them as berserkers. As previously mentioned the Lewis chessmen date to the late 12th century and were made of walrus ivory. The use of ivory suggests that they were produced in Scandinavia while some of the stylistic choices have led Robinson to place Trondheim, Norway as their origin (Robinson 2004, 35; 58). The date and provenance show us how the idea of the berserker continued well after the Christianization of Scandinavia.



Figure 4. Two rooks (BM 124 & 125) from the Lewis Chessmen (Robinson 2004, 29).

Based on the material and literary evidence it would appear that there are two depictions of berserkers. The first being the stereotypical warriors who dress or shapeshift as bears or wolves, and the other being warriors who simply displayed heightened states of aggression. The former can be seen in the Torslunda plates where men literally transform into wolves. Similarly

in the *Ynglinga saga* berserkers merely act like animals but go into battle without armor since fire or iron cannot harm them. In the latter depiction, we see normal men who partake in ritual behavior such as a warrior cult. The Lewis chessmen wear full armor and the only berserk behavior they show is biting their shields. A literary mold for this depiction can be found in *Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar*. During the Battle of Stamford Bridge, Harald is said to have fought like a berserker. As the battle turned against the Norwegians, Harald rushed to the frontlines. “Then King Harald Sigurtharson became so [ungovernably] fighting mad that he ran out in front of the battle line, slashing with both hands. Neither helmet nor corselet held out against him, and all those close by turned tail, and a little more and the English would have taken to flight” (*Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar* 92, trans. Hollander, 655). In this instance Harald does not take drugs or dress as a bear; he is simply depicted as a brave and skilled warrior.

While berserkers may not have existed as they are depicted in popular culture, there is certainly some truth behind the myth. It is unlikely that they consumed mushrooms and henbane, and dressed as bears or wolves. But it is possible that there were elite Viking warriors that were so ferocious that they seemed like savage animals. Maybe they were elite warriors, maybe they were members of a warrior cult, or maybe they were simply psychopaths who reveled in war and bloodshed. Regardless of their true nature, it is clear that the berserkers were a part of the Viking mindset and therefore existed in some capacity.

CONCLUSION

This paper has presented a wide range of ritual behaviors related to violent acts in Viking society. These rituals encompassed a wide range of domains, existing both in mythology and in reality. Some were religious while others were an integral part of law and politics. Ritual was used to define social groups, encourage warriors in battle, and settle legal disputes.

With *seiðr* and the *völur*, we see how important ritual specialists and their magical abilities were for what Price calls “the invisible battlefield”. The *völur* could prophesize the course of a battle, give warriors protective pendants and amulets, and hex the enemy to deprive them of their strength. Such ritual behavior is not limited to the Vikings; cultures across the world and throughout history have used similar rituals. In fact, it appears that the use of ritual in warfare as well as the development of ritual specialists for war is an important aspect of cultural evolution.

In his review of Manvir Singh’s article “The Cultural Evolution of Shamanism”, Luke Glowacki notes how ritual is used to mitigate the fear of battle and encourage participation. For example, the use of protective amulets is cross-cultural and continues into the present. In Papua New Guinea, Tanga warriors wear sprigs of ginger around their necks to grant them “a suit of magic armour which neither axe nor spears ... could penetrate”. This is reminiscent of the shield miniatures presented in chapter 3. It also brings to mind how *seiðr* could be used to dull an opponent’s blade. Glowacki also states that ritual specialists for war are often separate from shamans although this does not seem to be the case in Viking society. The *völur* used *seiðr* for both domestic and violent tasks. Ritual specialists also tend not to follow warriors into battle yet in *Heimskringla* it is said *seiðrmenn* fought in battle. This however does conform to the way

ritual specialist increase their wealth and social standing. These specialists often collected a portion of war loot as payment for their services, likewise, *seiðrmenn* would have earned their wealth fighting as mercenary sorcerers (Glowacki 2018, 24-25).

In his dissertation, Glowacki provides a description of war rituals amongst the Nyangatom, a pastoralist society inhabiting modern-day Africa. There are two ritual specialists in Nyangatom society that participate in the participation of war. These are known as the *emuron lo a ngamok* (diviner of shoes) and *emuron a akou* (diviner of the head). The first reads shoes sprinkled with tobacco and tobacco salt. The outcome of a battle is predicted by the positioning of the shoes when they land. The *emuron a akou* meanwhile told one raider how to produce a substance that will prevent the enemy from waking during a livestock raid (Glowacki 2015, 84). The *emuron's* divination of the future is similar to that of the *völur* and the use of a magical substance to dull the senses of the enemy is similar to the use of *seiðr*. It is in this way that we see that war rituals are cross-cultural throughout history. Rituals such as these are used to control the unseen forces at play in warfare. By controlling these unseen forces warriors are more inclined to participate in battle as they believe that they are more likely to survive the battle unscathed. As such, ritual is not only used to increase participation in battle but also to encourage acts of bravery by planting the belief of invincibility or inhuman strength within warriors.

We have also seen how ritual is used to define one's social status as well as social norms and taboos. While female sorcerers such as the *völur* were distrusted for their use of *seiðr* they were also held in high regard for their prophetic abilities. *Seiðr* itself is considered to be a feminine art and therefore was seen as socially acceptable when conducted by women. However, when used by men, *seiðr* brought connotations of *ergi* and *níð*. For women, such magic was a social norm, while for men it was a taboo that could utterly destroy one's reputation. Likewise,

cowardice in battle was viewed with *ergi* as it was considered the opposite of what a man should be. *Níð* and *ergi* could also be used to describe those who refused a challenge of *holmgang* as no self-respecting man would refuse to defend his honor and reputation in combat.

The *holmgang* also illustrates how ritual behavior could be used to settle legal disputes or blood feuds. Not only was the duel itself a complex procedure guided by law and tradition; the aftermath of the fight was just as ritualized. Depending on the terms of the duel, the loser could be forced to pay *weregild*, or if it was a fight to the death the victor claimed all of his opponent's property. The *holmgang* shows us how ritual is not always a religious affair. Rather ritual in Viking society was used to guide social behavior as well as define a person's or group's place within society.

What is most interesting is that the rituals presented in this paper are all in some way related to violence, be that in warfare or between individuals. The fact that such rituals appear across cultures, such as the Nyangatom, throughout history is also important to note. It would suggest that war rituals are a byproduct of cultural evolution as well as an intrinsic part of human behavior. Items such as pendants or amulets give warriors a sense of comfort during the chaos of battle. Their confidence against their enemies may be boosted if they believe they have powerful sorceresses, trolls, and other mythical creatures fighting on their side. Warriors have no need to fear if a *völva* has dulled the blades of their enemies so they cannot bite. It is for these reasons that ritual appears to have been so vital for the Norse concept of warfare and violence.

Only a handful of ritual behaviors have been discussed in this paper. Numerous other examples exist within Norse literature and in recent years archaeological evidence has begun to support the historical authenticity of figures such as the *völur* and by extension the Viking's belief in the 'invisible battlefield'. The relationship between ritual behavior and violent acts

seems to be underappreciated within the academic literature. I, however, believe that this relationship is imperative to understanding how warrior culture operated within Viking society. Hopefully, as new archaeological evidence comes to light this relationship will be seen with a newfound appreciation. Such evidence can only lead to a better understanding of Viking culture and human society as a whole.

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