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History or Myth? The Role of Women in *Vikings* (2013-)

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Abstract:

This Dissertation attempts to analyse the representation of women in *Vikings*, the History Channel's TV show. I am going to examine the different roles that female characters take in their communities and how Viking history and the Norse myth intermingle to depict empowered women in a realistic context. This study is based on Television Studies and Gender Studies, since it includes an analysis of the representation of some female characters of the show by taking into consideration the producer's intentions and the preferences of the audience. By looking at the depiction of women as mothers, leaders and warriors we will prove that these characters and their roles in society are based on historical aspects, but also on mythological figures and events in a way that the show adapts to present-day television and modern audiences.

Key words: *Vikings*, female empowerment, history, Norse myth, television

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Introduction

The importance of television is gradually increasing in the last decade thanks to the popularity of new platforms such as Netflix and HBO, and due to its entertaining role. One of the genres present in current TV shows is history or historical fiction, a genre that defines popular series like *Peaky Blinders* (2013-) or *Reign* (2013-2017). The main core of this Dissertation is *Vikings*, a popular History Channel show, written and created by Michael Hirst and first aired in Canada in March 2013. This show tells the story of a Viking community by putting the famous raider Ragnar Lothbrok and his family as main protagonists. Despite being classified as a historical drama TV series, *Vikings* is also based on one of the sagas in *Gesta Danorum* (12th c.) by Saxo Grammaticus (Puchalska 2015, 93), so Michael Hirst strikes a balance at intermingling both historical characters and events, and mythological and fictional elements. Previous papers that use this show as a primary source have mainly focused on its historical veracity or on the main male characters and the Viking community. However, these studies scarcely mention the role that women carried out in Viking societies and the relevance of female characters in *Vikings*. Thus, this Dissertation explores how the main female protagonists in *Vikings* and their stories are based on historical facts and, at the same time, they are empowered women at the level of Norse goddesses and heroines. The focus of this paper will be limited to Scandinavian women, mainly to Aslaug and Lagertha, notwithstanding there are female characters from other European characters in the show. The methodology used to carry out this study is mainly Gender Studies, since I am going to analyse the role of women in Scandinavian history and in Old Norse myth, and how it is depicted in *Vikings*. As the main source is a TV show, Television Studies are also used in order to reflect the relevance of these characters in the contemporary media and to what extent they make an impact in the audience.

The Viking Age is a hugely controversial historical period due to the lack of written resources between the 8th and 11th centuries. Scandinavians had an oral tradition and they only had the Germanic runes; therefore, not much information about these centuries has been collected until the arrival of the chronicles and the sagas. *Gesta Danorum*, written by Saxo Grammaticus in Latin in the 12th century, is one of the first documents about Denmark's history. In this work, Saxo includes stories of Danish heroes, history legends, and mythology. Thus, the sagas cannot be treated as pure historical texts considering the great quantity of fantastic elements they contain and because "there is no such thing as an unbiased text, every writer of all ages had an agenda and a worldview that was reflected in their texts" (Redon

2017, 27). In addition, Saxo Grammaticus was a man and a clerk, so the little information included about women might be biased. Apart from the sagas, only archaeology can help to reconstruct the Viking Age, which is nowadays much more reliable, and gives evidence of women's tasks and position in society. Then, the information that remains of the Norse myth also helps to find a connection between some characteristics of its goddesses and other mythological creatures with female characters in *Vikings*. Hence, the show, and especially the representation of women, will be influenced by both fact and fiction.

This study will start exploring the community of *Vikings*, located in Kattegat, which is apparently separated by gender roles. Then, the analysis will move from general to specific by delving into the treatment of motherhood in *Vikings* through different female characters. The following section focuses on power, and how some women become and behave as leaders of their community. Finally, the presence of warrior women in the Viking Age and in the show will be examined. All this, taking into consideration the influence of history and myth, and the common representations of women in these roles in popular television.

***Vikings*: A society of separate spheres?**

Historically, the idea of gender roles and the doctrine of separate spheres have been the basis of most European societies. At the same time, the media have always contributed to the perpetuation of gender roles, and the acceptance of power of men over women (Sink and Mastro 2006). Moreover, many studies have proved that “women are under-represented in media, and that when women are present, they are typically scantily dressed and relegated to stereotypical roles” (Collins 2011, 290). As regards *Vikings*, we need to consider that it depicts a Scandinavian society of the Viking Age where the separate spheres were already a reality, but women in Scandinavian communities could, on some occasions, aspire to far more rights than women in other countries. The society portrayed in this TV show is initially exposed as one structured by gender that makes a distinction between male and female roles. Women are most likely seen dedicated to the household, textile production, animal caring, childbearing and their children's education; oppositely, men are commonly seen as brave seafarers, raiders, leaders and warriors. However, these roles are not strictly defined as the story develops because the creators of the series have taken advantage of those infrequent exceptions of women who lived as wives and mothers, but also broke the gender stereotypes becoming leaders, warriors and heroines.

Vikings, though mostly at the beginning, portrays a society of separate spheres in which men and women carry out different tasks. The depiction of a society based on the separate spheres is obviously grounded on historical facts and on the contents of the sagas, from which some conclude that “women’s work was in the household and in production, e.g. weaving” (Ellis 2016, 694-695). The first season starts with a sequence of contrasting scenes in which Lagertha is fishing with her daughter Gyda, and Ragnar is teaching his son Bjorn how to fight (Hirst 2013, Season 1, Episode 1, 4:20). Here we have the figure of Lagertha, the mother who is regarded as the provider of sustenance for the whole family, while Ragnar is raider and the warrior. Each of them, as parents, have to teach their children in line with their genders so they learn their place in society from an early age. This reveals a patriarchal structure that involves a contrast between inside and outside, being the former the place for women and the latter for men. However, Ragnar decides to sail west, which is also Lagertha’s dream, and he does not allow her to go because, as he says, “I need to leave the children and the farm in the hands of someone I trust” (Hirst 2013, Season 1, Episode 2, 6:10). Even though he is perpetuating the idea that it is her responsibility to stay at home because of her role as wife and mother, Lagertha never sticks to this society’s conventions of being submissive to her husband. Moreover, during this argument he ironically suggests that he will stay to take care of the children, which he obviously does not intend to do. The relevant point here is that it shows how “It was possible for women to do men’s work, but not vice versa” (Ellis 2016, 695) and how Ragnar’s decision is mainly influenced by the society’s foundations. Thus, we cannot assert that the show is reinforcing gender roles through these examples, but rather representing the reality of the Viking Age.

Archaeology is, apart from the sagas, the little evidence that remains to prove the gender differences by exploring the burial rituals of the Viking Age. According to Redon, the tools found in women and men’s graves were directly related to their profession or social position (2017, 43). Most studies have shown most male graves contained arms and tools while female graves contained household items; for example, the great majority of warrior graves are from men. Therefore, it is true that Viking communities made a difference between the rights and duties of men and women. However, he takes into consideration the existing exceptions and asserts that “men and women both had their roles in society and it is not impossible to think that these roles could change or be switched” (2017, 4), which justifies the existence of female characters in *Vikings* that raid, fight and become land owners.

Nevertheless, these are the only scenes in the series in which gender roles are portrayed so straightforwardly, because *Vikings* shows how Scandinavian women take an

important part as mothers and wives, but that they could, though less frequently, acquire significant positions in society. Apart from the evident historical basis of this structure, the influence of mythology on Norse societies is also relevant in the depiction of female characters of the series in other roles and will be more specifically detailed in the following sections. Likewise, the female characters are shaped taking into consideration the interests of present-day society and audiences, which seek empowered characters they can relate to.

Motherhood in *Vikings*' female characters

One of the roles in which women are often seen in television is motherhood. All throughout history, women have usually been used as human beings with the purpose of breeding children. TV series, programmes and films almost always include female characters of any age taking the role of mothers. Rebecca Feasey, in her book *Mothers on Mothers: Maternal Readings of Popular Television*, makes an analysis of the audience's perspective of motherhood in television and asserts that "maternal favourites and likeable mothers are intertwined with notions of recognition and identification; it is as if many women respond to or invest in those characters whose domestic patterns or family department reflects, on some level, their own family unit, choices and behaviours" (2016, 104). Motherhood in *Vikings* is a theme depicted from different perspectives and through different female characters of the show: Lagertha is the traditional perfect mother that suffers for her children; Aslaug is used for breeding purposes and has a favourite son; and others become obsessed with having children or abandon them. Women played an important part as mothers in the Viking Age, when having offspring and heirs was very significant, and they had to give birth to and educate as many children as possible. In the TV show, almost every female character is or becomes a mother, but in this section only Lagertha and Aslaug will be analysed, since they represent different attitudes towards breeding and raising children which women in the audience might admire or criticise according to their own experiences.

Lagertha, as Ragnar's first right wife, is represented as a standard 'good' mother that would die for her children. Television often offers a patriarchal view of 'good' mothers which defends that "mothers are [those] responsible for the social, cultural, creative, educational, emotional, physical, nutritional and cognitive development of their children" (Feasey 2016, 1). The female protagonist appears as a caring and protective mother with her children, Gyda and Bjorn, who takes into consideration all those aspects mentioned by Feasey. Moreover, this idea of the perfect mother, usually the perfect wife too, involves that she values her

children and husband's life more than her own. Lagertha, for example, loses her only daughter because of a great fever in Kattegat. At the beginning of Episode 9, Lagertha fears for her husband, who has visited another earl, Jarl Borg, in name of his king. As a consequence, Lagertha visits the village's seer to explain her disturbing dreams of dark shadows (Michael Hirst 2013, Season 1, Episode 9, 8:35) to him, and the seer suggests that they are shadows from Hell's hall that want "to take something from [her]" (9:07). She asks if it is her life, but the seer answers "no, something far more important to you than that" (9:10), which can be interpreted as a prospect of her future divorce, but also of the spread of a disease all around Kattegat that will take Gyda's life. From a gender perspective, this romanticised account of motherhood, commonly used in modern television, bolsters a controversial image of the 'good' mother. Therefore, Lagertha is represented as a mother that would sacrifice anything for her children, and yet she fails to protect her daughter and suffers for it.

There is a parallelism between these depictions of maternity and Norse mythology as well. On some occasions, Lagertha's protective attitude towards her children reminds of the goddess Frigg, usually portrayed as a "wise, resourceful and loving wife and mother" (Larrington 1992, 141). According to the myth, Baldr, the son of Frigg and Odin is having dark dreams which mean that he is in danger. As Caroline Larrington explains, Frigg needs to protect her son and plans to "go about creation taking oaths from everything, animate and inanimate, that they will not harm him in any way: 'fire, water, iron, and every kind of metal, stones, earth, wood, sickness, [...]' all promise to do no harm" (1992, 149). Lagertha does not live in a fictional world, but she always protects her children at all costs. When she first sails to England with Ragnar, for example, their children remain in Kattegat with the priest Athelstan, and she threatens to tear his lungs out if something happens to them (Hirst 2013, Season 1, Episode 3, 36:20). Therefore, this patriarchal form of motherhood by which women would go all around the world or kill for their children was already existent in the Norse myth, as well as it has existed in history until the present.

While Lagertha's plot includes her relationship with Ragnar, her own deeds and her gradual acquisition of power apart from her role as a mother, Aslaug's storyline is almost reduced to being the bearer of Ragnar's other four sons. Women in today's culture, according to Leise Anne Clark, "are expected to behave in a prescribed manner that includes being soft, gentle, quiet, and *nurturing*, taking up less space and never demonstrating their own powers" apart from being "mothers or at least mothering [...] in submissive positions physically and psychologically" (2008, 10). This somehow reflects Aslaug's character in *Vikings*; she cannot be considered a passive woman as such because she has influence over other characters, but

she is the example of an overly correct, attractive and procreating woman. She is young, beautiful, fertile, a princess, and the daughter of two legends of Nordic mythology known by everyone in Scandinavia: Sigurd, the hero who murdered the Dragon Fafnir, and Brunhilde, the famous Valkyrie and shieldmaiden. Additionally, she has some qualities of the goddess Freyja, “the goddess most closely related to sexuality” (Larrington 2017, 46) and fertility, and she is a *völva* (female seer in Norse religion), which makes her attractive to most male characters of the show. Nevertheless, after some years of marriage, Ragnar is only kind towards her when Aslaug is pregnant again or has given birth to another child. By the same token, she asks her husband if she loves her and her last and deformed child Ivar, and he just answers “of course I love him” (Hirst 2015, Season 3, Episode 1, 11:50). Ragnar’s attitude towards his wife proves to be an example of the patriarchal expectations from women, and the idea of women as reproductive machines. Nevertheless, before dying, Aslaug shows she is aware of her relevance in the story by reminding Lagertha that “the gods foretold Ragnar would have many sons, and I have given him those sons. I am as much a part of this saga, Lagertha, as you are” (Hirst 2016, Season 4, Episode 14, 3:20). Contrary to being “quiet” (Clark 2018), Aslaug is only valued as a child-bearer but it is important to remember that Aslaug’s character is relevant both in the show and in the history of the Vikings for being the mother of Ragnar Lothbrok’s sons, who become famous warriors.

Apart from breeding four children, Aslaug’s role as a ‘good’ and caring mother makes a change when she gives birth to Ivar the Boneless by the end of Season 2. Although Aslaug breaks with the idea of the ‘good’ mother previously explained, some researchers state that “there [is] no such thing as a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ mother, simply differing maternal styles and motherwork practices” (Feasey 2018, 29). It is true that she becomes an overprotective mother with her youngest son, who was born with a deformity in his legs, but from this moment on she almost always leaves her older sons (Ubbe, Hvitserk and Sigurd) in charge of the widow of the previous earl and her closest friend, Siggy. Furthermore, Siggy drowns in a frozen lake trying to save Ubbe and Hvitserk’s life while Aslaug is sleeping with another man, Harbard. Likewise, when her sons are grown-up men, Lagertha kills Aslaug to take her home back, and Sigurd refuses to participate in Ubbe’s plans of revenge because “She wouldn’t have done it for us”, he says, “She never loved us, she only loved Ivar. Oh, yeah, and Harbard” (Hirst 2016, Season 4, Episode 14, 24:15). This shows how her attitude towards them influenced their perception of her as a mother and, therefore, how Aslaug does not follow the patriarchal ideas of motherhood of caring and living exclusively for all of her children. What is more, thanks to her sons’ perspectives the audience might tend to think of

Aslaug as a bad mother in spite of Feasey's suggestion of simply different ways of motherhood.

Both Lagertha and Aslaug are characters with contrasting characteristics from the beginning of the TV series, but their portrayal as caring mothers is common in television. In her book, Rebecca Feasey concludes that most women of the audience do not feel identified with the way motherhood is represented in television (2016, 217). *Vikings*, however, includes other female characters that construct different or non-stereotypical representations of motherhood: Siggy, whose sons are murdered and whose daughter dies because of a fever; Helga, Floki's wife, who becomes obsessed with having a child and adopts a slave that eventually kills her; and Porunn, Bjorn's wife, that abandons Kattegat leaving their daughter behind. These depictions might or might not like the audience, but they provide a less idealized concept of motherhood.

Women taking control

Scandinavian women were not only classified as wives and mothers; although they had many duties, they also had rights that women from Southern Europe did not. For example, parents usually arranged marriages for their daughters because of personal interests but women could ask for divorce, recover her properties and remarry (Larrington 1992, 149). In fact, "a divorced woman, like a widow, seems to have had more say in future matches than the woman marrying for the first time" (Larrington 1992, 149). Lagertha, for instance, divorces Ragnar, marries Earl Sigvard, almost marries Kalf and she is very well respected. Besides divorce, "in Scandinavia, as in the Germanic world in general, men preceded women as heirs, but women did inherit, and a variety of evidence confirms that women could, and a not-insignificant percentage did, become considerable land-holders" (Clover 1993, 3). This means that women could inherit their parents or their husbands' properties, but also their social position. So, in some cases, women had the right to become earls or powerful leaders of their community. Characters like Lagertha, Aslaug and Siggy struggle to acquire or to maintain their power, so this is what we will focus on in this section.

Siggy is one of the female characters that struggles to maintain and then try to recover power living in a patriarchal society. Siggy is introduced as Earl Haraldson's wife, but she eventually loses the power she has. Apparently, she is not an active character in the show because she does not speak publicly and never takes action, but she tries to influence her husband in her decisions. However, she is scarcely taken into consideration and has even less

power that she thinks due to living in a community in which gender roles prevail. Russell Kent and Sherry Most affirm that “because of traditional gender stereotypes, it appears that the possession of feminine characteristics is detrimental to leader emergence” (1994, 1337). Furthermore, Siggy is not even allowed to decide about her daughter’s marriage, since it was the father of the family who chose the suitor according to his personal interests. When Ragnar defeats her husband, she loses all her possessions and starts serving Lagertha and Aslaug, contrary to many other women in this period.

Siggy represents the greatest loss of power among *Vikings*’ female characters and she tries to get it back at all costs. One can notice the importance of her previous status when she says “I want my old position back. I was never meant to be a servant, a slave, a friend” (Hirst 2014, Season 2, Episode 6, 1:05). In order to achieve her goal, she offers her body to King Horik, King of the Danes, who also forces her to sleep with his eldest son. In addition, this proves that “today, dominant messages in popular culture often suggest that a woman’s power comes primarily from her sexuality” (Cato and Dillman 2010, 272). Therefore, Siggy uses her sexuality with the purpose of getting the power that she used to have because she sticks to her role of satisfying men that was expected from a woman in a male-dominant society.

Lagertha, on the contrary, can be considered the perfect leader as Ragnar’s wife and after their divorce, and she does take action to get power. She gains and loses power constantly in the series, but she starts as a farmer and becomes the queen of Kattegat. Initially, she shares the earldom with her husband and her duty is to act as the earl while her husband is not there, rule in Kattegat and attend petitioners. Moreover, she makes decisions in trials and takes care of the ill when the fever has spread. This illustrates that women did have a lot of authority in the Viking Age if we consider that men spent most of the year raiding. After divorcing Ragnar, the female protagonist marries another earl who abuses her and her son Bjorn, and whom she murders eventually. Michael Hirst explains that “Lagertha becomes convinced [that,] if she wants to stamp her own personality and authority, she has to take things” (History Channel 2016, 1:06), she has to take action in order to get the power that she wants and deserves. What is more, Lagertha starts getting authority when she “takes things” as any man would do. As the usual action heroine, she “sees herself as equal to (if not stronger than) the men with whom she interacts, and she does not see her biological sex as a deterrent to obtaining her goals” (Clark 2008, 46). Therefore, she becomes Earl of Hedeby in her own right, she eventually recovers her earldom after being usurped by Kalf, her right-hand man and future fiancé, as well as she kills Aslaug to become the queen of Kattegat. As many

heroic women in modern television, Lagertha acts courageously and, contrary to Siggy, she uses her masculine features to become the leader of Kattegat.



Fig. 1. Lagertha as a farmer (Hirst 2013, Season 1, Episode 3, 2:30).



Fig. 2. Lagertha as a Queen of Kattegat (Hirst 2017, Season 4, Episode 16, 7:45).

On this account, Lagertha shares another characteristic with the Norse goddess Freya. Freya, as a goddess, has her own hall, Folkvangr, where half of the slain go. Besides, she is usually portrayed as a beautiful woman with golden hair and wears a big cloak (Larrington 2017, 46). Lagertha, apart from blond and attractive, is the only female character that rules a community on her own, without sharing her position. Figures 1 and 2 above, illustrate Lagertha's progress from farmer to queen, sitting in the throne of her own mead-hall. Moreover, she is wearing a black cloak similar to that of the goddess Freya. Again, Lagertha is given goddess' characteristics that serve as a reinforcement of her power.

Since Lagertha and Aslaug are shaped with contrastive characteristics, the latter neither has an active role as a ruler nor does she get her power by fighting for it. According to Michael Hirst, "Aslaug would like to be the ruler of Kattegat herself, she is ambitious" (History Channel 2016, 0:52) but she never takes action and she is a bad leader. Aslaug, as well as Siggy, uses her sexuality to seduce Ragnar and acquire an important position, which can be considered a false form of empowerment. As Queen of Kattegat, Siggy, who has been in her position before, has to remind her of her duties: "You have other responsibilities. Ragnar has left Kattegat in your care. There are folk who are waiting to see you, there are important matters to decide" (Hirst 2015, Season 3, Episode 4, 8:40) when she goes with Harbard. This is probably an unrealistic portrayal of women from that period, because they

were not allowed to avoid their duty as wives. However, this can be interpreted as rejection of the patriarchal structure and a representation that mirrors today's societies where women have a higher level of freedom. Nevertheless, the power that she achieves is sometimes attributed to her magical powers. As a *völva*, she is considered a witch in Scandinavia, and she is thought to have bewitched Ragnar to become his wife, but there is no proof of this in the show. However, if this is true, Aslaug is not a passive woman because she has taken advantage of her sexuality and her magic while Lagertha, for example, has used her self-confidence and fighting skills.

Although it was very difficult for a woman to achieve a relevant position in society, archaeologists have proved that it was not impossible. According to Judith Jesch, "women had to achieve a relatively higher social status than men in the same community to be given the kind of burial that shows up in the archaeological record" (1991, 30). Important male figures used to receive ship burials and, surprisingly, one of the richest burials discovered was a huge boat in Osberg with the remains of two women. Since inhumation or cremation were the most common funerals, the Osberg ship demonstrates the power and the authority of those women (Jesch 1991, 31). The picture below illustrates Aslaug's burial, with her body put inside a ship and surrounded by household items, arms, and riches that will help her in the following life. Therefore, looking at the picture below, we can assume that Aslaug is well respected by her community despite not having been the perfect ruler.



Fig. 3. Aslaug's funeral (Hirst 2017, Season 4, Episode 14, 10:40).

While the depiction of power through the character of Siggy might be considered the most accurate with regard to historical records, the other representations of leadership can be

considered a more modern form of female empowerment. Siggy uses her femininity to try to acquire a position that she cannot get; Aslaug achieves a good position through her sexuality and then avoids her responsibilities both as a mother, wife and leader of a community; and Lagertha, conversely, forgets about the gender distinctions of the time and acts like Viking men to become queen.

Representing Scandinavian shieldmaidens

Some analysis focused on female characters of the sagas have demonstrated that the ‘strong woman’ is frequently present. Larrington speaks of a possible matriarchal society and of a woman “disappointed and betrayed in the match with an equal whom she has chosen” (1992, 157). According to the author, these women are independent, and they usually tend to be interested in militarized activities. Aslaug and Siggy, for example, never fight in *Vikings*, but they envy Lagertha for it. Despite the fact that she is the most relevant, other female characters get involved in warfare too: Torvi starts as a passive wife of an earl and becomes a shieldmaiden, Porunn appears first as a slave and then decides to become a warrior, and Astrid, Lagertha’s confidant and lover, is presented as a shieldmaiden from the beginning. It is hard to believe that women could easily take arms and fight during the Viking Age, but the fact is that warrior women existed in Scandinavia. Besides, they were hugely influenced by their religion, today’s Nordic myth, in which women also participate in warfare. Again, Lagertha is the main protagonist of this section since she is introduced from the very first episode as a shieldmaiden. The creation of this character includes an archaeological basis, mythological influence and television purposes. Putting together history and fiction, the creators of *Vikings* want to make a product which attracts and adapts to the modern audiences (Puchalska 2015, 93). This includes providing a “modern heroine” that “fights”, “solves mysteries” and “rescues herself and others from dangerous situations” (Brown 1996,56). Lagertha is very well appreciated and admired by almost everyone because she unifies the idea of the good mother and the good leader, but she also fights for her people.

To begin with, we need to consider the historical evidence that have motivated to depict female warriors in *Vikings*. As previously stated, Scandinavian people were buried with items related to their professions, usually arms and tools with male and household items with female bodies. However, Redon (2017) provides several archaeological sources which have proved that some women were buried with war weapons, though in less frequently. Another fact to take into account is that *Vikings* is based on the sagas, in which female warriors

already appeared. Even though the sagas are the only remaining sources covering the Viking Age and they are partially reliable, Northern Europeans worshiped goddesses and legends, like the Valkyries, who might have inspired Viking women to fight in battle (Redon 2017, 13). This use of history provides realism to the series, creating an atmosphere that emphasises the belief of a more equal than patriarchal society, very opposite to that previously mentioned.

Apart from this, Lagertha is often raised to the level of some mythological heroines. Lagertha is, on many occasions, compared to a Valkyrie, which means literally “chooser of the slain”. In Norse mythology, they were created by Odin to choose the bravest men that fought in battle and take them to Valhalla. This term was usually blended with shieldmaiden, which is the female warrior. Rollo, Ragnar’s brother, once explains to Bjorn that Lagertha and him had fought together in the same shield-wall and that “she fought like a Valkyrie” (Hirst 2013, Season 1, Episode 1, 38:45). With this, the audience can notice that Lagertha is a very good shieldmaiden, and she is admired and valued because it was not common for a man and a woman to fight in the same line. Moreover, if the Valkyries chose who had to die and go to Odin’s hall, one of Lagertha’s characteristics is also related with it. As a leader, she often sacrifices animals to obtain the gods’ favour, but the Vikings also sacrificed people for the same purpose. Thusly, Lagertha sometimes has to choose someone to offer to the Gods, as in the fourth Season, when she wants the Great Army to be protected and sacrifices Earl Jorgensen (Hirst 2017, Season 4, Episode 18, 22:00). Considering the fact that the gods and legends of their religion were of high significance to the Vikings, Lagertha must have been very admired among her people to be compared with a Valkyrie in a male dominant society. Therefore, it can be said that mythology is used to empower this character and to reinforce her talents.

As previously mentioned, shieldmaidens were very relevant in the Norse Myth, but also in the real Scandinavia of the 8th and 9th centuries. The TV series gives visibility to those shieldmaidens that existed in the period from a very realistic point of view. On the one hand, Brunhilde, one of the most famous shieldmaidens of Nordic mythology, is introduced as Aslaug’s mother. On the other hand, Lagertha and Grunnhild, the queen and King Horik’s wife, are the most famous shieldmaiden in the show, and it is proved by the existence of poetry. In that period, poetry was the only way of acknowledging how far their deeds got and how important they were, so these two warriors have a conversation about their popularity: “You are more famous, Grunnhild. The poets talk of your exploits, they tell how you killed Sweyn Forkbeard when he invaded Gotland”, to which she answers “and they say you are now an earl in your own right” (Hirst 2014, Episode 2, Season 10, 6:20). This demonstrates

the fame they had considering the fact that most poetry of the period was about male heroes, and yet they knew one another's deeds despite living in different places and despite being women.

Another positive characteristic of these shieldmaidens' portrayal in *Vikings* is that they are not overly sexualized. As Brown explains, the modern heroine's body "is not a body that exists solely to please men, it is a body designed to be functional" (1996, 56). This can be applied to the portrayal of shieldmaidens in *Vikings*, that, as Figure 4 illustrates, usually wear armour or comfortable clothes that cover their bodies in battle. Contrary to the sexualized representation of warrior women in present day television, the show breaks with this idealized portrayal of female characters and provides a forthright concept of Scandinavian shieldmaidens. What is more, the female protagonist herself is always taken into consideration in all of their meetings and war strategies and put at the same level as Ragnar or King Horik. There is every likelihood that these women were very well valued in their communities because they had manly characteristics, so again the idea of a patriarchal society in which men and masculine features rule comes to mind. Be it as it may, through the references to poetry and their bodies' representations, it can be said that the realistic depiction of these shieldmaidens serves as a form of empowerment without the need of exaggerating female sexuality.

In the show, Lagertha serves as an inspiration and she always involves other shieldmaidens in warfare. When Ragnar raids without her, only images of men sailing and fighting appear in the screen but, when Lagertha becomes an earl herself, she trains, encourages, and always brings shieldmaidens to battle. Before sailing to Paris, for example, she tells Erlendur that, if he is willing to share a boat "with a lot of women", he is invited to go (Hirst 2016, Season 4, Episode 6, 2:50). Later on, when Lagertha is the queen and Kattegat is under attack, most of the scenes shown focus on her, Astrid and Torvi, and the rest of shieldmaidens as depicted in Figure 4 below. In a society in which being a female warrior is infrequent, Lagertha gives visibility to other shieldmaidens without sticking to the gender conventions of the Viking Age. Hence, the increasing presence of female warriors in scenes helps to strengthen the image of empowered Viking women.



Fig. 4. Shieldmaidens (Hirst 2017, Season 4, Episode 19, 17:58).

The show includes warrior women mainly because they are part of the reality of Viking history. However, the trend of portraying strong female characters in modern television has also incentivised the depiction of shieldmaidens as mythological heroines. Lagertha is the main representative of Viking female warriors because she is as skilled and important as other male warriors and survives to every battle; nonetheless, the fact that there are many other shieldmaidens in the show and that they are extolled, reinforces the idea that free and brave women existed in the Viking Age.

Conclusion

Although the TV series *Vikings* focuses on the deeds of the raider Ragnar Lothbrok and his family, it can be considered that the female characters of the show play an important role as well. In addition, *Vikings* perfectly intermingles history and myth in order to provide empowered female characters that, in spite of living in an apparent patriarchal society, are frequently raised to the level of Nordic goddesses and heroic creatures like the Valkyries. It is a fact that the Scandinavian society in which the protagonists of the show live is based on the doctrine of separate spheres. However, this Dissertation has proved that Lagertha, Aslaug and other female characters in *Vikings* have the duty of bearing and nurturing children, but they can aspire to other significant positions in society as rulers and shieldmaidens. Through Lagertha and Aslaug, the series shows the importance of having offspring in the Viking Age and depicts a patriarchal idea of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ motherhood, also related to the goddesses Frigg and Freya. Notwithstanding this, there are many representations of motherhood in *Vikings* with which the audience can feel identified. As regards leadership, the fact that women could, sometimes, become rulers or make relevant decisions in their communities is

also illustrated in this TV series. Siggy and Aslaug take advantage of their sexuality to gain power and share their earldom and kingdom with their husbands while Lagertha, as the heroine, uses her bravery and skills to usurp the Earldom of Hedeby and the Kingdom of Kattegat on her own. Finally, the fact that women during this period could be trained as warriors and fight in battle beside men, is another sign of equality represented in the show. Moreover, these shieldmaidens are admired by others inside and outside the show, and they are given Valkyries' characteristics.

History and myth play a very important role regarding the portrayal of women in *Vikings*. These female characters' world is shaped with a historical basis since archaeology and the remaining literature of the period have proved that women were mostly devoted to the household, childbearing, farming and textile activities. Nonetheless, they have also confirmed that women could achieve the highest social position, as in the Osberg burial, or even use arms. On the other hand, myth has blended with history in order to empower those female characters that are out of the norm of gender roles. Women in Viking societies hardly ever got the power and respect represented in *Vikings*, but the creators of the show have used these exceptions to adapt the content of the series to modern television and audiences.

Previously published studies about *Vikings* have concentrated on the historical relevance of this show. On some occasions, they also focus on the Vikings, their lives and activities as a community, or its relation to the real story of Ragnar Lothbrok. However, this paper addresses specifically the depiction of women in the show taking into consideration the factual and fictional elements surrounding the Viking world. Therefore, this study might be relevant in future Gender and Television Studies that might address the portrayal of women in television.

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