



Life & Work

Women (and men) in Old Norse Mythology and Society



Prepared by M. Eaton & C. O. Alm

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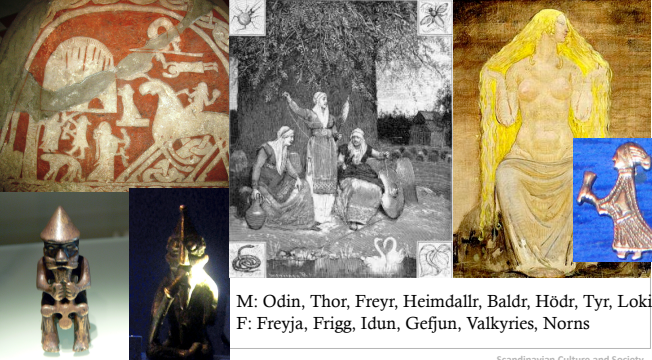
Prymskviða

- What happens in *Prymskviða*?
- How are the deities Freyja, Thor, and Loki depicted?
- What other female vs. male pre-Christian Old Norse deities are you familiar with?

2

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Male and female Deities



M: Odin, Thor, Freyr, Heimdallr, Baldr, Hödr, Tyr, Loki
 F: Freyja, Frigg, Idun, Gefjun, Valkyries, Norns

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[Steinunn, the mother of Poet-Ref, came to see him. She lectured to him for a long time and tried to convert him to paganism. Thangbrand listened to her in silence, but when she had finished he spoke at length, turning all her own arguments against her. "Did you ever hear," she asked, "how Thor challenged Christ to a duel, and Christ did not dare to accept the challenge?" "I have heard," said Thangbrand, "that Thor would be nothing but dust and ashes if God did not permit him to live." "Do you know who wrecked your ship?" she asked. "Who do you think?" asked Thangbrand. "I will tell you," she replied:

"It was Thor's giant-killing hammer
 That smashed the ocean-striding Bison;
 It was our gods who drove
 The bell-ringer's boat ashore.
 Your Christ could not save
 This buffalo of the sea from destruction;
 I do not think your God
 Kept guard over him at all."

from Borovsky (1999:8-9)

She added:

"Thor seized the great ship,
 Shook its frame

And beat its timbers
 And hurled it on the rocks;
 That ship will never
 Sail the seas again,
 For Thor's relentless thrashing
 Shmashed it into fragments."

4

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Real women and men: before & after Christianity

- Iceland converts to Christianity, 1000 AD
- Jochen's work is based on late 9th to mid-13th Century Iceland & Norway

5

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Pre-Christian marriage & inheritance

- Pre-Christian marriage
 - Generally male decision-makers
 - Engagement & marriage in 2 steps
 - Divorce was legal; women retained own property
- Instances of polygamy
- Inheritance troubles cause formalization of laws
- Men ran political bodies and represented women
- Christianity: woman's consent to marriage

6

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Icelandic leisure of life

- Gender based leisure
- Women worked more, socialized privately
- Women excluded from games and sports
- Drinking restricted to women in couples (Viking law)
- Women excluded from politics

7

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Women's work



From Speed et al (2004: 79); reconstruction

- Sexes working together at separate tasks
 - Women "inside", men "outside"
- Women in charge of household
 - Dairy work and food gathering
 - Laundry, creation of clothing
 - If husband absent; wife carried out his duties
- Grooming of high importance
 - Bathing
 - Sewing sleeves
- Burial artifacts and gender determination
 - ◆ How were the burial sites at *Skamby* vs. *Adwick-Le-Street* concluded to be male vs. female?

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Texts and images

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9

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