

Kirsten Ruffoni

Viking Age Queens

The example of Oseberg



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Introduction

The Oseberg ship burial is a Viking Age burial mound containing a double female inhumation, which is located in the Oslofjord area in Norway. Through dendrochronological analysis¹ it has been possible to determine the year in which the timbers of the grave chamber were felled, and the burial has consequently been dated to AD834. The burial was formed by pulling a ship ashore, placing it in a trench, and building a grave chamber on its deck. The aft and fore of the ship, together with the grave chamber, were then filled with a large amount of grave goods; the fore of the ship was also occupied by many sacrificed animals which, because of their position, are thought to have been killed outside the ship and then placed on it.²

The Oseberg mound was first excavated in 1903 and 1904, and since then it has been studied extensively. Many aspects of the burial have been considered by scholars, who have tried to reconstruct the events of the early 9th century in order to explain its grandness and significance.³ The mound has provided much interesting and unique archaeological material, thanks to the excellent preservation conditions which enabled wooden objects to survive underground for almost 1200 years. Probably the most important part of this burial is the wonderfully carved ship, which is 21.5 meters long and 5.1 meters wide.⁴ This ship, an early Viking Age construction, was useful in increasing our knowledge of Viking age ship building and sailing. Although it is thought by some that it was not suitable for ocean voyages, it is nonetheless very well built and highly decorated.⁵ Other important finds from the burial include decorated wagons and sledges, a wide variety of everyday objects and some woven tapestries.

When first excavated, the burial was thought to be that of a Viking Age chieftain, but it soon became apparent that it was lacking the weapons and other artefacts common in male graves, whilst it abounded in everyday objects such as kitchen utensils, which are normally associated with females. The discovery of two human skeletons instead of one also came as a surprise.⁶ Further studies proved that the burial was a double female inhumation and this led to it being labelled “unique”. There has been much speculation about who was buried in the mound and about which one of the two skeletons was the most important figure.

¹ Bonde & Christensen 1993: 575-583

² Brøgger 1917

³ Brøgger & Shetelig 1950; Ingstad 1982, 1992, 1995; Christensen & others 1992; Røthe 1994; Solli 2002.

⁴ Marstrander 1986: 164

⁵ Christensen & others 1992: 138-153

⁶ op.cit 40-41

A popular study of Oseberg has been that of focusing on the women buried in the mound in order to give them an identity. At first Snorri Sturluson's *Ynglingasaga* was used and it was proposed that the burial was that of Queen Åsa or of Queen Alvhild, who are the only two queens mentioned in the saga. Recent osteological studies conducted by Per Holck⁷ have indicated that none of these hypotheses can be considered valid as the dating and age of the skeletons doesn't fit with the supposed time in which the queens mentioned in *Ynglingasaga*⁸ would have lived. The burial occurred in AD834 and the two women were 70-80 and 40-50 years old respectively. If we consider what is said in *Ynglingasaga* Queen Åsa was about 30 years old in AD834, and she had moved back to Agder in AD821 after killing her husband King Gudrød. Queen Alvhild, first wife of Gudrød, is thought to have died in AD815, at about 25 years of age.⁹ Therefore it is very unlikely that either of these women was buried in the Oseberg mound; the women buried in AD834 were probably born in ca. AD750 and AD780, whilst Alvhild was born in ca. AD790 and Åsa in ca. AD800. Other scholars have focused on the uniqueness of the grave and claimed that only a very important woman would have received such a burial, and this woman was therefore probably a sorceress or priestess of high rank.¹⁰ The scholar Anne Stine Ingstad went as far as claiming that the Oseberg woman was possibly a representative of the goddess Freya, either a very powerful sorceress or a sort of demigoddess herself.¹¹ Critics of these theories argue that the Oseberg woman was an heiress and that she had the same status as a male chieftain and therefore received the same burial, according to the customs of the time. Other views include that of Røthe who claims that the Oseberg women were connected to a cult of giantesses or ancestral mothers¹², and that of Solli who interprets the burial as that of a sorceress who could be called on for help by the living and return to her mound when the work was done.¹³

There are many questions and mysteries about Oseberg that have not yet been answered. We still do not know for sure who was buried in the mound, what position this person held in society and why she was given such a large burial. It is also unclear whether one woman was the most important or whether the two were equally so, if they were related in some way or if they had similar functions in the community. I believe that Oseberg should be viewed within a wider context and compared to female high status burials from the Germanic Iron Age as well as to other burials from the Viking Age. Iron Age burials directly precede Viking Age ones, so that some of the particular characteristics of Oseberg might find an explanation in the earlier Germanic mortuary

⁷ Holck 2009

⁸ *Heimskringla, Ynglingasaga*

⁹ Christensen & others 1992: 267-270

¹⁰ Christensen & others 1992; Price 2002.

¹¹ Ingstad 1982, 1992, 1995

¹² Røthe 1994

¹³ Solli 2002: 229-230

practices. Through this comparison and by placing the Oseberg burial in a context wider than that of the Viking Age, I hope to come to a better understanding of its various characteristics and peculiarities, in order to come closer to a valid explanation of them.

Problemstilling

The aim of my thesis is to analyse the Oseberg burial from a wider, Germanic, perspective, in order to obtain a well documented argument regarding the much debated questions of who the deceased women were and why they were given what is commonly known as a kingly ship burial. The Germanic populations share a common origin with the Scandinavians and are therefore part of the same culture. It follows naturally that Germanic sources can be useful in the task of better understanding this early Viking Age burial.

My hypothesis is that the Oseberg burial was first and foremost secular. It is possible that one or both women also had an important religious function in their society, but I do not believe that this alone could justify the type of burial they received. Through comparative analysis with other tombs and with the help of primary documentary sources and secondary literature, I will attempt to determine the validity of this hypothesis.

Sources

I intend to make use of various primary and secondary sources throughout my thesis, in order to combine different areas of study and therefore obtain an interdisciplinary work. The primary literary sources I will consider are mainly those that focus on Iron Age Germanic societies and on Viking Age society. I will also be referring often to archaeological sources and secondary literature. As well as focusing on literature and archaeology, I will use runestones and works on history of religion and history of art.

I will be using primary runic and literary sources in order to determine the role and status of women in Viking Age society and to compare it to that of Germanic Iron Age women, as it can be deduced from the various Germanic law codes. In this way I hope to obtain a clearer picture of high status women in the Viking Age. This in turn will be useful in the understanding of what the Oseberg women represented to society. Relevant material includes Viking Age runestones from Norway and Sweden, law codes, such as those of the Lombards, Franks and Burgundians, and literary works such as the *Poetic Edda*, *Historia Langobardorum* by Paul the Deacon, *Historia Francorum* by Gregory of Tours, *Germania* by Tacitus, and *Beowulf*. I have chosen these particular sources because they are the only ones which mention women, and especially queens, extensively.

Other sources such as Bede or Isidore of Seville only mention kings and men, but never noble women, and are therefore irrelevant for my study.

As for the archaeological sources my primary interest is of course the Oseberg grave and the material found within it. I will be using the four volume 1917-1928 Oseberg publication by Brøgger, Falk and Shetelig as well as the more recent *Osebergdronningens Grav*, which summarizes the main facts and discoveries. Per Holck's work on skeletal analysis, *Skjelettene fra Gokstad- og Osebergskipet*,¹⁴ and *Levd Liv*,¹⁵ a study of the most recent DNA tests and discoveries, will also be considered in order to complete the picture of the Oseberg burial. The Oseberg tapestries and the other objects of supposed cultic significance will also be considered, as they may give clues to religious practices and cults of the pre-Christian Viking Age. Once I have outlined the main traits and peculiarities of the Oseberg burial I will proceed to compare it to a range of other burials. These will include other Viking Age ship mounds, such as Gokstad and Tune, ship mounds from other countries, such as Sutton Hoo and Ladby, Iron Age and Viking Age female high status burials from various areas of the Viking world and last but not least a selection of Germanic Iron Age female high status burials.

Relevant secondary literature will include works such as Sverre Marstrander's book on Viking Age ships, *De skjulte skipene*,¹⁶ Anne Stine Ingstad's publications regarding her theories on Oseberg,¹⁷ the theories of Brit Solli¹⁸ and Gunnhild Røthe,¹⁹ works on ship symbolism, gender and identity, and cults and religious practices. I will be using this literature to give depth to my arguments and review what others have said before me on the subject.

Theory

The theory on which I am basing my thesis is that during the Late Iron Age Germanic customs, traditions and beliefs changed only very slightly and slowly, until they were finally broken by the firm establishment of Christian religion. There is much written evidence that points to the fact that priests and bishops were constantly fighting against popular pre-Christian customs, even once the Christian religion was well established. From documents such as the letter from Pope Gregory the Great to Abbot Mellitus,²⁰ for example, we can see that although people changed the gods they believed in, they did not change their traditions, their age-old customs and their popular beliefs. An interesting passage of this letter reads:

¹⁴ Holck 2009

¹⁵ *Levd liv* 2008

¹⁶ Marstrander 1986

¹⁷ Ingstad 1982, 1992, 1995

¹⁸ Solli 2002

¹⁹ Røthe 1994

²⁰ *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, book I, ch. 30.

“Do not let them sacrifice animals to the devil, but let them slaughter animals for their own food to the praise of God, and let them give thanks to the Giver of all things for His bountiful provision. [...] It is doubtless impossible to cut out everything at once from their stubborn minds: just as the man who is attempting to climb to the highest place, rises by steps and degrees and not by leaps.”²¹

The Church had in fact great difficulty in stopping practices such as animal sacrifices, cults of divination and sorcery and many other ancient traditions. For this reason I believe it is possible to find many parallels between people in the Germanic Iron Age and people in the Viking Age, who essentially still shared the same customs and traditions, with few new elements. Religion certainly changed, first on the continent and then in Scandinavia, but during the initial phases of the conversion people probably still observed their local traditions and customs as they had done for hundreds of years, so that it is possible to compare Iron Age Germanic societies to Viking Age society even after the former were converted to Christianity.

Further elements in support of this theory are the striking similarities between Viking and Iron Age Germanic mythology, law and social structure, which indicate that both populations shared a common origin, and therefore common values and traditions which were passed down through the centuries. Archaeological finds in Scandinavia and on the continent also provide evidence of the common origin of Scandinavians and Germanics, further emphasizing the fact that these two peoples were essentially part of the same culture throughout the Iron Age and into the Viking Age and early medieval period.²²

A note on death and the afterlife

A further theoretical point which should be mentioned is the Viking Age view of death and the afterlife. In *Snorra Edda* and in many sagas and poems we find references to the afterlife of the Viking Age, although it is important to remember that most of these sources were compiled in the 13th century and are therefore not very reliable. Other sources such as the Gotland picture stones also shed light on aspects of the afterlife.²³ It seems that various beliefs coexisted or were typical of different areas at the same time. The most known Viking Age belief is that of the warriors who go to Valhalla, Odin's hall, and are served by Valkyries. This option was reserved for warriors who fell in battle. The rest of the population must therefore have had other beliefs. The Gotland picture stones represent boat journeys with a high frequency. The vast number of ship and boat burials, or of burials marked with a stone boat-shaped setting enable us to connect the boat or ship to a voyage to the otherworld. In this case the grave goods can be assumed to be the items which were needed

²¹ *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, book I, ch. 30

²² Rovagnati 2003

²³ Nylén & Lamm 1988

on a journey. Wagons seem to have served the same purpose as ships and, especially in Denmark, we often find females buried in the bodies of wagons.²⁴ In the *Poetic Edda* Brynhildr rides to Hel in the wagon she was burned in at her death.²⁵ A further belief is that of life within the mound. We find this mostly in Icelandic Sagas, but also in the Helgi poems of the *Poetic Edda*. This belief implies that the deceased continues living in the mound after his or her death, and the grave goods are a representation of the equipment which is needed for daily life. Sagas which contain scenes of mound breaking often include a fight with the deceased in the mound, who has to be killed again by decapitation.²⁶ Sometimes the belief of a journey and that of a life in the mound coexist: in the poem *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*, we find that Helgi visits his mound on certain occasions, so he journeys to the otherworld but also comes back to his mound in this world.²⁷ A well known practice of divination was that of sitting on a mound at night in order to talk to the dead who dwelled within it. This practice was still widely in use after the conversion and was constantly condemned by priests, as we see from the various Icelandic law codes. In the case of the Oseberg mound, the grave goods and the ship, wagon and sledges can be interpreted as the items needed for a journey to the otherworld, as items needed for a life after death in the mound or as a combination of the two things.

Method

The method I will be using throughout my thesis is that of comparative analysis. I will be comparing the Oseberg burial to a variety of archaeological and documentary sources, in order to build up a well informed argument and assess the validity of my initial theory. I will be focusing mainly on primary sources, although I will be integrating these with secondary studies made by various scholars. The views of scholars who have previously studied the subject will be taken together with evidence gathered from primary archaeological and literary material in order to obtain a clearer understanding of what the Oseberg burial represents.

Research questions

In order to investigate the arguments for and against my theory, I will now consider some more specific questions that will need researching and answering to obtain a valid conclusion. Much has been written about the Oseberg grave mound. Attention has been placed mostly on the ship and the grave goods and skeletons it contained. Questions such as why the mound was built

²⁴ Grieg 1928: 3-33

²⁵ *The Poetic Edda, Helreið Brynhildar*

²⁶ Soma 2007: 64-66

²⁷ *The Poetic Edda, Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*

and who it was built for have been asked by countless scholars, who have arrived at very different conclusions, or simply admitted that we cannot find a plausible answer.

My work will be divided into three parts, the first two focusing primarily on archaeology and the third on literary sources:

Part I: The Oseberg burial. What is Oseberg? How rich and unique is it? How can we define richness? How unique is the possibility that at least one of the Oseberg women might have been a sorceress? Is this reason enough for a ship mound filled with grave goods, or was it common for high status women to have special connections with the gods and ritual practices? Does the burial reflect this connection with the gods or is it simply a classic Viking Age high status burial? How important is the aspect of sorcery or cultic practice in relation to the type of burial?

First of all I will provide a description of the archaeological material of Oseberg, before engaging in the presentation of various theories regarding the meaning of the burial.

The idea that at least one of the Oseberg women was a sorceress is very interesting, and it is therefore also interesting to investigate if the possible religious aspect of her life can be reason enough to ensure her such a huge and complex burial. Perhaps the possibility that the woman was a priestess was just one of her aspects, and may not have been the most important one either. I will not attempt to prove if the sorceress hypothesis put forward by scholars such as Ingstad, Solli and Røthe, is right or wrong, but I will try to argue that even if it is the truth, it may not be the main reason for the construction of the burial as it is, and it may not be such an unique aspect either. Long funerary rituals and animal sacrifices are a common practice of the time and do not necessarily indicate a sorceress's burial, but rather the burial of a very important person, which can be a member of royalty and a holder of land and power.

Part II: archaeological comparisons. What are the similarities and differences between Late Iron Age Germanic female high status burials and Viking Age female high status burials? How do these burials compare to Oseberg? What is the difference between Oseberg and other Viking Age ship burials?

In this part of my work I wish to use archaeological sources and compare a variety of excavated female high status burials from the Germanic world and from the Viking one. By undertaking this comparative analysis I wish to investigate the richness, and therefore the uniqueness, of the Oseberg burial. I wish to see if it really is unparalleled in Europe or if it is just different from what we know, but can be explained in a simple manner when its elements are broken down into smaller units. If other smaller female burials are equally rich, for example, then Oseberg is not as unique as we may think. I will also evaluate the role and social position of women in the Viking Age, as it can be determined through runestone evidence, in order to better understand

the reasons behind the Oseberg burial. The fact that it is a ship burial might reflect the uniqueness and importance of the people buried within it or, on the other hand, it might be a fusion of Germanic Iron Age high status female burial practices with noble Viking Age burial practices, where ship mounds seem to have been common for chieftains and nobles.

Part III: the literary evidence. How can the role of women in the Viking Age be compared to the role of women in Late Iron Age Germanic tribes? What elements do the two societies have in common regarding high status women? What female traits from Germanic society are still present in the Viking Age?

Firstly, I will be looking at the role of Germanic women in society as seen through the law codes, and then I will analyse portraits of important Germanic women as they are described in literary sources and compare these to the role women occupied in Viking Age society. The women in literary sources can give an idea of the customs and traditions of Germanic society which were still present in the early Viking Age, enabling us to understand the importance of these women to the society they lived in. I will consider how Germanic women were able to rule countries and be priestesses at the same time; I will then see if this aspect can still be found in the Viking Age and can be applied to the Oseberg women. I will also look at how usual or unusual it was for a woman to receive a grand and rich burial, both in the Germanic and Viking periods.

It is also interesting to note that although the historical sources for the Germanic Iron Age were written by Christians, and although most of the women portrayed were also Christian, these women are nonetheless shown as rich and powerful, rather than pious and modest as Christian women should be. There are many documented instances throughout the Medieval period and also later of powerful Christian women, who sometimes also ruled kingdoms and who were often buried with grave goods. Therefore if Christian women from the 4th century onwards were able to occupy prominent and powerful positions in society, this probably happened in the pre-Christian period too, when the Church had not yet imposed the role of the submissive and obedient woman as the standard expected behaviour. This implies that we can compare Germanic high status women to Viking Age ones regardless of their religious beliefs.

I have now set my *problemstilling* and related research questions and have explained what sources and method I will be using and what the theoretical background for the project is. I will now proceed to analyse the sources I have chosen in order to find arguments which support, or which are against, my initial theory.

Chapter I

The Oseberg burial: archaeological finds and related theories

The Oseberg burial

Discovery and Historiography

The Oseberg burial is located in the bottom of the Slagen valley, 4 km north of the town of Tønsberg, Norway. As we have seen in the introduction, it is a ship mound and it contains a double female inhumation, together with a large variety of grave goods and animal sacrifices. The mound was originally 45 m wide and probably 6 m high.²⁸ The plasticity of the clay subsoil allowed the mound to sink to a height of 2.5 m over the years. The pressure of the clay soil, combined with the weight of the stones which filled the front part of the ship's deck, resulted in the breaking up of most of the wooden objects. This made the recovery of the archaeological material particularly difficult and time-consuming.²⁹ However, it is thanks to this clay soil, and to the wet conditions of the earth, that the ship and the wooden artefacts present in the mound have been preserved underground for almost 1200 years. The clay and water hermetically sealed the mound, so that the organic material did not decay. This unusual level of preservation is one of the factors that make the Oseberg burial so special to archaeologists.

The Oseberg burial was at first partly excavated in 1903, by the owner of the local farm, Knut Rom, who found some Viking Age woodwork and took it to Universitetets Oldsaksamling. However, the large-scale excavation only began in the spring of 1904. It was led by the archaeologist Gabriel Gustafson, with the help of Sivert Johnsen and Haakon Shetelig. The excavation lasted from the 13th of June to the 5th of November 1904. During this time the ship and its vast amount of woodwork had to be preserved from the weather and kept moist so it would not be ruined. The ship and the many artefacts it contained were in very bad condition, as most items were broken to pieces and had to be extracted a little at a time. It soon became clear that the mound had been broken into in the past, and no precious objects remained among the grave goods.

Because of the type of artefacts found in the grave and through early bone analysis it was noted that the Oseberg mound was not a chieftain's grave, but was the burial of a woman. However, the fact that there were two women buried in the grave only became apparent after an anatomical analysis of the skeletal remains.

The ship and the artefacts were taken to Oslo and in 1905 the long process of conservation and reconstruction began. It was not until 1926, a whole 21 years later, that the last objects were restored to their original state. Work on the ship proceeded much faster than work on the wooden

²⁸ Marstrander 1986: 162

²⁹ Brøgger 1917: 20-90

objects and this was ready by 1907, after only a few years. In 1912 the first artefacts, together with the Oseberg ship, were finally displayed to the public for the first time, although the ship was not fully reconstructed until it had been moved to the Viking Ship Museum in 1929.

The first publication concerning Oseberg was formed by five large volumes, four of which were published between 1917 and 1928. The archaeologists Brøgger and Shetelig, and the scholar Hjalmar Falk formed the committee which was in charge of the publication. Shetelig wrote most of the first and third volumes, the former concerning the ship and the grave and the latter focusing on the woodwork and decorations. The second volume was compiled by Sigurd Grieg and contains an accurate description of all the objects found in the grave mound. Volume five was instead written by K.E. Schreiner and Jens Holmboe and deals with the skeletal remains and botanical aspects. The author of volume four, the one concerning textiles, died in 1928 before completing the work, which has since been taken up by various other scholars³⁰ and was finally published in 2006 by Arne Emil Christensen and Margareta Nockert.³¹

This five volume work formed a comprehensive analysis of the main aspects of the Oseberg mound and documented the find and the process of excavation very clearly. Many other works have followed this initial publication. Brøgger published a series of articles in important Scandinavian journals between 1915 and 1950, in which he further researched specific aspects of Oseberg, such as the theory of Alvild and Åsa, the mound breaking and the ship. Shetelig also co-wrote the 1950 publication on the Viking ships, entitled *Vikingskipene, deres forgjengere og etterfølgere*.³²

In 1956 Sofie Krafft published her book *Pictorial weavings from the Viking Age: drawings and patterns of textiles from the Oseberg finds*³³, which was a valuable addition to the then unpublished Volume IV of the original Oseberg publication. Many others have also taken up the subject of the Oseberg textiles and tapestries, analyzing the weaving techniques and, where possible, the colours used, but also interpreting the tapestry fragments in various ways. One particularly interesting work is that of Anne Stine Ingstad, who sees in the tapestries images of the life of the deceased who, according to her, participated in, or even presided over, a cult of Freya.³⁴ Gunnhild Røthe, in her 1994 Master's thesis, also concludes that the Oseberg burial functioned as a cult site, but she argues that the woman/women buried in the mound were not part of a cult of Freya, but rather of a cult of giantesses or ancestral mothers who represented the land owned by the ruling family.³⁵

³⁰ Christensen & others 1992: 51-84

³¹ Christensen & Nockert 2006

³² Brøgger & Shetelig 1950

³³ Krafft 1956

³⁴ Ingstad 1982, 1992, 1995

³⁵ Røthe 1994

Other studies of specific aspects of Oseberg include various publications on the ship, such as, for example, Sverre Marstrander's work,³⁶ studies on the tents found among the grave goods³⁷ and studies of the fine sledges that were recovered from the mound³⁸. Most recently, a full scale reconstruction of the Oseberg ship is currently being made in Tønsberg and will be ready within the next few years.³⁹

In 1992 Christensen, Ingstad and Myhre published a single volume book which summarizes the main facts from the first Oseberg publication, in order to make the find better known to the general public. This publication is very useful, containing all the most important aspects of the Oseberg mound and describing them in a simple and concise manner.⁴⁰

More recent research papers include Per Holck's *New thoughts on the skeletons from the grave mound*⁴¹ from 2006 and a very interesting booklet from Oslo Kulturhistorisk Museum entitled *Levd liv*,⁴² which deals with the reopening of Gokstad and Oseberg mounds in 2007 and the latest skeletal research and DNA analysis.

Finally, much time has been spent throughout the 20th century in writing about the identity of the Oseberg women, as we have seen in the introduction. However, despite the new dating evidence given by Per Holck in 2009, popular belief still has it that Queen Åsa is the mound dweller of Oseberg.⁴³

The mound: positioning and building

The excavation of the mound provides some very useful information regarding the sequence in which the burial ritual was performed, thus enabling us to better analyze and understand the artefacts found within it. Scholars who have analyzed the macrofossils from the earth of the mound discovered the remains of spring flowers beneath the ship. This implies that the trench in which the ship was placed was dug out in springtime. The discovery of apples in the fore of the ship and in the grave chamber indicates that the mound was not closed until autumn. The different colouring of the soil beneath the mound from that of the soil which covered the ship also supports this interpretation. The mound was therefore built in two phases: one half in the springtime, before the burial took place, and one half in the autumn, when the deceased had been placed in the grave with their goods and the animals had been sacrificed.

³⁶ Marstrander 1986

³⁷ Zehmke 1993

³⁸ Huth and Løchen 2007

³⁹ *Vikingveien i vestfold*, 2010: 17

⁴⁰ Christensen & others 1992

⁴¹ Holck 2006

⁴² *Levd liv*, 2008

⁴³ Christensen & others 1992: 32-41

The burial is located in the flat centre of a low valley overlooking the sea. Because of the higher sea level in the Viking Age, the mound was probably placed about 800 to 1000 m from the shore, although it now lies further inland. The ground on which it was constructed is now arable land, but in the Viking Age it was wet and marshy ground, unsuitable for growing crops.⁴⁴ A small stream ran through this flat land and into the sea, and it is next to this stream that the mound was placed. It is interesting to note that on the crest of the hills around the mound many other grave mounds are found, which are probably older than the Oseberg mound. The Oseberg mound was placed in a completely different landscape from the other surrounding mounds, although we cannot be sure of the reason for this. By applying landscape analysis we can say that the Oseberg mound was placed in the centre of the landscape and looked out onto the surrounding land and onto the sea. It was only visible from afar when viewed from the sea. In contrast, the other nearby mounds could be seen from afar in all directions and from them one could see a much larger landscape area. The choice of the position of the mound was very probably not casual, but the reasons for this choice remain unclear and can only be guessed.⁴⁵

Once the positioning of the mound had been established, and trench dug in the ground, the ship was pulled up from the sea and placed in the designated area. During the excavations, when the ship was removed, the tree trunks which had been used to roll the ship along the ground were found still lying under it.⁴⁶ On the deck of the ship, behind the mast, a grave chamber was then erected. The shape of the grave chamber resembled that of a tent, although it was entirely built of wood.⁴⁷ After the grave chamber had been prepared it was filled with the grave goods that the deceased women would need for their journey to the otherworld, and also with goods of symbolic function. The bodies of the deceased were probably originally placed on two beds. However, because of later mound breaking, the bones of the two women, together with many bed fragments, were found strewn across the chamber and above the front part of the deck.⁴⁸ Many items which were originally in the grave chamber were found above the deck of the ship, in the trench which had been dug by the mound breakers. It is possible to distinguish these items from those which originally lay in the deck because the trench was dug at a level above that of the deck itself.⁴⁹

The first half of the mound was probably built to cover the grave chamber, either before or after the deceased and their grave goods had been placed inside it. The front part of the deck was at this stage not covered by earth and became the area in which rituals were performed and in which

⁴⁴ Marstrander 1986: 85

⁴⁵ Gansum, Jerpåsen & Keller 1997

⁴⁶ Marstrander 1986: 93

⁴⁷ *ibid*

⁴⁸ Brøgger 1917: 26

⁴⁹ *op.cit* plate n.XXVII, drawn by Gustafson

other grave goods, sacrificed animals and necessary ship's equipment were also placed. The sacrificed animals included 15 horses, 4 dogs and 2 cows. In addition, 4 sledges and a wagon were also found. Once all the rituals and sacrifices had taken place the ship was made ready to sail, or almost. Some of the oars were laid out, but others were stacked on the deck, not all of them finished. A very small anchor, weighing only 9,8 kg was also discovered, together with remains of rope and material, possibly from the sail.⁵⁰ The ship was found securely fastened to a large boulder in the ground by a strong and thick rope. Once the ship was ready, the front of the deck was covered in stones, making a sort of preliminary mound and crushing part of the ship with their weight. Then, finally, the rest of the mound was built and the ship covered for 1200 years. As mentioned above, there is evidence for mound breaking, which according to the latest research occurred shortly after AD953.⁵¹

Now that the sequence of the burial has been established, it is possible to look more closely at the various items found inside the mound. I will start with the ship, which is the largest and most famous item, and the basis for the assumed richness of the burial.

The ship

We have already noted the measurements of the ship of 21.5 by 5 metres, but we have not yet seen what kind of ship it is. The ship is built of oak and has a fixed pinewood deck which may be a later addition. It has 15 pairs of oars, which indicates it would be manned by 30 men or warriors. We know that the larger and later Viking war vessels, or longships, could be manned by 70-80 warriors, and were therefore much larger than the Oseberg ship.⁵² There are various interpretations regarding the use of the Oseberg ship in the Viking Age. Some scholars, such as Anne Stine Ingstad, argue that the vessel was exclusively ceremonial, mainly based on the fact that it was extensively decorated.⁵³ Others, such as Shetelig already in 1917, believe that the ship was only used for short coastal journeys, and that it could not resist an ocean voyage.⁵⁴ Marstrander instead argues that the Oseberg ship was a small royal vessel called *karfi* according to saga evidence. He claims the ship was used for long voyages and takes the cracks in the thin mast as proof of this. Marstrander also argues that the ship was not built as well as other later Viking ships because it is an earlier example, a starting point from which to correct technical problems on later ships.⁵⁵ Bill claims that the small size of the Oseberg ship compared to 10th and 11th century warships doesn't mean it could not be used in combat. He argues that in the 9th century a small fleet

⁵⁰ Christensen & others 1992: 87

⁵¹ Bill & Daly, in preparation.

⁵² Brøgger 1950: 173-174

⁵³ Ingstad 1995: 144

⁵⁴ Brøgger 1917: 341

⁵⁵ Marstrander 1986: 161

of 5 ships the size of Oseberg could have carried 200 men, possibly enough to form an army at the time.⁵⁶ Bill also reminds us that we do not know how many risks a Viking Age sailor was prepared to take with his ship, so we cannot simply claim that the Oseberg ship was only used in calm waters or as a ceremonial vessel based on our modern perception of risk.⁵⁷ Dendrochronological dating of the ship has indicated that it was constructed in ca. 820, and then buried in 834. This rules out the theory put forward by some scholars by which the ship would have been old and out of use at the time of burial.⁵⁸

One of the first elements to be noted when observing the ship is its decoration. The stem and stern of the ship, together with some associated timbers, are covered in carvings of animal art style. Based on experimental archaeology, it has been argued that it took about a year to complete the carvings⁵⁹. As we have seen, Ingstad takes the carvings as an indication of cultic use, but she does not relate them specifically to a cult like she does for those on the wagon and sledges. Carvings are also found on other ships and boats, such as on the Nydam and Kvalsund boats.⁶⁰ There is also evidence that the Gokstad ship was decorated, although this was in the form of painting rather than carving. The use of carving or painting on a number of vessels could indicate that it was a common practice in the Viking Age to decorate a high-status vessel, and not necessarily that the vessel was used for ceremonial purposes.



Figure 2: the Oseberg ship

⁵⁶ Bill 2010: 35-39

⁵⁷ op.cit 31

⁵⁸ Brøgger 1917: 341

⁵⁹ Bill 2010: 34

⁶⁰ ibid

The Oseberg ship, like the other Viking Age ships, was definitely a high-status vessel and when considering the time it took to prepare and put together all its components, it is possible to claim that a vast amount of wealth was needed to pay for its construction. Only someone of very high rank could have owned such a vessel.

The human remains

Within the Oseberg mound two female skeletons have been discovered. One is almost complete, whereas the other is missing many parts. Through bone analysis it seems that the older woman, of which we have the most complete skeleton, was probably 70 to 80 years old at the time of burial, whilst the younger was about 40 to 50.⁶¹ The scholar Per Holck has analyzed the skeletons in great detail and from his study we learn, for example, that the older woman suffered from osteoporosis and breast or lung cancer as well as having a bent back and possibly hirsutism.⁶² She died of cancer as well as old age, as her tumour was in a terminal stage. The younger woman also died of illness, possibly of a brain infection, a tumour or thrombosis.⁶³ According to Holck the hypothesis by which the younger woman was a sacrifice can be ruled out because the broken collar bone shows signs of at least a few weeks of healing and the head injury happened after her death; the skull was probably crushed by one of the grave robbers during the mound breaking.⁶⁴

From ¹⁴C dating it seems that the two women died at about the same time and isotope analysis show that they probably also followed the same diet, indicating they were both of the same or similar rank.⁶⁵ DNA testing was carried out after the reopening of the mound in 2007 and a sample of DNA was collected from the younger woman's skeleton. It was not possible to recover any DNA for the older woman. The DNA of the younger woman was found to be of subtype U7, a type not common in Europe but found mostly around the Black Sea area, although this result is not 100% reliable.⁶⁶

Finally, the skeletons were discovered lying strewn across the grave chamber and in the trench above the front part of the deck, after the bodies had been disturbed by grave robbers or purposely destroyed by a ritual mound breaking, as we shall see later. Some scholars⁶⁷ argue that the missing bones from the younger woman were removed by grave robbers together with the jewellery they were ornamented with. It is also possible, in my opinion, that the younger woman died a while before the older and was at first buried in another location. As often happens during

⁶¹ Holck 2009: 45

⁶² op.cit 58-60

⁶³ op.cit 62

⁶⁴ op.cit 62-65

⁶⁵ op.cit 48; *Levd Liv* 2008: 16

⁶⁶ *Levd liv* 2008: 14

⁶⁷ Brøgger 1917: 26

translatio, when the bones of an individual are moved from one tomb to another, some of the bones may have been lost or broken before the corpse could be placed in the new grave.

The grave goods

A vast variety of grave goods was discovered in the Oseberg burial, enough to make the first excavators describe the back of the deck as a fully furnished kitchen.⁶⁸ The chamber was also prepared with everything the two women would need on their journey and life in the otherworld. Among the many kitchen utensils we find several wooden buckets. Two buckets were also found in the grave chamber and present brass decorations. One of these buckets contained a ladle and some wild apples which had also been preserved in the mound. The other decorated bucket presents two human figures in a lotus position. It is of Celtic origin and most likely comes from Ireland.⁶⁹ Other kitchen utensils include four wooden trays, two whole and two fragmentary, two large cauldrons with chains and an iron tripod to put over the fire, three barrels for storage of food and liquid, a frying pan, a set of variously sized troughs for flour and bread production, five wooden ladles, two bowls, two working axes and a knife, a small grinding stone to make flour and a stool.

As well as kitchen utensils, the women were also accompanied by other objects which had been placed in the grave chamber and fore of the ship. Among these are a set of beds: the three which had been placed on the fore of the ship were still whole at the time of excavation, whilst those which had been placed in the grave chamber lay in fragments. The largest bed measured 2.2 m by 1.90 m and its posts were carved and painted in the form of animal heads. Fragments of textiles and feathers found in the chamber and in the mound breakers' trench indicate the chamber beds were covered by pillows and quilts.⁷⁰ Personal objects also followed the women in the grave chamber, and of these we note three bone combs and fragments of a fourth, some glass beads, two pairs of shoes and fragments of shoe soles. Weaving looms, spindle whorls, wooden boxes and various implements used in textile production were also present, as well as two iron lamps.⁷¹ Some of these items were found in an unbroken wooden chest.⁷² Also in the grave chamber were the remains of cannabis seeds, which were commonly used as painkillers.

Farming was also represented in the form of working tools. Some of these include a small sledge, a selection of wooden shovels and other equipment for tilling the earth and a wooden drill.⁷³

Some of the objects found in the grave chamber have been interpreted as not being of practical use, but rather as having cultic significance. Of these the most important are probably the

⁶⁸ Marstrander 1986: 161

⁶⁹ Grieg 1928: 172

⁷⁰ Brøgger 1917: 27

⁷¹ Grieg 1928: 135-172

⁷² op.cit 173-211

⁷³ op.cit 212-232

five animal headposts and the iron rattles that are thought to go with them. The headposts are highly decorated with elaborate woodcarvings and they were found together with handles that could be used to carry them or to attach them to larger constructions. We know that the iron rattles are connected to these posts because one was found attached by a rope to the mouth of one of the wooden animal heads.⁷⁴ These posts and rattles were probably carried in processions and it is likely that their function was to ward off evil spirits. According to Anne Stine Ingstad the rattles and animal headposts are clearly related to the cult of Freya.⁷⁵ Rattles are however a common feature of Viking Age burials and more than 230 examples have been found so far, so they are not necessarily connected to the cult of a specific god.

Another interesting item is the wooden staff found in the unbroken chest in the grave chamber. This staff had originally been catalogued as being of “unknown use”,⁷⁶ but various scholars have suggested it is either a sorceress’s staff or a symbol of royal power.⁷⁷ The term for sorceress in Old Norse is *völva*, which means “bearer of the staff”, the staff being *völfr*, and therefore it is thought that this staff, which is hollow and divided into five equal parts by carvings, is a cultic object.⁷⁸ An account in *Morkinskinna* mentions a *reyrsprote*, a “staff of the realm”, which is given to king Harald Sigurdsson, who by accepting it accepts to rule half of Norway.⁷⁹ Professor Magnus Olsen maintains that the term *reyrsprote* can be traced back to meaning reed, and so the reed was once the symbol of kingship and power.⁸⁰ Ingstad claims that the reed was also a symbol of fertility, and therefore the staff found in the Oseberg burial must be a fertility symbol. In my opinion it is more likely to represent royal power, just as the “sceptre” from Sutton Hoo ship burial is thought to symbolize.⁸¹ An alternative interpretation is that of the scholar Wessberg, which claims the staff is actually a horn, as it has a distinct “mouth piece” carved at one end. A reconstruction of the staff has proven that it actually does work as a horn.⁸²

Further finds include a wooden box shaped chair which is similar to many other known kings’ and bishops’ chairs and we find medieval parallels to it in many Scandinavian churches. The chair is a symbol of highest status. A wooden saddle and other fragmentary riding equipment were also originally in the grave chamber, whilst two tents and various fragments from the ship’s rigging and sail had been laid on the deck. Finally, a selection of wooden fragments of unknown

⁷⁴ Grieg 1928: 65-66

⁷⁵ Ingstad 1995: 144

⁷⁶ Grieg 1928: 270

⁷⁷ Ingstad 1992: 251-252; Olsen 1913

⁷⁸ Ingstad 1995: 142

⁷⁹ *Morkinskinna*, translated by Andersson and Gade 2000

⁸⁰ Ingstad 1995: 142

⁸¹ Bruce-Mitford 1974: 6-10

⁸² Wessberg 1996: 20-28

provenance indicate that the ship contained yet more grave goods which unfortunately have not survived.⁸³

The wagon and sledges

Among the grave goods were also a wagon and 3 large sledges which are very interesting. The wagon is a very old Iron Age type, of which we have parallels in Denmark and on the continent. It has been dated to the 8th century. What mostly distinguishes this wagon is its decoration. All four sides of the wagon are richly ornamented with legendary scenes. At the back of the wagon nine cat-like figures holding a paw in front of an eye are represented. The legendary scenes are hard to identify, but one is possibly a representation of Gunnar in the snake pit, as told in *Atlakviða* in the *Poetic Edda*.⁸⁴ Male heads and snakes are frequently represented among the carved scenes and these depictions are thought to be protective symbols.⁸⁵ Some scholars, such as Ingstad, argue that the wagon was only used for ceremonies and processions, as it is so vastly decorated. I believe that the wood carvings indicate that the wagon was the means of transport of a high status person, which could be used both for practical and ceremonial functions, as the decorations do not compromise the functionality of the vehicle.



Figure 3: the Oseberg wagon

Three of the four sledges are also entirely decorated in carvings, and one of them has extensive signs of wear, indicating it had been in use for a long time. Because of their exaggerated decorations, the three carved sledges are also thought by some to have had a ceremonial function, although once again I believe they were simply the marvellous possessions of a rich and noble person. Only one other such Norwegian Viking Age sledge has been found so far, and that is the Gokstad sledge, which is a working sledge.⁸⁶

⁸³ Grieg 1928: 233-250

⁸⁴ *The Poetic Edda, Atlakviða*, translated by Larrington 1996.

⁸⁵ Grieg 1928: 3-33; Shetelig 1920: 5-10

⁸⁶ Grieg 1928: 55

The tapestries

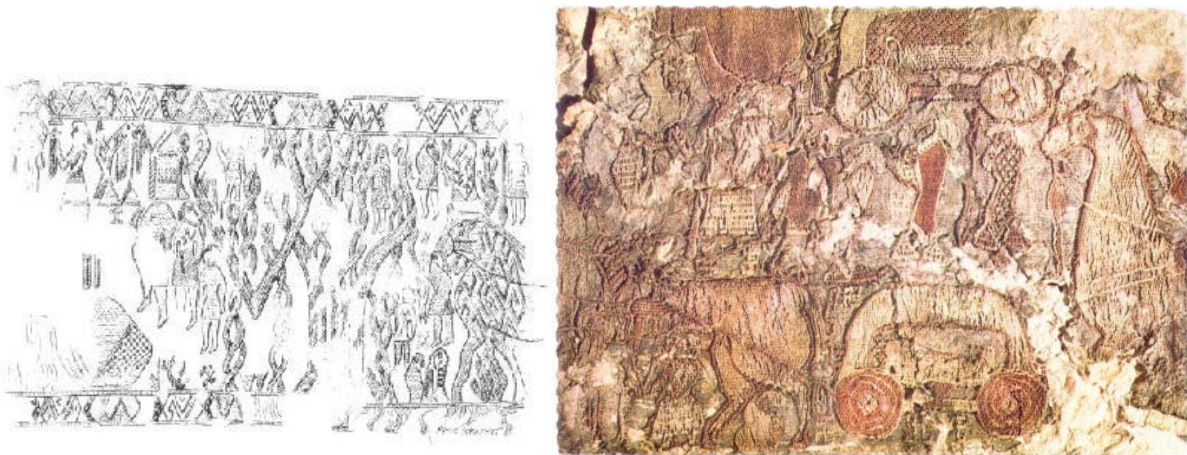
The tapestry fragments which were found inside the grave chamber of the Oseberg mound have received much attention by scholars because of their rarity and their intriguing representations. The fragments are full of symbolism which is hard for us to comprehend, but which must have been very clear to a Viking Age viewer. Some of the fragments, for example, have been interpreted as representing legendary battle scenes: one in particular is thought to be the Bråvalla battle which took place in the 500s between the Svear and the Danes.⁸⁷ A further pair of fragments which were found folded together on the floor boards of the burial chamber form part of the picture of a procession and possibly of a religious ceremony.⁸⁸ It is these fragments which are of most relevance here. On the first fragment we find an oversized man riding a white horse, whilst four birds, possibly hawks or falcons, fly above, in front of, and behind the horse. Falcons and eagles are considered to be symbols of royalty and therefore this first figure has been interpreted as being a king. Below the king is a depiction of a patterned horse pulling a carriage in which two figures, probably women, are seated. A black bird flies over the carriage, possibly a raven. Among these main figures there are many swastika symbols and also the recurring figure of a small woman bearing a lamp. At the edge of the fragment is another oversized figure, a man with a sword and some objects hanging from his arms. Further people are represented as being on foot and carrying spears. The front part of a further horse connects this first fragment to the second one, on which we find the rest of the animal pulling a second carriage. This third horse is red. The carriage pulled by this horse is covered over by some decorated textiles, possibly a woven tapestry. Below this is a further horse and carriage, also covered over by a tapestry or decorated textile. A third horse wearing a harness is depicted at the end of the fragment, suggesting that it also pulled a carriage. Two black birds are woven above this last horse. Among the horses and carriages we find further men with spears and swastika symbols. For each of the covered carriages a figure holding a staff is present. In one case it is possible to see this figure holding the reins of one of the horses, which indicates that it represents the driver of the carriage. As the driver is walking along with the horses, it seems that no one was riding in the concealed carriages, which may therefore have contained images of deities.

These two fragments just described are the main ones on which Anne Stine Ingstad bases her theory by which at least one of the Oseberg women was a powerful priestess, a sorceress or a demigoddess who presided over an important cult of Freya and may have been considered as the goddesses' representative on earth. However, some further smaller fragments were possibly also originally part of the same tapestry. On one of these fragments we find a sacrificial scene, where the

⁸⁷ Ingstad 1992: 244-245

⁸⁸ Ingstad 1995: 140

bodies of male figures are hanging among some trees, which are depicted with entwined trunks. A woman holding a sword by the blade and another one with her hands lifted as if in prayer occupy the top left part of the fragment. On the far right is the front part of a harnessed patterned horse. The pattern is very similar to that of the horse in the first fragment.⁸⁹ Another fragment shows a figure with a bird's head together with a variety of small symbols, a horse and rider and what is possibly a longhouse.⁹⁰ Finally, another piece of tapestry depicts the side of a building, either a longhouse or a temple, with two figures holding spears standing beside it. Some further spears and symbols are weaved behind the two figures.⁹¹



Figures 4,5: tapestry drawing and fragment

The animal sacrifices

A selection of sacrificed animals was discovered on the front part of the ship's deck. As we have seen, the animals included 15 horses, 4 dogs and 2 cows. One of the cows was however found in the aft of the ship, and not in the fore. All the horses had been decapitated and their heads laid in a pile together, whilst the bodies were placed in different areas: four outside the ship, three on the left side of the fore and one on the right.⁹² One of the cows was found at the back of the deck, where the kitchen utensils were, whereas the head of the other had been placed on a large bed at the front of the deck, whilst its body was found outside the ship.⁹³

Analysis of the plant remains found in the animals indicates that they had probably been grazing close to the mound before being killed.⁹⁴ The dogs were probably hunting hounds and some iron chains thought to be their leads were found close to them.⁹⁵ All the animals were sacrificed so that they could follow the two women in the afterlife, where they might still be needed.

⁸⁹ Ingstad 1992: 241

⁹⁰ op.cit 245

⁹¹ op.cit 242-243

⁹² Brøgger 1917: 82

⁹³ op.cit 64-66

⁹⁴ op.cit 48

⁹⁵ Grieg 1928: 233-250

Evaluation of the richness of the Oseberg burial

Because of the large quantities of well preserved wooden objects, the Oseberg mound has often been presented as the richest and most varied European burial. In the preface to *Osebergdronningens grav* the authors go as far as claiming that we must look to royal graves in Egypt in order to find burials with such rich and varied objects.⁹⁶ The objects found in the grave are certainly many and of a wide variety, but are they objects that we would associate with richness? Because of mound breaking which occurred about 120-150 years after its construction, the burial is lacking gold, jewellery and other expensive items, so we cannot be sure of its original richness. The material found within the mound certainly represents richness from an archaeologist's point of view, because it is a very valuable addition to our knowledge of the past, but it does not necessarily represent richness in the common sense of monetary value. We know that the ship took a very long time to construct in all its parts and was therefore a very expensive item in itself⁹⁷, but when compared for example with the rich gold finds from the Sutton Hoo ship burial, can we say that Oseberg is richer? On the basis of the recovered material it is not possible to determine the original richness of the burial and therefore it cannot be claimed that it is the richest find of Europe. When evaluating the richness Oseberg it is important not only to ask if it is rich or not, but also what kind of richness it represents and how we should understand this. Many furnished Viking Age graves have not yielded any gold items, so we can assume that gold was not a common object to be found among grave goods, not even in high-status burials.⁹⁸ It seems that weapons, riding equipment, gaming pieces and useful utensils were considered more important as grave goods than precious metals. We must take into account that the burial was furnished with a wagon and three sledges which were made in such a way to indicate they went beyond practical use. Their intricate decorations, which cover these items almost entirely, probably required much skill and a long time to complete, so they are in themselves expensive items which symbolize high status. Jewellery in the form of brooches, neckrings, armrings and finger rings was possibly present in the mound, but if we consider the ship, wagon and sledges as objects of richness, the jewels would have formed only a small part of the total wealth of the grave. These considerations make a direct comparison between Oseberg and other rich graves, such as the above mentioned Sutton Hoo ship mound, impossible because of the different kind of richness which they represent. It is hard to claim which European burial is the richest, but we can certainly say that Oseberg was very rich and its richness was, to a great extent, in the form of expensive wooden items rather than gold and silver ones which may or may not have been present.

⁹⁶ Christensen & others 1992: 7

⁹⁷ Bill 2010: 34

⁹⁸ Brøgger 1945: 1-44

Oseberg is considered unique because it is the only certain female ship burial discovered so far, although it has been suggested that the now lost ship mound of Borre also contained a female as well as a male individual. This was claimed on the basis of the find of a metal ornament for a knife sheath of Slavic stile.⁹⁹ The supposed uniqueness of the burial is also given by the vast quantity of grave goods it contained, which we know about because they have miraculously been preserved in the mound. However, other grave mounds probably also contained such grave goods, but they have not survived long enough for us to find them and therefore many people assume that they were not as rich and varied as Oseberg, although this cannot be proven.

The cultic significance of Oseberg: various theories

So far we have seen in detail what the Oseberg burial is and what was found within it. I will now look more closely at a selection of interpretations of the burial. When talking about Oseberg, the main question asked is usually why the mound was built and for whom. If it had been a chieftain lying inside the grave chamber, we would have simply concluded that this was a kingly burial, but seeing as the mound contained two females, a variety of theories which try to explain the reasons for its construction have emerged. I will be looking at the theories of Anne Stine Ingstad, Brit Solli and Gunnhild Røthe, three scholars who have attributed a cultic significance to Oseberg.

Anne Stine Ingstad: the cult of Freya

The scholar Anne Stine Ingstad has interpreted the Oseberg burial as the grave of a priestess of Freya, or even of a representative of the goddess. Ingstad bases her theory on the assumption that the Oseberg burial is unique and unparalleled, and that no other queen has ever received such a burial. Therefore, argues Ingstad, the Oseberg burial is not a simple queen's tomb, but must be something much more important: the burial of a demigoddess or at least of a powerful sorceress.¹⁰⁰

The theory of Oseberg being the centre of a cult of Freya is based primarily on the interpretation of the tapestry fragments found in the mound. This reading of the tapestries is then supported by the cultic use or symbolism of a variety of other objects found in the grave.

The tapestry fragments are, according to Ingstad, like a book. We cannot easily understand this book because we are not used to reading images, but rather words. Ingstad has interpreted the various images in a way that they recall some of the items present in the Oseberg burial, as well as recalling the two buried women themselves. First of all, Ingstad interprets the tapestry as representing a real-life scene which the weavers were familiar with. The scholar Bjørn Hougen has argued that tapestry weaving was a high status occupation, suitable to noble ladies,¹⁰¹ and therefore

⁹⁹ Myhre & Gansum 2003

¹⁰⁰ Ingstad 1995: 139

¹⁰¹ Hougen 1940

Ingstad claims it is possible that the tapestry fragments were made by the deceased women. Regarding this argument, Per Holck, during his analysis of the skeletal remains, commented on the presence of marks on the teeth of the younger individual, which are thought to be the consequence of the use of a metal toothpick. It is, however, also possible that the marks come from a sewing needle, a metal object which is very similar to a toothpick, and which women to this day often keep in their mouth during sewing and embroidery.¹⁰² According to Ingstad, the deceased women of the Oseberg burial wove the tapestry and depicted an aspect of their own life on it.

The fragments represent a cult of the goddess Freya and more specifically a *dísa*-cult, or religious ceremony. On fragment one the first figure, the oversized rider, is the king. The two women in the wagon are priestesses or sorceresses and it is possible to discern this because of the black bird, probably a raven, flying above them. The raven is here interpreted as a symbol of wisdom which in turn indicates that one or both of the women in the wagon were very wise or had supernatural powers.¹⁰³ The swastika symbols are seen as indicating peace and good fortune, making this a cult of the good.¹⁰⁴ The lady with the lamp is a symbol which indicates that who comes behind her is of royal descent. The lamp held by this figure is compared to the two iron lamps found in the grave chamber. The oversized man with a sword at the edge of the fragment is a shaman and these figures together “seem to represent the supreme good”.¹⁰⁵ The spears which the many walking figures are holding are considered to be symbols of fertility here because they are being used as staffs. On the second fragment the first covered carriage contains the image of a powerful fertility god, possibly Njord, Frey or Freya. The most probable candidate is Freya because the horse that pulls the carriage is red and braided, which symbolically implies love, passion, binding of witchcraft and binding of marriage, which are attributes of this goddess. The second wagon is surrounded by swastika symbols and is therefore thought to contain the image of the god Thor, whilst the third, missing wagon, of which only the horse remains, contains an image of Odin because there are two black birds, his ravens, flying above the horse. In the third fragment, the one with the human sacrifices, the two women are the ones who sat in the carriage in the first fragment and they are the ones to preside the cult. The horse in this fragment is the same as the one in the first. As all the sacrifices are male, they must have been given to a female deity in representation of the sacred death-marriage. Therefore this cult is dedicated to Freya. In the final two considered fragments we find a further representation of Freya as the figure with a bird’s head and the depiction of a temple. According to *Snorra Edda* Freya possessed a falcon cloak with which she

¹⁰² Holck 2009: 40

¹⁰³ Ingstad 1995: 141

¹⁰⁴ Cooper 1986: 67-69

¹⁰⁵ Ingstad 1995: 141

would turn into a bird.¹⁰⁶ Another temple and some symbols and human figures in the last fragment are further indications of a fertility cult.¹⁰⁷

Ingstad not only interprets the tapestry fragments as representing a real life cult of Freya, but she also associated some of the images to items found in the Oseberg mound. Among these are the staff, which she claims resembles the staffs carried by the drivers of the covered carriages, the two iron lamps which are what the small lady carries, the wagon, which “appears to be of the same type as those depicted on the tapestries”¹⁰⁸ and some of the textile fragments, which have patterns similar to those on the textiles which cover the carriages in the tapestry. As we have seen above, Ingstad also interprets many other objects in the Oseberg mound as symbols of fertility. These further objects do not have direct parallels in the tapestry fragments, but they nonetheless strengthen the image of the burial as belonging to more than a queen and as having a strong cultic significance, especially towards a cult of fertility. Among the symbols of fertility are all the objects contained in the unbroken chest which was found in the grave chamber, which include a comb, the above mentioned iron lamps and staff, spindle whorls, spinning tools and other implements for textile production. According to Ingstad these objects do not simply represent the woman’s occupation of textile production, but are symbols of a fertility cult. She interprets the comb as being used to comb sacred horses, which were a fertility symbol. The items for textile production, and possibly more specifically for linen production, are considered by her to be symbols of marriage and fertility, implying the “holy wedding”¹⁰⁹. The iron lamps, as well as being interpreted as the same ones which are depicted in the tapestry fragments, are taken to symbolize life and death.

The sacrificed horses are considered by Ingstad to be holy animals rather than horses for practical use, based on the fact that no horse equipment was found in the burial.¹¹⁰ Other scholars have instead argued that the sacrificed horses were symbolically those which would pull the wagon and the three decorated sledges, although there were more horses than necessary for this in the mound.

As for the wagon, sledges and ship, Ingstad argues that the cat-like figures carved on the wagon represent Freya’s cats and that the wagon is the same as those depicted on the tapestries, which in turn are a representation of a ceremonial cult of Freya.¹¹¹ The sledges and the ship are also highly decorated and must therefore also have a ceremonial function. Ingstad has argued that the

¹⁰⁶ *Snorra Edda*, translated by Byock 2005.

¹⁰⁷ Ingstad 1995: 144

¹⁰⁸ *ibid*

¹⁰⁹ Ingstad 1992: 251-252

¹¹⁰ *op.cit* 238

¹¹¹ *op.cit* 248-249

ship was sailed around the calm waters of the Oslofjord in order to spread fertility to the land.¹¹² She claims that “the luxurious ornamentation suggests that it may have been used for cultic service”.¹¹³ Other scholars have pointed out that the Oseberg ship is not the only decorated vessel of the period and that it is not possible to claim that it is an object of cult by the wood carvings alone, which, also, Ingstad does not analyze in detail.¹¹⁴ Ingstad also suggests a possible interpretation for the ship being tied to a large boulder in the burial:

“The ship was fastened to a large stone, although there was an iron anchor in the burial. But this cannot have been sufficiently strong. It is possible that people feared her, and guarded themselves against her returning from the dead to haunt them. I think it is more likely that she was considered of such great importance because of her diverse activities that they wished to keep her at any price and that she therefore must stay in her barrow with all her property and all she needed to be able to continue her work for peace and fertility in the valley”.¹¹⁵

Ingstad’s main question is “was this woman more than just a queen, and why was she accorded so spectacular a burial?”¹¹⁶ and her answer is that at least one of the women buried in the Oseberg mound was more than just a queen. She was a powerful sorceress or even “Freya’s representative and incarnation”¹¹⁷ and therefore the centre of the cult depicted in the tapestries and represented by various items in the burial. The burial was so rich and grand because it contained a demigoddess, not because it contained a queen.

Brit Solli: the völv

Not everyone agrees with Anne Stine Ingstad’s theory by which one of the Oseberg women was Freya’s incarnation on Earth. The scholar Brit Solli, for example, argues that rather than being a representative of Freya, one of the Oseberg women was a *völv*, a sorceress or prophetess.¹¹⁸ In this way she was more connected to the humans of the area than to the gods, as it was the humans who called for her help and for which she acted. Ingstad maintains that the Oseberg ship was fastened to a boulder so that the Oseberg women would remain in their mound and ensure prosperity and fertility to the land even after their death. Solli’s interpretation is that the ship was fastened to the boulder so that the *völv* would be sure of finding her way back to the mound after she had been summoned and her spirit had left her body to perform some magic. In her opinion people would sit on the mound and summon the *völv* when necessary. If the *völv* was not able to return to her mound it would be a catastrophe because her powers would be lost forever, so it was important that she found her way back to her dwelling after being summoned away. This argument is based on how a shaman’s power functioned in the Viking Age: a shaman would lie as if dead

¹¹² Ingstad 1992: 250

¹¹³ Ingstad 1995: 144

¹¹⁴ Bill 2010: 34

¹¹⁵ Ingstad 1995:145

¹¹⁶ op.cit 139

¹¹⁷ op.cit 146

¹¹⁸ Solli 2002: 229

whist his soul, *önd* in Old Norse, travelled away from his body. If the soul could not find the body again at the end of the journey, the shaman would die.¹¹⁹ Solli also maintains that one of the Oseberg women was probably of very high rank and might also have been a queen as well as a *völva*. This woman must have been a ritual performer of high rank, who probably led the sacrificial feasts known as *blót*, and her burial was to be her last ritual drama.¹²⁰ Finally, Solli mentions the accounts of the Arab travellers Ibn Fadland and Ibn Rustah, who both took part in *Rus* funerals in which a female was sacrificed together with the deceased leader, one by being killed in the grave chamber of a ship and the other by being shut alive in the burial mound.¹²¹ The question of whether one of the two Oseberg women is also a sacrifice is, however, left open and at this point it is useful to recall the observations made by Per Holck, who maintains that both women died of natural causes and none of the two skeletons show evidence of a violent death, the bone fractures present all being either partly or fully healed before death, or being *post mortem*.¹²²

Gunnhild Røthe: the cult of giantesses

Another alternative theory regarding the cultic aspect of Oseberg is that of Gunnhild Røthe. Røthe partly agrees with the theory of Anne Stine Ingstad and maintains that the Oseberg burial is of better quality and has more grave goods than other chieftains' burials. Therefore, Røthe claims that one of the Oseberg women must have had an important cultic function in society, as well as being of high status, and that her grave became a cult site after her death.¹²³ She compares Oseberg to the description of the burial on the Volga river which was recorded by the Arab traveller Ibn Fadlan. Her conclusion is that Oseberg contains more and better grave goods than the Volga burial, so it must, therefore, be the burial of a person who is of higher status than a chieftain. She also claims that the Oseberg burial contains more sacrificed animals than any other burial, especially many horses, and this is also an indication of something that goes beyond a secular high-status burial. In her view, the Oseberg mound is connected to the pre-Christian cult of ancestors. As she claims:

Den gravlagte kvinnes kultiske rolle kan således forstås som en del av ei ætts herskerideologi for å sikre seg rettigheter til et geografisk område.¹²⁴

(The buried women's cultic role can therefore be understood as part of a dynasty's ruling-ideology in order to secure themselves rights to a geographic area.)

In conclusion Røthe believes that the Oseberg burial most probably represents a cult of ancestral giantesses or mothers which was aimed at the continuity of dynastic powers over the area or

¹¹⁹ Solli 2002: 229

¹²⁰ op.cit 231

¹²¹ op.cit 221

¹²² Holck 2009: 62

¹²³ Røthe 1994: 153

¹²⁴ op.cit 156

kingdom, rather than representing a fertility cult of Freya as Ingstad claims.¹²⁵ The burial mound became a cult site for this ideology and, most importantly, functioned as a display of the power of the ruling dynasty.

Further considerations: the Oseberg mound breaking

A final issue which deserves attention when considering the cultic aspects of Oseberg is the question of mound breaking. The Oseberg mound was broken into shortly after AD950, so just over 100 years after it was made. The mound breakers dug an open trench from the south end of the mound and proceeded until they reached the grave chamber. Once inside they broke and threw most of the items and bones from the grave chamber out in the newly dug trench and then probably removed all valuable objects.¹²⁶

The reasons for mound breaking may at first seem obvious: grave robbers dig their way into rich mounds in order to steal the valuable objects from them. However, a closer analysis of this phenomenon reveals that there can be many different and complex reasons behind a mound breaking, and it is often not possible to distinguish which of these reasons is the most plausible. The most researched reasons for mound breaking are ritual breaking, change of power and *translatio*, which occurs in Christian times.

Ritual breaking occurs when a family member is forced to prove his power in order to retain it. To do so, he must break into his ancestor's mound and recover a symbolic item, such as a sword, a belt or an arm ring, which will prove he has the strength of his powerful ancestors. According to saga evidence, this ritual breaking occurs in powerful chieftains' graves.¹²⁷

Mound breaking in relation to change of power occurs when a new dynasty takes control of a territory and its members completely destroy the power of the previous dynasty by breaking its grave mounds and rendering them uninhabitable for the deceased. For good measure the bodies of the deceased are also disturbed or thrown out, and of course the valuable items stolen.¹²⁸

Translatio is the phenomenon by which the remains of a pagan ancestor are removed from his tomb and reburied in consecrated ground, in an attempt to save the pagan soul from hell.¹²⁹

In the case of Oseberg, we can rule out the *translatio* reason, seeing as, although by the late 10th century people of this area might have been converted to Christianity, the bones of the deceased have not been removed from the mound, but only thrown out of the grave chamber. Ritual mound breaking is also unlikely, as the only evidence of it is found in 13th and 14th century sagas and there is no proof that it actually happened in the Viking Age. As for change of power, the area of Viken,

¹²⁵ Røthe 1994: 153-156

¹²⁶ Brøgger 1917: 21-28

¹²⁷ Soma 2007: 64-65

¹²⁸ Myhre 1994: 79

¹²⁹ op.cit 76-77

where Oseberg is, was at times under Danish rule and at times under Norwegian rule. The scholar Egon Wamers, through a study of the Frankish annals, found out that “in 813 Haraldr Klakk and his brother personally subjugated Vestfold, which was in revolt. That means that again they enforced the subordination of the nobles of this colony.”¹³⁰ It is possible that a member of the opposing dynasty decided to destroy the grave chamber and make it uninhabitable for the deceased, so that they would be forced to leave the area and make place for the new dynasty. The bones of the Gokstad man also suffered the same treatment as those of the Oseberg women and some scholars take this as proof of mound breaking in connection to change of power.¹³¹ Of course, simple plundering can also be the main reason behind the Oseberg mound breaking. It is currently impossible to determine with certainty for what reason the Oseberg mound was broken into just over 100 years from when it was made.

A critical analysis of the Oseberg theories

The theories which we have just seen all claim that the Oseberg burial was so grand and important because of the religious or supernatural aspects it represented. In my opinion there can be various other reasons for constructing a ship mound for two females, and these reasons can very well be secular ones rather than religious ones.

I believe that Ingstad is possibly reading too much meaning from the images woven on the tapestries. Her theory is based on the principle that Oseberg is the most splendid female burial of prehistoric times, as well as being more luxurious than any kingly Norwegian burial. So far I have tried to argue against this presumption, and we shall see in detail in the next sections how other kingly or female burials can be considered equally splendid and important although they may present a different kind of richness. I maintain that Oseberg is not the most luxurious Scandinavian burial to have been found, and therefore I believe that it is not possible to claim that this mound must represent something that goes beyond a royal burial on the assumption that it is unique and unparalleled in richness and splendour.

The interpretation of the tapestry fragments as representing a cultic celebration¹³² is probably trustworthy and very well argued. The procession of people and carriages and the presence of the covered carriages whose horses are driven by a figure walking beside them seems to indicate a cultic rite, as do the many symbols whose function is to help the viewer recognize the various woven elements. However, how can this specifically be a cult of the goddess Freya? There are at least three covered carriages which, if they contain images of deities, each contain a different god. The human offerings which are hanging in the trees can therefore have been offered to more

¹³⁰ Wamers 1995: 157-158

¹³¹ Christensen & others 1992: 83

¹³² Ingstad 1992; 1995

than one god. Why should male humans have been offered exclusively to a female goddess, and therefore to Freya? Also, was there really something as complex as a “holy death-marriage” behind the sacrifices? In my opinion sacrifices which were more probably made to ensure the favour of the gods and therefore peace, prosperity and luck in battle. The women in the carriage beside the king may well be the same women who are presiding over the cult in the sacrifice fragment, as we know from various sources, one of these being the Arab Ibn Fadlan’s account,¹³³ that women held important roles in cultic services. However, I think it is a bit far fetched to claim that these are the same women which are buried in the Oseberg mound. It is of course possible, but there is no way of validating such a claim. In the same way I think it would be hard to verify that the carriage in which the two women are sitting in the tapestry is the chariot which was found in the mound because “it is of the same type”. A carriage with four wheels depicted on a tapestry would look remarkably alike to any similarly constructed real life carriage.

Ingstad claims to have identified one or more aspects of the goddess Freya on each of the tapestry fragments (excluding the battle scene) and that therefore Freya must be the primary deity to which the cult is orientated. She also identifies a large variety of images as symbols of fertility, which she further connects to Freya, although she was not the only Viking Age fertility goddess. Furthermore, Ingstad identifies many objects in the Oseberg mound as symbols of fertility and she uses these, together with the tapestry fragments, to claim that the women buried presided over an important Freya-cult and that one of them may also have been the goddess’s incarnation on earth. In my opinion, objects such as the iron lamps and the items for textile production, do not symbolize fertility. The lamps may well have been used in a cultic procession, but they may also have been used as lamps inside the house. Textile production was an important occupation which all women, even the most high-born, practiced daily. A lamp on a stand would be useful when weaving a picture on a tapestry in the semi-darkness of a longhouse. An object such as the bone comb found in the unbroken chest would probably have been used for combing wool rather than for combing sacred horses and is therefore not a fertility symbol in my opinion. In the same way, I think the other objects such as spindle whorls and wooden clubs, symbolized the occupation of the women rather than a fertility cult. The staff which was found together with the so far mentioned objects possibly had a function which is still unknown to us. Ingstad identifies it as a symbol of fertility and also as being the same as the staffs in the tapestry and therefore part of the cult of Freya. However, she herself argues that the staff could be a symbol of power and royalty. I think that if it is a symbol it is more likely to indicate royal power than fertility. One further point that I would like to make is that Ingstad only considers the cat-like figures and not the legendary scenes and other wood

¹³³ Lund Warmind 1995: 131-138

carvings when analyzing the chariot. What cannot be made to fit with the goddess Freya is left out of the argument. Similarly she interprets the ship as being a cultic object because it was decorated, but she does not analyze the decorative motifs or look into the tradition of ship decoration, which we have seen is not exclusive to the Oseberg ship.

Another point which I consider important is that of the spears depicted in the tapestry fragments. Ingstad claims that the spears are held as staffs and are therefore symbols of fertility and consequently of Freya. However, the spear also symbolizes the god Odin, battles and warriors. The presence of so many spears on the tapestry fragments could be an indication that the ceremony is a war offering to ensure luck in battle or to thank the god of war for an obtained victory. Men are offered to Odin in exchange for his attention and his favour which are needed to win a battle; the obtained favour is then maintained by rendering thanks to the god. Victory in battle brings peace and prosperity to the victorious and therefore the swastika symbols of good fortune and peace could also be interpreted in the light of a military victory. There are instances in the archaeological record of spear points being found in female burials, such as in one of the sorceress graves at Birka and in the sarcophagus of the Lombard Queen Teodolinda, as we shall see in the next chapter. These finds indicate that the spearhead did not only symbolize warfare, but could have had other meanings, some of which remain unknown to us. I think that if the spear was an important fertility symbol then we should also have found a spear in the Oseberg burial, together with all the other fertility symbols. As no spearhead was found during the excavation of the burial, we can conclude that the spears of the Oseberg tapestries are more likely to be symbols of warfare than symbols of fertility.

First of all it must be remembered that it is not certain that the tapestry fragments depict scenes of the life of the deceased women. It is a possibility, but it is just as possible that the scene is a legend or tradition, a story being told in pictures, just like the possible Bråvalla battle scene is. Furthermore, if a woman was to preside over an important cultic celebration, this woman probably occupied a very high position in society, being no less than a queen or princess. I think it is more likely that a queen would have been helped by priests and priestesses in a cultic celebration rather than there being an independent sorceress or high priestess who presided over the cult. We shall see from older pre-Christian Germanic sources how prophetic powers were often attributed to queens, and how sorceresses were often given important social and political positions. Therefore it is possible, as Ingstad claims, that the queen represented a goddess in the cult, but I don't think she represented the goddess in everyday life. This argument can be better understood by looking at a similar situation in our own times: a Christian priest is Jesus's representative on Earth; in fact, during Mass the priest represents the figure of Jesus. But when the religious ceremony is over the priest becomes a common man again and no one believes he is an incarnation of Jesus. Similarly, if

a queen or noble woman represented Freya or another goddess during a religious ceremony, this does not imply that she was considered an incarnation of the goddess once the ceremony was over. Consequently, I think that if one or both of the Oseberg women presided over a cult, this was not the main reason for the construction of their grand burial. People would first and foremost see a high-status woman and only secondarily a representative of the goddess (if she ever was that), which was an aspect restricted to religious ceremonies.

In conclusion I can say to agree with Ingstad on the point that the Oseberg women might have played a role in an important public religious ceremony. However, I believe that that this was not necessarily a fertility cult or a cult of Freya and I believe that if the women were Freya's earthly incarnations during the ceremonies, this was not reason enough to place them in a ship mound. Cult is almost certainly an aspect which is represented in the Oseberg burial, but it is not the main or only reason for the burial.

The theory put forward by Gunnhild Røthe is similar to that of Anne Stine Ingstad, but Røthe comes to a different conclusion. Rather than being the centre of a cult of Freya, the Oseberg mound represents a cult of evil powers, of giantesses or ancestral mothers. My arguments in opposition to Ingstad's theory are also valid for Røthe's, so I will not repeat them.

Regarding the theory put forward by Brit Solli, I think the attempt to explain the presence of the boulder to which the ship is tied is very good and more realistic than the interpretation given by Ingstad. If one of the Oseberg women was a *völva*, a sorceress, people would want to continue asking her for help even after her death. As I have said for Ingstad's theory, I do not believe that being a sorceress is enough for receiving a ship burial, and I will further argue this point in the section on known sorceress burials which I will compare to Oseberg. Again, the sorceress aspect may have been part of the life of the deceased women but, in my opinion, it is not enough to explain a ship burial.

Chapter II

Comparative analysis between Oseberg and other burials

The role of women in the Viking Age

The role and social position occupied by women in the Viking Age is something that needs to be considered and defined before engaging in a comparative analysis between the Oseberg burial and other burials and relevant historical figures. As in all societies, not all women occupied the same role, but they were instead organized in a hierarchical scale, which included high-status and low-status elements. It is the high status women and their role in society that is of most relevance here.

Archaeological material and runic inscriptions are the most reliable sources when considering the role of women in the Viking Age. Archaeology is particularly representative of the higher status classes of society: richly furnished burials are more likely to receive attention and to provide research material and answers than a simple plain inhumation. Runic inscriptions also give an insight into wealthier social classes, by claiming inheritance rights and therefore publicly stating richness and property.

The many richly furnished Iron Age and Viking Age female burials indicate that women of higher status were commemorated in a way appropriate to their social position. They were buried in what was probably their finest clothing, and adorned with many expensive items of jewellery, which would accompany them to the otherworld, rather than be used by someone else in this. They also had with them all they needed for their next life, including working and cooking tools, toiletry implements such as tweezers and combs and sometimes a boat, wagon or, in one known case so far, a ship for the voyage. Occasionally animals or slaves would accompany the deceased woman on her journey to the afterlife. Such burials were only possible if the woman commemorated was very rich and came from, or married into, a noble and wealthy family who could afford to spend part of their inheritance in creating a lavish grave for the deceased. These female burials are paralleled in richness, and may sometimes exceed, high status male burials of kings and chieftains. This indicates that high status women occupied a position in society that was not far off from that of important and wealthy men. Oseberg is the largest known example of rich female burial, but it is not the only one: many other female burials are, if not equally large, at least equally well equipped and, in some cases, filled with more precious objects. Tombs such as those found at Tuna and Valsgårde in Sweden, or at Hedeby in Northern Germany,¹³⁴ indicate that Oseberg is not unique in its kind. As we shall see in the next section, there are many other rich female burials from the same period.

¹³⁴ Nylén and Schönback 1994; Elsner 1989

Oseberg stands out because it is the largest and possibly most important, but not because it is unique. As well as in Scandinavia, other rich Norse female burials have been found in countries known to have been visited by the Vikings, such as the grave discovered at Peel castle on the Isle of Man, which was a rich and well equipped pagan burial.¹³⁵ This distribution of Scandinavian female burials outside their homeland is an indication that women, as well as men, undertook voyages and settled in new lands, rather than being left behind at home.

Archaeological sources seem to indicate that high status women, and in particular those few who inherited and administered their own property, were considered equal to high status men when it came to burial practices. They had their share of costly personal possessions as well as occupying an important enough role in society which enabled them to be commemorated in extravagant ways, just like their male counterparts were. This shows that the social standing of a woman was clearly marked at her death, but what did it imply exactly in life? This question can be best answered by looking at runestone evidence. We find some instances, especially in Swedish memorial runestones, of women commemorating husbands, sons, daughters, brothers or other relatives. In other instances it is women being commemorated by a man or, occasionally, by another woman. When a woman has a runestone set up in memory of someone, it means that she is wealthy enough to pay for the stone to be placed, for the runemaster to carve the message and sometimes, for someone to carve pictures or decorative motifs. Setting up a runestone was therefore an indication of social standing: only the higher status people, especially when they were women, possessed the means to pay for the creation of a memorial stone. Still more interesting is when a stone not only serves the purpose of commemorating a deceased relative, but is also used as an inheritance document. In fact, it is from such stone “documents” that we today know that women in the Viking Age had the right to inherit, possess and administer property. A fitting example here is that of the Hillersjö stone, which reads:

GæiRmundr [f]ikk GæiRlaug møydomi i. Þa fingur þau sun, aðan hann drunknaði. En sunn do siðan. Þa fikk ho[n] [Gu]ðrik. Ha[nn] ... þenna. Þa fingur þau barn. En maR æin lifði; hon het [In]ga. Ha[na] fikk Ragnfastr i Snutastaðum. Þa varð hann dauðr ok sunn siðan. En moðiR kvam at sunaR arfi. Þa fikk hon Æirik. Þar varð hon dauð. Þar kvam GæiRlaug at arfi Ingu, dottur sinnaR. Þorbiorn Skald risti runaR.¹³⁶

Geirmund married Geirlaug when she was a girl. Then they had a son before he drowned and the son died later. Then she married [Gu]drik, ... Then they had children, but only one girl survived. She was called [In]ga. She was married to Ragnfast of Snottsta, then he died and [their] son [died] later, and the mother inherited from her son. Then she was married to Eirik. She died there, and there Geirlaug inherited from her daughter Inga.¹³⁷

¹³⁵ Jesch 1991: 37

¹³⁶ Hillersjö inscription, *Sammordisk runtextdatabas*

¹³⁷ Hillersjö inscription, translation quoted in Jesch 1991: 54



Figure 6: the Hillersjö runestone

In this case Geirlaug, after a series of marriages and deaths, inherits from her only surviving daughter Inga, whom she outlives. The runestone recording this complex inheritance pattern was placed in full view for everyone to see, so that the claim to the property could not be doubted or contested. From this inscription we learn that women did not inherit from their husbands if they had children, but they inherited from their children if these died before them. We also learn that women as well as men had the right to inherit, whereas in many other countries property would pass to the closest male relative once a couple's male children were dead. Furthermore we are aware of the fact that a woman alone, such as Geirlaug, was able to administer property and run wealthy farmsteads by herself, without becoming subjected to another man, such as a more distant relative. Women therefore had legal rights and were regarded as people just like men were. They were not entirely subjected to men, but retained a degree of legal and economic freedom. Widows especially, could become very prominent figures in society.

Several runestones¹³⁸ were set up by women in memory of male relatives and husbands who died abroad. In these cases, the women who commissioned the stones would probably have been left at home to administer the men's property whilst they were away. If the men died and there were no adult children who could run the farmsteads, the women would take over these businesses and run them until the heirs were old enough to administer their own property. This kind of memorial stone did not specify that the commemorator would take over the dead man's business, but this can often be read between the lines.

It is interesting to note that one of the largest and most elaborate Viking Age Norwegian runestones, the Dynna stone from Gran in Hadeland, was set up by a woman in memory of another woman. This is a very rare case of commemoration. The runes are inscribed along the narrow edge of the stone, whilst the broad side is occupied by carved figures which represent the Nativity. The stone reads:

¹³⁸ Spurkland 2005

Gunnvör gerði brú, Þrýðriks dóttir, eptir Ástríði, dóttur sína. Sú var mæst hönnurst á Haðalandi.

Gunnvör Þrýðrik's daughter made a bridge in memory of Ástríðr, her daughter. She was the handiest maiden in Hadeland.¹³⁹

It is possible that Gunnvör was a widow who inherited from her dead daughter. This runestone is also one of the two in Norway which mentions the building of a bridge. This has a twofold significance: the bridge symbolized a way in which to help the soul of the deceased to reach the otherworld, but a real bridge was also very useful to travellers, and commissioning one was proof of richness and power. The building of bridges in connection with memorial runestones was an early Christian practice in Scandinavia. Bridges substituted the old tradition of building grave mounds.

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One further important runestone is that of Tune, Østfold, which dates to the 5th century. Although it is much older than the Viking Age runestones considered here, it is important to mention the Tune stone because it is the earliest surviving inheritance “document” of Scandinavia. The runestone reads:

Side A: *ek WiwaR after Wōdurīdē witandahalaiban worahtō [rūnōr]*

I, WiwaR, in memory of WoduridaR the master of the household, made these runes

Side B: *falh Wōdurīdē staina þrijōR dohtriR dālidun arbija āsijōstēR arbijanō*

I entrusted the stone to WoduridaR. Three daughters arranged the funeral feast, the dearest / most devoted / most divine of heirs.¹⁴¹

From this inscription, and basing ourselves on the outlined Viking Age inheritance patterns, we can say that the three women were the daughters of the deceased and that WiwaR was probably son of one of them, and so grandson of WoduridaR. All four relatives had inheritance rights on WoduridaR's property. The grandson raised the stone and the three daughters prepared the funeral feast and made it “pleasant”. “If it means that the daughters had some kind of cultic function, the Tune stone is proof that women had a prominent role in this society”.¹⁴² This stone is also an indication that women in Scandinavia possessed inheritance rights as early as the Migration Period and perhaps earlier; these same inheritance rights were still prominent in the Viking Age.

Runic inscriptions, especially those carved on memorial stones, give us an insight into the legal status of a wealthy Viking Age woman. We learn that a woman can inherit land and administer prosperous farmsteads, as well as being able to commission monuments in memory of her relatives and, jointly, “documents” of her legal rights. From runic inscriptions we get a picture of independent and free women, who had rights and were considered able to run businesses just as efficiently as men. Widows were particularly important because they were free to dispose of their

¹³⁹ Spurkland 2005: 105

¹⁴⁰ op.cit 106, 119

¹⁴¹ op.cit 38-40

¹⁴² op.cit 42

inheritance as they wished, whilst the property which passed to other women would be administered by their husbands or fathers.

The primary sources available to us which concern Viking Age women seem to indicate that high status women occupied a prominent position in society. Although they did not gain renown through battles and raids, they nonetheless became important as administrators of the economic and religious aspects of life. Women were given a great deal of freedom when it came to daily affairs and they were left in charge of farms when their husbands were away. As I have said before, this freedom and independence did not apply to the majority of women, who lived in poverty and performed their daily chores without obtaining any special social position.

Now that a short overview of the role of women in the Viking Age has been presented, it is possible to look at various types of burials, starting with female Iron Age and Viking Age Scandinavian graves, and to compare them to the Oseberg burial, in order to better understand what this burial may represent and for what reasons the women in it deserved a ship mound.

Scandinavian Iron Age and Viking Age female high status burials

The Oseberg burial is most often compared to other important ship burials, but it is rarely associated to other female burials, unless it is to state how much grander this grave is. In this section I will look at female high status burials from Scandinavia which date to the Iron Age and Viking Age. I will compare these burials to the Oseberg mound and attempt to assess the similarities and differences between them. Through this analysis I hope to obtain a clearer picture of where the Oseberg burial can be located in female burial history.

Four burials from Tuna cemetery in Badelunda, Sweden

The cemetery of Tuna on Lake Mälaren in Sweden is a very interesting site. In this cemetery a series of boat and chamber graves, which date from the 4th to the 11th centuries, have been discovered among the many cremation and inhumation burials. These large graves all belong to women, and the dating suggests that approximately one woman per generation was given a boat or rich chamber burial. The male graves are for the most part cremation burials.¹⁴³ The boat graves are here distinguished from the Oseberg ship grave because their size is so different: where the Oseberg ship is over 20 m long, the boats of Tuna are about 5 m.

Many of the female boat burials of Tuna are very badly preserved and have yielded few artefacts. However, a small selection of relatively well preserved graves help us identify the main traits which the more ruined burials probably also shared. The first of these graves is chamber grave X. It was discovered in 1952 when a house was built over it, and among the finds were some rich

¹⁴³ Nylén and Schönback 1994: 146

gold jewels weighing together over 300g.¹⁴⁴ The jewels include a neckring, two armrings, two finger rings and two pins. The grave in which these objects originally lay was destroyed during the digging for the foundation of the house. However, by a close analysis of the many stray finds in the loose earth, it was possible to conclude that the grave was originally composed by a chamber of 3 m by 2 m.¹⁴⁵ Further finds which were very probably originally part of the grave were two silver spoons and three bronze vessels, possibly used for serving wine. Two glass beads and a blue and white decorated glass beaker were also found. No organic material has been preserved. The gold, silver and glass are all elements which indicate very high status, so that it is possible to conclude that the grave was that of a noble woman. The decoration on the golden jewellery and the style of the glass beaker indicate a date of about AD300 for this burial.

A second important grave find is boat grave 75, which has been dated to the 9th century.¹⁴⁶ This grave is formed by a deep trench in which a boat had been placed. The burial had then been marked with a set of stones placed in the form of a boat. Because of the depth at which the boat was placed, which lay under the water level, much of its wooden items have been preserved, including the boat. Metal objects suffered oxidation and have therefore survived in rather poor condition. The boat is about 5 m long¹⁴⁷ and its planks were originally sewn together rather than nailed together with rivets. This explains why no rivets have been found in boat graves in which only the impression of the wooden planks in the earth survives. Among the grave goods we find many everyday objects, including a trough, a wooden plate, a whetstone, a beaker, a wooden box, a dish and two wooden spoons. A clay pot and a selection of indeterminable wooden pieces were also found.¹⁴⁸ Among the preserved jewellery we have two oval brooches, a chain, an equal armed brooch, some bronze beads and three armrings. A large selection of glass beads and silver pendants decorated with imprints from Arabic coins complete the set of jewels.¹⁴⁹ These items confirm that the burial is that of a high-status woman. Textile fragments preserved under the brooches indicate that the woman was dressed in costly and colourful fabric.

Boat graves 35 and 48 are also classified as high status female burials on the basis of the jewellery finds and through osteological analysis of the small quantity of bone remains. Boat grave 35 is formed by an oval stone setting of about 7 m by 3 m. The boat has not survived, but it has left an impression in the earth.¹⁵⁰ Osteological analysis indicates that the deceased was a young woman. Of the grave goods that accompanied her no wooden objects have survived. However, various

¹⁴⁴ Nylén and Schönback 1994: 18

¹⁴⁵ *ibid*

¹⁴⁶ *op.cit* 44

¹⁴⁷ *op.cit* 65

¹⁴⁸ *op.cit* 52-57

¹⁴⁹ *op.cit* 58-63

¹⁵⁰ *op.cit* 36

brooches, glass beads, pendants and a knife have been found in the grave. These objects enable us to date the burial to the late 700s-early 800s.¹⁵¹ Boat grave 48 is similarly badly preserved, with only a colouring in the earth to indicate where the boat had been. Bone analysis indicates that the grave was made for a 20 to 40 year old woman.¹⁵² Interestingly, a Bronze Age axe head was found in the burial, indicating that the site was in use, either as cemetery or as habitation, maybe even one thousand years before the burial was dug. The jewellery recovered from this grave includes a cross-shaped tin brooch, two knives, a pair of shears, tweezers, a whetstone, two oval brooches and a selection of pendants and beads.¹⁵³

The burials which I have just mentioned form only a small part of the 80 or so graves which have so far been discovered. It has been estimated that only about one fourth of the cemetery has been excavated, so many more graves could be hidden under the earth. The series of rich female boat burials and chamber graves, which date from the late Roman Iron Age into the Viking Age, indicate a very old burial tradition which was maintained throughout at least 7 centuries. We do not know who these women were. Some, such as the scholar Judith Jesch, have suggested that they represent a matriarchical society in which women were at the head of the family.¹⁵⁴ A different interpretation could be that the women represent the mothers of the most important chieftains of each generation, who were given lavish burials by their sons. For the moment we cannot be sure of the position that these women occupied in society.

When looking at the Tuna cemetery, we find some close parallels to the Oseberg burial. From the scarce available material evidence we can conclude that most probably all the boat burials and chamber graves were equipped with everyday objects as well as costly items of jewellery and textiles. Although the boats of Tuna are rarely more than 5 m long, they nonetheless remind one of the Oseberg burial, with its ship placed in the ground with a wide selection of everyday objects and tools. When compared to the Tuna cemetery, the Oseberg burial seems to spring from this age long tradition, although the two women in the ship mound received a much larger vessel and a vaster quantity of grave goods. Although built on a much grander scale, the Oseberg burial shares many important traits with the boat graves of Tuna.

Hedeby chamber grave

Excavations at the Viking Age town of Hedeby, which presently lies in northern Germany, but which was originally part of Denmark, have uncovered as many as 1350 graves.¹⁵⁵ Of these, only 5% contained grave goods. Two of the most important graves of Hedeby are the ship mound

¹⁵¹ Nylén and Schönback 1994: 38-41

¹⁵² op.cit 82

¹⁵³ op.cit 85

¹⁵⁴ Jesch 1991: 35

¹⁵⁵ Arents & Eisenschmidt 2010

which I will be looking at later in this chapter and a high status female chamber grave. The chamber grave was discovered in the southern cemetery and has been dated to the 10th century. It was built by digging a chamber of 3.40 x 2.60 m and lining it with wooden planks. The deceased was placed within the body of a 1 x 2 m wagon within the chamber. The woman was dressed in fine clothing with gold brocade embroidery, as well as wearing some silver hairclips. She also wore a large gold pendant and two further pendants which are wonderfully worked in Terslev type decoration.¹⁵⁶ Between the pendants were gems and pearls. Grave goods include a bronze bowl, a gaming board and a locked chest containing various valuables and personal items. Animal head decorations were present on many of the grave goods. It has been suggested that the collection of golden jewellery and precious pearls present in this grave is possibly the richest so far discovered in Scandinavia.¹⁵⁷

The Hedeby chamber grave is extremely rich in precious items and contains grave goods typical of the nobility. The burial in a wagon body was a common practice for high status women in Denmark. Compared to Oseberg, this burial is much smaller and is lacking animal sacrifices and vast amounts of grave goods; however it is nonetheless extremely rich and represents a woman of the highest possible rank.

A selection of Viking Age sorceress burials

As we have discussed the possible cultic aspect of the Oseberg mound, it is useful to review what a possible sorceress burial normally looks like. The vast majority of sorceress burials do not belong in the above section on female high status burials because they are generally very simple. What mainly characterizes a sorceress's burial is the presence of a staff, strange pendants or narcotics in a grave. Most graves in which these items were present are simple flat burials, where a hole large enough to contain a human is dug into the earth and the body is placed in it and covered over with the remaining earth. In many instances the "staff" can also be interpreted as a cooking spit, making the identification of the sorceress very dubious. A few of the possible sorceress burials are larger and of high-status, and these may more easily be compared to Oseberg.

Three possible sorceress burials from Birka

The Viking Age town of Birka on Lake Mälaren in Sweden has yielded many burial finds, three of which have been interpreted as *völva* graves. In grave Bj660 we find a female inhumation placed in an earth chamber of 2,45 x 1,5 m.¹⁵⁸ Of the skeleton only the teeth remain, but many grave goods have survived. The woman was buried with a silver threaded band around her head. She was wearing the typical Viking Age oval brooches and a silver chain between them. She also

¹⁵⁶ Elsner 1989: 73

¹⁵⁷ op.cit 73-76

¹⁵⁸ Price 2002: 128

had a necklace made of 28 crystal and glass beads, with a silver pendant in its centre. Under one of the oval brooches a silver granulated crucifix was found. A clear glass bead strung on a ring of gold wire has been interpreted by the scholar Neil Price as being some kind of facial jewellery, possibly a nose or lip piercing.¹⁵⁹ The woman also wore a belt from which hung a bronze spoon, a pair of scissors, an iron awl, a curved eastern pendant, a whetstone and an iron knife. An iron staff had been placed horizontally across her body.¹⁶⁰ Other grave goods include a wooden box, a glass beaker of Continental type, a ceramic and an iron vessel and a wooden bucket. The grave has been dated to the early 900s. The burial is considered that of a *völva* because of the presence of the iron staff and the unusual facial jewellery. Price has also interpreted the silver crucifix as being a symbol of the supernatural,¹⁶¹ but it could just as well be an indication of conversion, perhaps at a transitional point in which pagan and Christian religion were both valid and practiced together.

Grave Bj834, a 10th century double human inhumation in a large chamber grave, has also been interpreted as the burial of a *völva*. The chamber, which measured 4 x 2 m and was 1,95 m deep, originally contained a man and a woman, probably seated on the same chair. Only the woman's teeth have survived, but the grave goods of both individuals permit this interpretation. A raised platform at one end of the grave chamber contained two sacrificed horses with rich harnesses, indicating this was a high status burial. The man was buried with his weapons, a sword, a shield and 15 arrows, whilst the woman had the typical oval brooches, two circular bronze and silver brooches and a pendant made from an Arabic coin. Both individuals carried a number of Arabic coins in pouches attached to their belts. The woman was also wearing a silk shawl with silver threading. Other grave goods include tweezers, a needle case and scissors.¹⁶² What makes this burial that of a sorceress is the presence of an iron staff. In addition a spear head which was embedded in the chamber wall indicates that a spear had been thrown over the arranged grave and had a symbolic meaning. The spear possibly marked the grave as that of a warrior for the god Odin to see. Price argues that the spear symbolizes the magical aspect of Odin and is therefore a further indication that the grave is that of a sorceress.¹⁶³

The third of the possible Birka sorceress burials is grave Bj845, a small chamber grave covered by a mound. Only the skull of the skeleton has survived. The woman was buried with a leather pouch, a whetstone, an iron knife, two oval brooches, a circular bronze brooch, a row of pendants and a glass bead. The woman was wearing a beaver fur trimmed cloak and a silver embroidered silk band on the head. An iron staff had been placed across the body. An ornamented

¹⁵⁹ Price 2002: 128

¹⁶⁰ op.cit 130

¹⁶¹ ibid

¹⁶² op.cit 131-135

¹⁶³ op.cit 137

iron box, similar to one of the unbroken chests in the Oseberg burial, was placed at the feet of the woman. The burial has been dated to 925-943.¹⁶⁴

A grave from Fyrkat, Jylland

Another possible sorceress grave is found in Denmark. In this grave, grave 4, a woman was buried in the body of a wagon measuring 2 x 1 m. The woman was dressed in simple clothes and had no brooches. Some gold threads were sewn into her dress. She was buried with two silver toe rings, a bronze bowl and a copper bowl. Also in the grave were a knife, a whetstone, a box brooch, a set of amulets on a silver chain, a silver pendant, a dress pin of copper covered by gold foil, a gold pendant and two glass beads. Some henbane seeds found on the floor of the wagon have been suggested by Price as being of mind altering function.¹⁶⁵ Further finds include an oak box originally containing clothing, shears, a whetstone and a spindle whorl. The jaw bone of a pig and some very old owl pellets are thought to be of cultic significance. A wooden staff and a metal one were also found.

The sorceress burials analysed so far are among the few more convincing examples of *völva* graves. They are also the only recorded examples of high status sorceress graves. The staff is the prime indicator of the burial of a sorceress, followed by amulets and strange pendants and jewels and by other odd grave goods such as special seeds, jaw bones (which have also been found in the Gokstad ship mound) and owl pellets. Similarities between these burials and Oseberg lie mainly in the presence of a staff in all cases, although Oseberg is the only one not to have an iron staff, but only a wooden one, which has also been given other interpretations as we have seen. Price suggests that the cannabis seeds found in the Oseberg grave chamber are also an indication of a sorceress's burial.¹⁶⁶ However, other scholars argue that the cannabis seeds were used as painkillers and not as mind altering substances.¹⁶⁷

In conclusion archaeologists have excavated many possible sorceress burials, very few of which are also high status burials. These few high status graves can be compared to the Oseberg burial, and we have seen that there are some similarities between them. However, we cannot base our conclusion that these are sorceress graves on the fact that they contain rich grave goods. On the contrary we can assume that the women buried in these graves were of secular high status as well as possibly being sorceresses. If all sorceresses were buried with rich grave goods, we would not have evidence for the many poorly furnished sorceress graves. This means that Oseberg, as well as the

¹⁶⁴ Price 2002: 140

¹⁶⁵ op.cit 154-156

¹⁶⁶ op.cit 205-206

¹⁶⁷ Holck 2009: 60

other sorceress burials mentioned, is not a high status burial because it is that of a sorceress, but it is the burial of a noble woman who may have also occupied the role of sorceress during her lifetime.

Other ship burials of the Viking Age and Iron Age, from Scandinavia and elsewhere

The Oseberg burial is a ship mound, so it follows naturally to compare it to other similar mounds. Ship mounds have been found in Scandinavia, on the Continent and in Britain. I will be comparing Oseberg to burials from all these locations. The similarity between these burials indicates that Oseberg is part of a widespread burial tradition that is typical of Germanic peoples.

Gokstad and Tune

The ship burials of Gokstad and Tune, the other two well known Norwegian Viking Age ship burials, present many similarities with the burial of Oseberg. All three contain a similar sized ship, Gokstad being over 23 m¹⁶⁸ and Tune being just over 18 m long.¹⁶⁹ The mounds were also placed in locations near a river or the sea in all three cases. Tune and Gokstad are dated to the beginning of the 10th century, so they are slightly younger than Oseberg.

The Tune mound was probably originally the largest of the three, with a diameter of 80m. Of the ship it contained, only the lower part, that which was embedded in clay, has survived, whilst the rest has decayed. It is built of oak and pine, just like the Oseberg ship is, and it probably had 11 or 12 pairs of oars. It was also rather shallow, especially when compared to the Gokstad ship.¹⁷⁰ Marstrander claims that the Tune ship belonged to a category of private royal vessels called *karfi*, to which the Oseberg and Gokstad ships also belong. Only few grave goods were recovered from Tune and these included a sacrificed saddle horse, a sword, of which the hilt remains, a spear blade and a shield boss. A lump of iron which was probably a chain mail was also discovered. The grave chamber, which differed from that of Oseberg and Gokstad in that its sides were overhanging the ship, was robbed and only fragments of grave goods remained, including part of a ski, some glass beads and a finely carved sleigh shaft. Some textile fragments were also found, probably belonging to clothing.¹⁷¹

The Gokstad mound was originally 50m in diameter and 5m high.¹⁷² Its contents have also been preserved thanks to the clay soil. The ship is over 23 m long, as seen previously, and is very well built and capable of resisting ocean voyages. A wooden burial chamber was built on the deck of the Gokstad ship, just like it had been built on Oseberg. The roof of the chamber presents visible signs of hacking caused by mound breakers who probably stole most of the valuable grave goods.

¹⁶⁸ Marstrander 1986: 158

¹⁶⁹ Paasche 2010: 162-163

¹⁷⁰ Marstrander 1986: 158

¹⁷¹ op.cit 159

¹⁷² op.cit 160

No weapons were found onboard the ship and parts of the skeleton were also missing. Among the grave goods which were not removed we find a gaming board with a single gaming piece, some finely decorated gilded mountings from a harness and bridle and two bronze medallions of Western-European origin. A tent, a cauldron, five beds and some kitchen utensils were also recovered. The remains of a peacock, a very exotic animal in Viking Age Norway, were discovered under the floor boards of the chamber. Twelve horses and six dogs had also been sacrificed to accompany the chieftain to the otherworld. Three small boats, a sledge, oars, ropes, parts of a sail and a rusted anchor complete the picture of the find.¹⁷³

When looking at these two burial mounds, we find many similarities with Oseberg. The presence of a ship with a grave chamber and grave goods occurs in all three burials. Although not much has survived from Tune, we see that Gokstad contained kitchen utensils, beds, a tent and boats. Oseberg contained the same items, apart from the boats and sledge, which were substituted by sledges and a wagon. When first reading about the Oseberg mound it seems that an unusually large amount of animals have been sacrificed there, 15 horses, 4 dogs and 2 cows. However, when comparing these figures to those from the Gokstad sacrifices of 12 horses and 6 dogs, we see that they are quite similar and probably reflect the tradition of the time. Overall the Oseberg mound only stands out as different from the other Viking Age ship burials because it is the only certain female ship burial so far discovered and because it contains two bodies. If the Oseberg burial had contained a male chieftain, it would have been considered the same as the other ship burials, and I therefore think that it reflects the burial tradition of the time for high status and important people.

Sutton Hoo

The ship burial of Sutton Hoo, also known as *mound I*, is dated to the beginning of the 7th century. It is uncertain whether it represents an Anglo-Saxon burial or a Scandinavian one, but the scholar Rupert Bruce-Mitford has argued that the East Anglian royal dynasty of the time, the Wuffingas, had close contacts with Sweden and may even have come from there originally. According to him and to various other scholars the Sutton Hoo ship burial can be nothing less than the burial of a king of the royal dynasty which resided at the nearby centre of Rendlesham.¹⁷⁴ The burial is incredibly rich as it was never robbed. There is a large amount of gold and precious stones. Of the ship only the impression in the sand remains, as the soil in the area is particularly acid and therefore not good for preserving organic material. There is no trace of human bones, but these could also have decayed in the mound.

Among the rich grave goods we find a finely decorated helmet which is covered in Style II animal art and heroic scenes, together with a sword with a gold and garnet cloisonné hilt and the

¹⁷³ Marstrander 1986: 160-162

¹⁷⁴ Bruce-Mitford 1974: 1-60

boss and other metal parts of a decorated shield. A sceptre, modelled as a large whetstone and surmounted by a model stag, is probably a symbol of royalty. More gold is to be found on the purse lid's decorative plates made of garnet cloisonné and millefiori glass, and on the similarly decorated shoulder clasps and sword belt buckle. A further buckle, made entirely of gold and decorated with animal figures, of the weight of 412.7g¹⁷⁵ was also found in the grave. Finally 37 gold coins, 3 blank coins and 2 ingots which were probably inside the decayed purse were discovered. The objects are mostly of Anglo-Saxon or Scandinavian manufacture, whilst the coins are Frankish. All these items date to the early 7th century. A further set of interesting objects is the three silver bowls with silver spoons of byzantine origin which also formed part of the grave goods. A large bronze Celtic hanging bowl, dated to the late 6th - early 7th century completes the picture of the valuable items found in the ship mound of Sutton Hoo.¹⁷⁶



Figure 7: the Sutton Hoo gold buckle

The ship mound of Sutton Hoo was placed overlooking a river and not far from the coast, in line with the location of the previously mentioned Viking Age ship mounds. It is earlier than the Oseberg mound by about two centuries, but presents many similarities to the Viking Age grave. Although the preservation conditions for organic material at Sutton Hoo were particularly unfavourable, we nonetheless know that it was a ship burial and that it was covered by a mound and filled with grave goods. Of the wooden grave goods which might have been placed in the mound we have no trace; what we do have is evidence of what precious items a richly furnished grave originally contained. I believe that Sutton Hoo is useful in establishing what the Oseberg burial might have looked like before it was robbed, if it ever contained precious metals, and what kinds and what amount of costly items we would have been most likely to find there.

¹⁷⁵British Museum website

¹⁷⁶Bruce-Mitford 1974: 1-60; British Museum website

Ladby and Hedeby

The ship graves of Ladby and Hedeby are two continental examples of Viking Age burial mounds which can be compared to the Oseberg mound. Ladby is located in northern Fyn, Denmark, whilst Hedeby is on the old border with the Frankish Empire, close to the river Eider.¹⁷⁷

The Ladby ship grave consists of a 21 m long ship covered by a mound. The contents of the mound are very badly preserved, but it is possible to discern a collection of rich banqueting equipment, a gaming set, and some weapon fragments, including an axe, some arrowheads and a shield.¹⁷⁸ Fragments of a sword and various metal fittings were also found together with riding equipment. Most of the objects were so rusty they resembled lumps of iron and their original shape could only be seen through x-ray.¹⁷⁹ The ship had totally decayed, but we know of its presence thanks to the impression of the soil and the many nails and rivets which originally held the wooden planks together. Fragments of unburned human bones were discovered, indicating that this was an inhumation. A selection of animals, comprising 11 horses and 4 dogs, were sacrificed and placed in the mound. It is possible that the commemorated man lay in a grave chamber made from a tent.¹⁸⁰ The Ladby burial has been dated to the beginning of the 10th century, based on the decorations in Borre and Jelling style present on some of the recovered objects. The items contained in the mound give an indication of nobility and highest rank. The gaming pieces, tent and animal sacrifices can be closely paralleled to the finds of Gokstad and Oseberg. The number of sacrificed animals is also similar to that recorded in other Viking Age ship burials.

The Hedeby ship mound is somewhat different from the other known Viking Age mounds. Instead of consisting of a ship on which a grave chamber is built, the Hedeby burial is made from a grave chamber dug into the ground and filled with goods which was consequently covered by a ship and a mound. This type of ship burial is most common on the Continent, especially in the Saxon area, although we also find a similar example in *mound 2* at Sutton Hoo. The grave chamber was built of wood and contained three warriors, accompanied by three horses. One of the warriors, the “lord”, lay in the western part of the chamber with his weapons and a banqueting set. In the eastern part were the other two warriors, also well armed. The ship covered both sections of the chamber.¹⁸¹ Many of the grave goods are of Carolingian origin, including the swords, the silver mounts of the lord’s sword-belt, the drinking set, the horse fittings and spurs and the arrow heads. The shields, gaming board, and the saddle mounts are instead of Scandinavian origin.¹⁸² The grave has been

¹⁷⁷ Wamers 1995: 149

¹⁷⁸ op.cit 155

¹⁷⁹ Sørensen 2001: 58-124

¹⁸⁰ Wamers 1995: 155

¹⁸¹ op.cit 149-154

¹⁸² op.cit 149

dated to AD830-850. Because of the large amount of Carolingian items and because the two warriors who accompanied the lord possibly symbolized the retainers of a Frankish court, it has been suggested that the burial may be that of Haraldr Klakk, the Danish king who accepted baptism and became a vassal of the Franks.¹⁸³ Once again, the objects found within the mound can be compared to those of the other Viking Age ship burials. In this case we also have a probable human sacrifice in the form of the two retainers who accompanied their lord in the afterlife. Although the construction of this ship mound is different, its essential elements, such as the ship, the sacrifices and the type of grave goods, are still very similar to those of Oseberg, Gokstad and the other ship mounds of the period.

When looking at a variety of Viking Age and Iron Age ship mounds it is possible to see a pattern of recurring customs throughout the burials. Viewed as a part of this ship mound tradition, the Oseberg burial seems to fit well into the parameters which define such graves. In order to get an idea of how rich the Oseberg mound, and the other robbed mounds, could have been, it is necessary to look at the example of Sutton Hoo. When compared to other ship mounds, it is therefore possible to say that the Oseberg burial is a typical example of this tradition, the only difference being the gender of the deceased, for which at present we have no other certain example in ship graves.

Some continental Germanic Iron Age female high status burials

So far I have looked at similarities and differences which are apparent between Oseberg and some other ship burials. I have also compared the female ship grave with earlier and contemporary Scandinavian female burials. In order to obtain a wider picture of the characteristics of the Oseberg burial and their occurrence in other burials, I will now compare the ship mound to a selection of continental Germanic Iron Age female burials. In this section I will not only explore how the Iron Age burials relate to the ship grave of Oseberg, but, in the few instances where it is possible, I will also consider the identity of the individuals buried, which I will then connect to the historical figures found in the literary sources which I will analyze in the next chapter. By connecting high status female burials to known historical figures I hope to come to a better understanding of the social positions which could result in lavish burials, in order to present a better grounded hypothesis as to the position occupied by the Oseberg women in early Viking Age society.

Teodolinda Queen of the Lombards: ca. AD570-627

The first burial I will be looking at is that of the Lombard Queen Teodolinda, who is described in Paul the Deacon's *Historia Langobardorum*. Teodolinda was the wife of King Autari and later of Agilulf. At the death of her second husband she ruled in place of her son. She is thought

¹⁸³ Wamers 1995: 150

to have died between 616-626, although an obituary from Monza dating to the 12th century states that she died on 22nd January 627.¹⁸⁴ It is very probable that Teodolinda had the church of S.Giovanni in Monza built so that she could be buried there, although the first written sources which claim her sepulchre lies in the church are dated to the 12th century.¹⁸⁵ For a Catholic Queen, being buried inside a grand and rich church was the best possible option. Teodolinda was rich enough to have a church built as her tomb and to be buried under its floors. A 13th century obituary with later additions states that in the year 1308 the tomb of Teodolinda was moved from the floor beneath the church and placed in a sarcophagus in the chapel of S.Vincenzo, where it lies today. Masses in memory of Queen Teodolinda are still being said to this day at every anniversary of her death. Teodolinda is very famous in Northern Italy and she is remembered, after almost 1400 years, as the people's queen. When her first husband died, Teodolinda was permitted to retain her title of Queen and, more importantly, to be the one to choose the new Lombard king because she was so much loved by her people. It is also believed that Teodolinda converted the Lombard people from Arianism to Catholicism, an action which made her very popular in Catholic Italy.

The sarcophagus of Teodolinda was first opened in 1941. In it were found various objects, including some nails, a selection of golden decorative elements which were probably sewn onto leather, a decoration from the scabbard of a knife and an iron spear head. The finding of a male tooth in the sepulchre led to the hypothesis that Teodolinda's son Adaloaldo had also originally been buried with her. It is thought that the votive crown, the golden gospel cover and the mysterious gold hen and chicks which form part of the treasures of Monza were also originally part of the grave goods of the queen and were removed from her tomb when she was moved into the sarcophagus in 1308,¹⁸⁶ the year in which the church was rebuilt. Also attributed to her is the so called *corona ferrea*, a crown said to be made from one of the nails by which Jesus was put on the cross.



Figure 8: the "corona ferrea"

¹⁸⁴ Merati 1985: 81

¹⁸⁵ Beltrami 1899: 665-678; Lusuardi Siena 2000: 114

¹⁸⁶ Bognetti 1967: 519-533; Lusuardi Siena 2000: 114-118

A striking aspect of the tomb of Teodolinda is that although she was a Catholic and was buried in a church, she was nonetheless buried with a set of very rich grave goods. This enables us to use her tomb as a means of comparison to the Oseberg burial. If in the case of Teodolinda we consider the church as part of the burial (she could not have been buried elsewhere), we note that both burials were extremely large. Oseberg was fitted with a ship and a set of everyday objects and tools which were needed for a pagan life, whilst Teodolinda was placed in the house of God and needed no earthly equipment. She nonetheless had precious golden items with her. The church which Teodolinda probably had built and in which she was buried can be paralleled to the mound and the ship in which the Oseberg women were placed. Both burials are therefore grand, rich and full of meaning: the ship of the Oseberg women was the fastest way to reach the otherworld, whilst the placing of Queen Teodolinda inside a church was the quickest route to heaven. The status of both the Lombard queen and the Viking Age noble women was marked by the grandness and richness of the burials, so that everyone who saw their tombs would recognize them as very important figures.

Gundiperga Queen of the Lombards: ca.AD 591-post 652

Gundiperga was the daughter of Teodolinda and of the Lombard King Agilulf. She married Arioaldo, Duke of Torino, who became king in 625 and later had Gundiperga shut in a tower as he suspected her of treachery. At his death Gundiperga was freed by the Catholic dukes and she ruled the Lombards alone for ten months before choosing the Duke of Brescia, Rotari, as the new king.¹⁸⁷

Gundiperga founded the church of S. Giovanni Domnarum in Pavia, in which she was later buried. In 1129 Masses were still being said in her memory in the church.¹⁸⁸ It has not been possible to identify her tomb, so we do not know what grave goods she was buried with, but we can assume them to be similar to those of Teodolinda, maybe not as rich.

As for Teodolinda, Gundiperga was also allowed to rule the Lombards by herself for a time, indicating that she occupied a very prominent social position, which was more than just that of the wife of a king.

Aregund Queen of the Franks: AD unknown-565/70

Aregund was the wife of King Clotar I of the Franks and mother of Chilperic I. She was also the sister of another wife of Clotar called Ingund.¹⁸⁹ She was buried in the basilica of St. Denis in Paris, together with many other Merovingians, especially women and children. In fact, no adult male Merovingian tombs have been found at St. Denis.¹⁹⁰ Aregund's tomb is the only identifiable

¹⁸⁷ Jarnut 1995: 55

¹⁸⁸ Kruger 1971: 373-382; La Rocca 2002: 504

¹⁸⁹ Fleury and France-Lanord 1998: 25

¹⁹⁰ op.cit 29

one, thanks to a ring bearing her name which was part of her grave goods. The preservation conditions inside her sarcophagus were favourable for organic material, whilst metal objects suffered oxidation. From the textile fragments it has been possible to reconstruct what Aregund was wearing at the time of her burial. Many metal objects, such as pins, buckles and other ornaments, complete her dress.

Aregund was wearing a satin headdress held in place by two gold pins. The gold pins are the only ones found at St.Denis, indicating the tomb was a royal one.¹⁹¹ Her dress was made of various parts: a fine woollen undergarment which came to her knees, a violet robe of the same length, held to her body by a belt, and an open satin tunic which was dark red and fastened at the waist with a further large belt. The tunic was decorated with two brooches and its sleeves were embroidered with gold thread. The belts were both decorated, one with garnets and the other with silver pendants. Aregund was also wearing leather shoes fastened with leather straps up to her knees. On the shoes were silver and gold decorated plaques.¹⁹²

As well as the belts, brooches and pins, Aregund was fitted with various other items of gold and silver. The ring which permits us to identify her is made of gold and has a monogramme inscribed on it which, when deciphered reads “AREGVNDIS REGINE”, Queen Aregund.¹⁹³ Her earrings were also made of gold and decorated with two large pearls. Two further decorative pins, made of gold and silver and measuring 26 cm, were used as decorations on her dress.¹⁹⁴



Figure 9: the ring of Aregund

Aregund was not buried with many grave goods, but she was dressed in her finest clothes and adorned with much gold, silver and precious stones. Although no items outside of what she was wearing were found in the sarcophagus, her burial is nonetheless considered to be extremely rich. As Teodolinda and Gundiperga, Aregund was buried in a church, an honour reserved only to those

¹⁹¹ Fleury and France-Lanord 1998: 82

¹⁹² op.cit 83-90

¹⁹³ op.cit 95, 210

¹⁹⁴ op.cit 96-110

of highest rank. The church can once again be paralleled to the ship mound of Oseberg, as the fastest way to the afterlife. The dress and ornaments of Aregund serve as an example of how a queen would be buried and we can imagine Teodolinda, Gundiperga, the Oseberg women and all the other high status women so far discovered in burials, adorned in a similar manner. If the sarcophagus had been robbed, we would only have found some textile fragments and possibly the gold embroidery on the sleeves of the tunic, which is what we find in many other high-status burials.

Considerations on the comparative analysis of Oseberg

After comparing the Oseberg burial with a selection of other burials, it is possible to summarize the main similarities and differences between the various tombs. Comparison with other Scandinavian high status female burials from the Iron Age and Viking Age clearly shows that Oseberg is so far the largest rich female burial, but it is by no means the only one. Other burials, although smaller in size, contained more precious objects, so it is not possible to claim that Oseberg is the richest of all, although it is probably the most impressive. Apart from size, the main difference between Oseberg and the other analyzed female high status burials is that only the former contained animal sacrifices. Oseberg is also the best preserved burial and so, naturally, it contains the most objects.

Table 1: Oseberg and other Scandinavian female high status burials

	<i>Ship/boat</i>	<i>Chamber</i>	<i>Wagon</i>	<i>Kitchen utensils</i>	<i>Coins, jewels, other precious metals</i>	<i>Glass, beads</i>	<i>Staff</i>	<i>Other items</i>
Oseberg	Ship	X	X	X			X	X
Hedeby chamber grave		X	X	X	X	X		X
Tuna X		X		X	X	X		
Tuna 75	Boat			X	X	X		
Tuna 35	Boat			X	X	X		
Tuna 48	Boat				X	X		X

1. Oseberg is the only female burial in which animal sacrifices have been found.
2. Oseberg has the most everyday items, but is also the best preserved and largest of the burials in the table.

Comparison to other rich sorceress burials indicates that Oseberg has some elements in common with these graves, but it is evidently not of the same kind, being so much grander and containing so many other items of varied significance. What most strongly connects Oseberg to other high-status sorceress burials is the presence of the staff, although it is one of the only two cases in which this item is wooden. All other staffs so far identified are made of metal and even

where the wooden staff was found there was also a metal one present. If we take into account the earlier mentioned argument by which the Oseberg staff might actually be a horn, then Oseberg has very little, if anything, in common with other sorceress burials. When considering the other possible cultic items of Oseberg it becomes apparent that they represent something different from a sorceress. These items, such as the wagon or the animal headposts, point towards high status secular use or cultic celebrations rather than the presence of a *völva*.

Table 2: Oseberg and sorceress burials

	<i>Mound</i>	<i>Chamber</i>	<i>Staff</i>	<i>Amulets</i>	<i>Narcotics</i>	<i>Animals</i>	<i>Other possible cultic items</i>
Oseberg	X	X	X wooden, possibly a horn		X medicinal	X	X
Birka Bj660		X	X				
Birka Bj834		X	X			X	
Birka Bj835	X	X	X	X			X
Fyrkat 4		X	X one wooden one iron	X	X		

1. Oseberg is only compared to other high-status sorceress burials. The majority of sorceress burials are plain inhumations with few grave goods, which are very hard to compare to Oseberg.

Comparison to other ship burials has produced a vast amount of similarities. Oseberg seems to be a kingly burial but containing women. It shares all the main characteristics with other important ship mounds and the main difference is that it contains items related to the female world rather than to the male one. Generally, the type of grave goods, the structure of the mound and even the quantity of sacrificed animals, fits in with the pattern of the other ship burials I have looked at. The main similarities are summarized in *table 3*.

Table 3: Oseberg and other ship burials

	<i>Mound</i>	<i>Ship</i>	<i>Sledge, boat, wagon</i>	<i>Tent</i>	<i>Kitchen utensils</i>	<i>Gaming pieces</i>	<i>Weapons</i>	<i>Sacrifices</i>	<i>Jewels, coins, other precious metals</i>	<i>Staff</i>
Oseberg	X	X	3 sledges 1 wagon	X	X			15 horses, 4 dogs, 2 cows		X
Gokstad	X	X	3 boats	X	X	X		12 horses, 6 dogs, 1 peacock	X	
Tune	X	X	1 sledge shaft				X	1 horse		
Ladby	X	X		X	X	X	X	11 horses, 4 dogs	X	
Hedeby ship mound	X	X			X	X	X	3 horses, 2 humans	X	
Sutton Hoo mound 1	X	X					X		X	X sceptre

1. Not included are items which are only found in Oseberg: iron lamps, items for textile production, working tools.
2. Not in the table: beds found in Oseberg and Gokstad, anchor and rigging found in Oseberg and Gokstad.
3. No weapons in Gokstad probably due to mound breaking.
4. Fewer items in Tune as it was less well preserved.
5. No organic objects have survived in Sutton Hoo.

Comparison between Oseberg and Germanic Iron Age burials has proved more difficult because of the different burial customs of pagan Vikings and Christian Germans. However, if we interpret the mound and the church as both symbolizing the main structure of the burial and the route or connection to the afterlife, comparison becomes easier. As we have seen, only the noblest people were buried in large mounds; similarly only the noblest were buried inside a church. Christians did not need material grave goods in their afterlife, but royal figures were nonetheless buried in their finest clothing and with much jewellery and costly items. The main difference between Oseberg and these Christian burials lies in the construction and type of grave goods, whilst similarities include the importance of the burial (a mound and a church) and the display of richness and power, given by animals and vast quantities of grave goods in Oseberg and by extremely costly precious metals in the Christian burials.

Table 4: Oseberg and Germanic Iron Age burials

	<i>Mound</i>	<i>Church</i>	<i>Weapons</i>	<i>Jewellery</i>	<i>Other precious items</i>	<i>Precious textiles</i>
Oseberg	X					X
Teodolinda		X	X spearhead of unknown symbolic meaning	X	X	
Aregund		X		X		X

1. Oseberg is being compared to Christian burials which occur in a church rather than a mound.
2. Christians were not buried with everyday items, but their grave goods comprised jewels and precious items.

An interesting consideration emerges when comparing the Oseberg burial to that of Queen Teodolinda. Both burials contained items which are not easily interpreted. In Oseberg we have the wooden staff, the highly decorated wagon, the five animal headposts and the iron rattles, which have all been attributed a cultic significance, but for which we do not know the exact use or meaning. In Teodolinda’s burial we have the spearhead, the male tooth and, especially, the golden hen with its seven golden chicks.



Figure 10: the hen and chicks of Teodolinda

The hen has been interpreted as a gift from an emperor, as a reliquary or as symbolizing the duchies of Lombardy or the Church, and every interpretation is extremely uncertain. Because of the different working techniques and decorations, it is thought that the hen was made in the 5th century and the chicks only added in the 7th.¹⁹⁵ This further adds to the mystery surrounding this incredible item. We have seen how Teodolinda is still remembered in Lombardy today and how she is considered “special”. Could these unusual grave goods perhaps be a reflection of her particular status? If so, could this principle also apply to the Oseberg women? By analyzing Germanic texts in the next chapter I hope to come closer to a possible answer to these questions.

¹⁹⁵ Museum of Monza website

In conclusion it is possible to claim that Oseberg shares some traits with all the types of burials analyzed in this chapter. It is most similar to other (male) ship burials, but also fits into the high-status female category and has something in common with the burials of Germanic women too. There is no doubt that the Oseberg burial is that of a noble woman (or of two noble women) which most resembles the tombs of Viking Age chieftains. In order to better understand how the Oseberg women came to receive this type of burial, I will now compare what we know regarding the role of women in the Viking age with portraits of important Germanic queens as found in the various Germanic histories. Most of these queens are historical figures, whilst some are legendary but, because of the Germanic origin of the Vikings, still useful in this study as the old legends were part of the culture of the Germanic people who lived in Scandinavia before the Migration Period.

Chapter III

Literary sources: portraits of Germanic queens and their connection to high-status Scandinavian women in the Viking Age.

The role of women in the Germanic Iron Age, according to the surviving law codes

In chapter II I have analyzed the role of women in the Viking Age, based primarily on the judicial evidence gained from runic inscriptions. Similarly, in this section I wish to look at the role of women in the Germanic Iron Age as we can understand it through the analysis of the surviving law codes. This analysis is necessary in order to comprehend the women portrayed in the historical sources which form the main subject of this chapter.

I have chosen to look at the laws of the Franks, of the Lombards and of the Burgundians. The first two tribes are those mentioned in the histories which I will be analysing in this chapter, whilst the third, the Burgundians, have been included as a further means of comparison and because, as they themselves state in their law code, they are the sworn enemy of the Franks and the similarities between the two societies become therefore even more interesting. I have chosen not to include the Anglo-Saxon laws because women's rights are not so clearly indicated in them. Many other Germanic tribes also had their own law codes, but the ones which I have chosen to use are very similar to them and are therefore enough to present a general picture of Germanic law and society.

The many clan-based Germanic tribes who moved during the Migration Period had a set of law codes based primarily on long-accepted and old customs, rather than on legislations issued at a specific date by a ruler. As they settled into new lands, however, their political system evolved and the king became a more important figure. Written law codes were first issued at this time: they were defined as the summary of the main age-long customs of a population, but in truth they comprised a set of amendments and changes to these customs. Where the custom was still entirely valid and accepted, no written law was issued concerning it.¹⁹⁶ The main focus of these written law codes was that of preventing the blood feud. For centuries a wrong done to the member of a family was avenged by the family of the victim through a wrong done to one or more members of the family who committed the original crime. Such a feud could then be carried out over generations. The first powerful Germanic kings introduced a system of compensation, stating in their law codes the exact fine for every type of crime, from the striking of a finger to the stealing of bees to homicide.¹⁹⁷ Another important aspect covered by the written law codes concerned inheritance rights. Inheritance patterns were very complicated in Germanic society, so a set of laws was written stating

¹⁹⁶ Drew 1973: 6-14

¹⁹⁷ *Edictus Rotari*, laws 41-127, 309-352, translated by Drew 1973.

all the possible cases and who had the right to inherit, and in what portion, in every case. It is these laws that are of greatest relevance to this study, as they clearly indicate the rights and limitations of women, enabling us to understand their role in Germanic society.

In *Lex Gundobalda* (ca. AD474-516), the Burgundian code issued by King Gundobald and his son, we find a law entitled “of succession”, which reads:

1. Among Burgundians we wish it to be observed that if anyone does not leave a son, let a daughter succeed to the inheritance of the father and mother in place of the son.
2. If by chance the dead leave neither son nor daughter, let the inheritance go to the sisters or nearest relatives.
[...]
5. Concerning those women who are vowed to God and remain in chastity, we order that if they have two brothers they receive a third portion of the inheritance of the father, that is, of that land which the father, possessing by the right of *sors* (allotment), left at the time of his death. Likewise, if she has four or five brothers, let her receive the portion due to her.¹⁹⁸

This law further states that it is not possible to sell or dispose of the *sors* land, which passes only through inheritance. Any other acquired land, either through sale or by gift, can be disposed of as wished by the man or woman who possesses it. Similar laws of the code explain how a mother can inherit from her dead son (LIII), how an aunt and a nephew are to divide their inheritance (LXXV) and who inherits when a man dies without children (XLII).

The Lombard law codes also include similar legislations, examples of which are law 158 of *Edictus Rotari* (AD643) and, especially, the first four laws of *Liutprandi Leges* (AD713-735):

*158. Si quis dereliquerit filiam legitimam unam et filium naturalem unum aut plures et alios parentes proximos aut heredis, aequaliter dividant substantiam defuncti, id est in tres partes: filia legitima accipiat uncias quattuor, quod est tertia pars; naturalis filii uncias quattuor, quod est tertia pars, et parentis proximi aut heredis uncias quattuor, id est tertia pars. Et si parentes proximi non fuerint, tunc curtis regia suscipiat ipsas quattuor uncias.*¹⁹⁹

158. If anyone leaves one legitimate daughter and one or more natural sons and other near relatives or heirs, the substance of the dead man shall be divided equally into three parts: the legitimate daughter is to receive four twelfths, that is, a third part; the natural sons four twelfths, that is, a third part; and the near relatives or heirs four-twelfths, that is, a third part. If there are no near relatives, then the king’s fisc shall receive their four twelfths.²⁰⁰

1. Si quis langobardus sine filiis masculinis legitimis mortuos fuerit, et filias dereliquerit, ipsae ei in omnem hereditatem patris vel matris suae, tamquam filii legitimi masculini, heredis succedant.

¹⁹⁸ *Lex Gundobalda*, law XIV, translated by Drew 1972.

¹⁹⁹ *Edictus Rotari*, law 158, Austrian Academy of Sciences website

²⁰⁰ *Edictus Rotari*, law 158, translated by Drew 1973.

2. *Si quis langobardus se vivente filias suas nupto tradiderit, et alias filias in capillo in casa reliquerit, tunc omnes aequaliter in eius substantia heredis succedant, tam quam filii masculini.*

3. *Si quis langobardus sororis reliquerit, et vivente eum ad marito ambulaverint, tantum habeat ex fratris facultate, si ipse filias reliquerit, quantum in diae votorum acceperunt, quando ad maritum ambulaverunt. Nam si ipse frater neque filiûs neque filias reliquerit, aut si habuerit et ante eum mortui aut mortuae fuerent absque filiis, filiabus: tunc sorores eius, tam qui in capillo remanserunt, quam quae ad maritum ambulaverunt, in omnem substantiam eius ei heredis succedant.*

4. *Si quis langobardus sorores et filias in capillo in casa reliquerit: pariter atque aequaliter, quantaecumque fuerent, in hereditatem eius succedere debeant, tamquam filios legitimos dereliquissit.*²⁰¹

1. (On the succession of daughters) If a Lombard dies without legitimate sons but leaves daughters, the daughters shall succeed as heirs to all the inheritance of the father or mother as if they were legitimate sons.

2. (On the succession of married and unmarried daughters) If a Lombard while living has handed over some of his daughters in marriage and other daughters remain at home unmarried (*in capillo*), then all of the daughters shall equally succeed as heirs to his substance as if they were sons.

3. (On the succession of sisters) [...]

4. (On the succession of unmarried sisters and daughters) [...]²⁰²

Further similar laws are to be found in *Pactus Legis Salicae* and *Lex Salica Karolina* which together form the *Lex Salica* (ca. AD510), or the laws of the Salian Franks. An example from this code is law CVIII:

In like manner it was pleasing and agreed that if a man had neighbours but after his death sons and daughters remained, as long as there were sons, they should have the land, just as the Salic law provides. And if the sons are already dead, then a daughter may receive the land just as the sons would have done if they lived. But if she is dead and a brother survived, then the brother shall have the land, not the neighbours. And if the brother dies and no other brother survives, then a sister may succeed to possession of that land.²⁰³

As we can see from the examples, the laws of the three tribes are very similar. This indicates that Germanic law was virtually the same for all Germanic tribes, whether they migrated through the Continent or remained in their northern homelands. Regional variations and modifications in time certainly occurred, but the main principles and customs on which justice was based remained the same for all tribes, friends or enemies as they may have been.

Germanic women had the right to inherit property when no male heirs preceded them. However, daughters preceded brothers and sisters preceded male cousins. Mothers could inherit from their children if none of these survived and aunts could share inheritance with their nephews. Women also possessed the right to divorce if they were mistreated in marriage (XXXIV of *Lex Gundobalda*) and the right to choose whether to remarry or to go back to their relatives if they became widowed or were set aside by their husbands (199 of *Edictus Rotari* and C and CI of *Pactus legis Salicae*). A limitation to the legal rights of women is set out in both the Lombard and the

²⁰¹ *Liutprandi Leges*, laws 1-4, Austrian Academy of Sciences website

²⁰² *Liutprandi Leges*, laws 1-4, translated by Drew 1979.

²⁰³ *Pactus legis Salicae*, law CVIII, translated by Drew 1991.

Frankish laws: each woman was under the guardianship of a husband or relative (the guardianship being called *dos* in Frankish and *mundium* in Lombard), and he who possessed her guardianship also administered her property and inheritance. A woman would take her possessions with her into marriage and these would be administered by her husband. If she became widowed or divorced the woman and her property would either pass to a new husband or return to the woman's family. Only in some special cases was the woman free to administer her own property: a widow or an unmarried woman with no close male relatives who could own her guardianship was free to do as she wished with her possessions.²⁰⁴

A further interesting point which is found in the Germanic law codes is that of *wergild*, or man-price. Each man and woman was attributed a *wergild* which was to be paid to the family in case of homicide or serious injury. Germanic laws assigned the same value to the *wergild* of both men and women belonging to the same social class. Frankish laws differed slightly, in that within a social class, women of childbearing age (from 12 to 60) were assigned a higher *wergild* than girls or older women, and the same applied to men of fighting age.²⁰⁵

Finally, most Germanic law codes mention provisions against sorcerers and witches, as well as against the casting of spells and the brewing of potions. A fine was to be paid also when a man or woman visited a prophetess or sent a slave to ask of his or her future.²⁰⁶ These laws were promulgated after the Germanic peoples (or at least the kings) had converted to Christianity and might reflect the struggle of eliminating heathen practices such as divination and the commission of curses or magical remedies.

From the various Germanic law codes we can see that women had an important role in society. The social class to which they belonged was more determining than their sex in legal procedures and rights, as we have seen, for example, from *wergild* values. Although men came before women in inheritance patterns, it was not unusual for women to inherit property and in some cases, when no close male relatives survived, the women were also able to administer their property as they wished.

The laws of the Germanic peoples applied to all women of the same social class. In the case of queens, the inherited land was not just a farmstead or some woodland, but a whole kingdom. It was therefore legally possible that in some special cases a woman would inherit and administer a kingdom if no other man had been chosen by the people as king, or if the chosen king was still a

²⁰⁴ *Liutprandi legis*, law 14, translated by Drew 1979.

²⁰⁵ *Pactus legis Salicae*, law XXIV, translated by Drew 1991.

²⁰⁶ *Edictus Rotari*, laws 197 and 376, translated by Drew 1979; *Liutprandi legis*, law 84, translated by Drew 1979; *Pactus legis Salicae*, laws XIX and LXIV, translated by Drew 1991.

child. Queens would protect their child's right to the throne through a strong rule which would discourage other ambitious men from trying to seize power, and the law would permit this.

I will now look more closely at some of these queens, as they are presented in a selection of Germanic literary sources.

Portraits of important Iron Age Germanic women from literary sources

There are many contemporary literary sources which mention and describe high status women in the Germanic Iron Age, which is the period from about AD400 to AD800. In this section I will analyze this corpus of sources and attempt to extract information about important Germanic women and the position they occupied in society. One of the sources I have chosen to use, *Germania*, does not fit into the period of the Germanic Iron Age, but was written some centuries earlier, during the Roman Iron Age. I have nonetheless decided to include this work in my study because some aspects of these earlier described Germanic peoples are still valid in later periods and this work also gives us an insight into the role of Germanic women at the time of the Romans.

Germania

Germania was written by the Roman Cornelius Tacitus in AD 98 and is considered by many to be “the most important literary evidence for the ancient Germans”.²⁰⁷ The Germanics which Tacitus describes are an ethnic category, rather than a linguistic grouping as we intend the term today. At the time of the northern expansion of the Roman Empire towards and beyond the Rhine, the Germanics were those northern barbarian tribes which had not yet been defeated. The term “Germanic” was applied to these people to distinguish them from the Celtic Gauls, who no longer posed a threat as they had already been conquered. The Germanics of Tacitus are therefore “the others”, the barbarians who live in a way different to that of “standard”-Roman and Greek-civilization.²⁰⁸

Germania is Tacitus's second work, and scholars generally accept that it belongs to the category of ethnographic monographs. However, Tacitus does not simply write an account of the Germani as they had become known to the Romans through extensive trade and military expansion; he is considered to be a political historian and a moralist, and the reasons for composing *Germania* are therefore more than historical. Recurring themes which we find in his work are liberty against tyranny, moral corruption and political situations. The *Germani* are portrayed as being free and incorrupt, as well as being “a focal point for Roman fears and aspirations”.²⁰⁹ Tacitus's work therefore seems to have been written as a means for discussing moral and social issues, as well as

²⁰⁷ Rives 1999:1

²⁰⁸ op.cit 16

²⁰⁹ op.cit 52

recounting historical facts “as they happened” and not as tyrants such as the emperor Domitian claimed they happened. Finally, *Germania* was possibly also intended as an “implicit praise” to the deeds of the emperor Trajan.²¹⁰

When using *Germania* as a source for the Germanic peoples it is necessary to consider the extent of its reliability. On one hand, Tacitus presents the *Germani* in a very stereotypical way: he is not interested in describing them as they really were, but uses them to explore social and political issues. Tacitus in fact “is attributing to the *Germani* the same social and moral virtues that the Romans of the late republic and early empire believed had once characterized their own ancestors”.²¹¹ Thus the *Germani* are all strong and brave, but disorganized in battle. They are free and wild, prone to anger and love war, they live by emotions rather than by discipline and reason. On the other hand, the Romans of the 1st century AD did not only know the Germanic peoples through the classical stereotype of the barbarian, but also knew them through direct contact. Trade and military action ensured close contact between Romans and Germanics, so that part of the information regarding these peoples would derive from eye witness accounts. The information which we find in *Germania* is therefore partly based on old Greek and Roman stereotypes and partly on merchant and military accounts. Some of the information present in this work has also been proven through comparison with archaeological and Germanic literary sources. *Germania* must not be considered as a historical account of the *Germani* as they were, but part of the information it contains shows how Romans viewed these barbarian tribes.

Among Tacitus’s descriptions of the Germanic peoples we find a portrait of the courageous and strong woman. We also find mention of individual women who really existed. Of Germanic women in general and of their role within the tribe Tacitus writes:

...these [women] are each man’s most sacred witnesses, these his greatest euologists; to their mothers and wives they take their wounds, and the women are not afraid to count and examine the blows; they bring to the warriors both food and exhortation.²¹²

He further describes the role of women in relation to men and battle by adding that:

Tradition has it that various armies, already wavering about to give way, have been rallied by women through steadfast entreaty and baring of breasts, revealing captivity close by....Not only that, they even think that there is in them some holy and prophetic force, and they neither scorn their advice nor ignore their utterances.²¹³

In this last phrase we find reference to women whom Tacitus had heard about from other authors, and whose existence is proven through various Roman historical documents. Strabo writes about “prophetic priestesses” who accompanied the tribe of the Cimbri to battle and told the future by

²¹⁰ Rives 1999: 51-53

²¹¹ op.cit 62

²¹² *Germania*: 7.2

²¹³ op.cit 8.1, 8.2

slitting the throats of prisoners and watching the blood pouring into great cauldrons. In other sources, such as Dio Cassius and Ceaser we find the names of two prophetesses: Veleda and Ganna, whilst Tacitus mentions a third, Aurinia.²¹⁴ Veleda's existence is well documented: she came from the tribe of the Bucteri and gained authority during the Batavian revolt after she foretold the victory of the Germani. She was often present as one of the witnesses of important political agreements. In AD77 or 78 she was captured by a Roman general and taken to Rome. The poet Statius describes her as "the tall maiden whom the Rhine-drinkers worship".²¹⁵ Veleda was also said to be a virgin, an aspect which contrasts with Caesar's writings in which he says that it was the matrons who performed divination.²¹⁶ The life of Ganna is not so easily traceable, but it is thought that her name comes from Old Norse *gandr*-staff of magic. Ganna was also said to be a virgin. The third mentioned prophetess, Aurinia, is only found in Tacitus. Her name is thought to be Celtic, or to be a corruption of the name Albruna, friend of the elves, a fitting name for a sorceress. Roman documents dealing with Egypt record the name of another prophetess, Baloubourg, called "the sybil of the Semnonnes". Her name was probably "Waluburg", connected to the Gothic *walus* and the Old Norse *völr-völva*.²¹⁷ A further interesting element is that of the Roman emperor Vitellius, who was devoted to a seeress from the tribe of the Chatti, indicating that even the Romans believed in and appreciated women's prophetic skills.²¹⁸

One final consideration which Tacitus makes about Germanic women concerns marriage. He gives a very stereotypical view of Germanic marriages, claiming that men are happy with one wife each and that they marry women who match them in age, height and strength, so that their children are always vigorous. He adds that the wife does not deliver a dowry to the husband, but the husband to the wife and that the wife "comes as an ally to her husband's labours and dangers, and will endure and dare the same things in war".²¹⁹ Although these affirmations are stereotypical and used primarily to contrast the corruption of Roman marriage values, they nonetheless strongly remind us of the rights of women in the later Germanic Iron Age and Viking Age, such as inheritance rights and the right to possession and administration of property. From Tacitus we therefore learn that the Romans considered Germanic women to be strong, independent and brave, just like Germanic men. In addition, some women also possessed prophetic powers. Finally, women in general were able to influence men and exhort them to battle.

²¹⁴ Rives 1999: 154-55

²¹⁵ op.cit 155

²¹⁶ ibid

²¹⁷ ibid

²¹⁸ op.cit 154

²¹⁹ *Germania*: 18.1 to 20.2

Historia Francorum

The history of the Franks was written by Bishop Gregory of Tours between AD575 and AD594.²²⁰ It is formed by 10 books: book I deals with the period from the Creation until the death of St. Martin at Tours in 397. Books II to IV fill the period between 397 and the assassination of King Sigibert in 575. Although Gregory describes events which happened during his lifetime from book IV onwards, it is only from book V that he actively took part in many of these events, after becoming bishop in 573. Books V to X are therefore a first hand and contemporary account of events which happened between 575 and the death of the bishop in 594.²²¹ The *Historia* is structured in the form of a chronicle, a historiographical collection of events set out in chronological order and described “as they happened”, with no reasoned afterthoughts regarding links of cause and effect. Gregory also copied letters and documents into his chronicle in order to support his claims with evidence. However, his *Historia* is by no means an objective account of history, but describes events through the eyes of a bishop and therefore of the Church. As Thorpe claims:

Gregory was a zealous churchman: naturally enough, he always saw situations from the viewpoint of the Church; and a king who was regular in his attendance at the offices of the Church or a count who made a strenuous effort to protect church buildings and church property might hope to find his voice more readily condoned in the History.²²²

There are also some inconsistencies regarding dating and ruler succession throughout the *Historia*. Furthermore, there are no other contemporary accounts which can be compared to *Historia Francorum*, so it is not possible to verify the validity of Gregory’s claims and descriptions.

Historia Francorum is to be considered, at least from books V to X, as a first hand account of events described from the point of view of the author, who took part in many of them but who also interpreted them through the eyes of the Church. What is interesting to this study is that Gregory of Tours does not only talk about kings and bishops, but also extensively about women, especially those of the Merovingian dynasty and those married into the dynasty. His accounts are crude and realistic and, when taken critically, can prove useful in the task of determining the position occupied by Frankish women in 6th century society. Although we meet women throughout all the books of the *Historia*, it is those who lived at the time of Gregory and which he met in person who are of most interest.

From book IV onwards we meet two female characters who left a great mark on the history of the Franks. These women are Fredegund and Brunhild. The latter is also mentioned by Paul the Deacon in his *Historia Langobardorum*, and many scholars have pointed out that the lives of these two women could be the origin of the legendary female figures from the *Saga of the Nibelungs*,

²²⁰ Thorpe 1974: 16-23

²²¹ *ibid*

²²² *op.cit* 34

Volsungasaga and the heroic poems of the *Poetic Edda*.²²³ The evil Queen Fredegund is compared to the literary figure of Guðrun, wife of King Atli (Attila of the Huns) who commits horrific crimes, whilst Brunhild is thought to be Brynhildr, the sworn enemy of Guðrun and the cause of many troubles. It is possible that historical events which occurred in the 6th century evolved into legends by the 13th and were recorded as such by medieval Icelandic scholars 700 years after they originally happened.

According to Gregory, Queen Fredegund was at first a servant of King Chilperic's first wife. She was able to win Chilperic's affection so that he divorced his wife, shut her in a nunnery and married Fredegund instead. Chilperic's brother Sigibert disapproved of this habit of marrying one's own servants, so he asked for the hand of Brunhild, daughter of King Athanagild of Spain. He hoped that, after seeing Brunhild, Chilperic would also wish to marry a noble woman and dismiss his servant wives. The plan worked and Chilperic dismissed Fredegund and married Brunhild's sister Galswinth. However, he still slept with Fredegund and Galswinth often complained of this until she was murdered in AD568. It is unclear whether Fredegund or Chilperic killed Galswinth, but after her death the king officially took Fredegund back and made her a queen once more. Brunhild, being Galswinth's sister, took revenge for the murder and started a feud with Fredegund that would last until the death of the latter in AD597. The feud was probably continued by both parts, but in *Historia Francorum* it is always Fredegund who commits the most evil acts. Brunhild, at the death of her husband Sigibert, married Merovech, the son of king Chilperic. Fredegund was mysteriously widowed in AD584, when Chilperic was discovered dead. She was accused of the murder of the king and took refuge in the cathedral in Paris, taking with her the many riches of her husband. By then Fredegund was accused of murdering Galswinth, Sigibert, Chilperic, Merovech and Clovis (another son of Chilperic). In addition to this, Gregory claims that she tortured and killed many common people, as well as attempting to murder Brunhild and her son Childebert.²²⁴ Gregory writes of her that "[Fredegund] had no fear of God, in whose house she had sought sanctuary, and she was the prime mover in many outrages".²²⁵ It is possible that of the two women, Brunhild was the one most devoted to the Church, and therefore she is described in a better light by Gregory, whilst Fredegund, who accused the bishop of slandering her, was his personal enemy and is therefore portrayed as a national enemy in the *Historia*. What is important from this account is that Gregory gives evidence for the power and influence of Frankish queens in the 6th century. Regardless of these queens being portrayed as good or bad, it is clear from the *Historia* that they

²²³ Thorpe 1974: 15

²²⁴ *Historia Francorum*: books IV-X

²²⁵ op.cit book VII, ch. 15

could be independent and enjoy power. They could also rule as regents for their children when these were proclaimed kings before being fully grown.

One further woman who lived at the time of Gregory and who briefly deserves mentioning is the nun Clotild, daughter of King Chilperic. Clotild was of noble birth and resented the poverty in which she claimed to be forced to live as a nun. She led the revolt of the nuns of Poitiers and by the end was commanding an army of bandits and outlaws.²²⁶ Gregory of Tours was one of the judges at her trial and so followed her case very closely. He condemned her actions, which he saw as an open rebellion against the Church, but he nonetheless described her acts of leadership and independence in the *Historia*.

Finally, Gregory of Tours also mentions Queen Aregund, wife of Lothar I and mother of Chilperic, whose sarcophagus was discovered in the basilica of St. Denis in Paris, as we have seen in the previous chapter. Aregund is found in chapter 3 of book IV. In this chapter we learn how Ingund, wife of Lothar, asked her husband to find a suitable man for her sister Aregund. Lothar was filled with desire for Aregund and decided he should be that man and so he married her, discarding Ingund.²²⁷ Aregund's son, Chilperic, was later to become the husband (and probably victim) of Queen Fredegund.

In *Historia Francorum* we find that many high status women are portrayed as cruel and violent. Even the "good" women, such as Brunhild, were forced to use violence to counter that of their enemies. Generally, noble women are described by Gregory as strong and independent, taking revenge on wrongs done to them and controlling the lives of kings as if they were chess pieces, through lies, treachery, cruelty and outright evil. The women who Gregory talks of best are obviously those who were obedient and submissive, who prayed and had churches built. The women who were more active and proud of their social status were instead those who, according to the writings of the bishop, used cruelty and violence most, with the aim of destroying enemies and gaining power and richness. A woman like Fredegund, who started out as a servant maid, was able to become so powerful that no one could stop her continuous killings and torturings.

The most prominent female figures portrayed by Gregory of Tours are therefore those who did not live according to the behavioural norms which the Church expected of women. Being of high-status these women could not simply be punished and forced into their proper place either. Although Gregory may have portrayed some Frankish queens in an exaggeratedly negative light, it is still possible to gather that noble women in the 6th century enjoyed a degree of independence and power and were able to occupy prominent social and political positions in certain circumstances.

²²⁶ *Historia Francorum*: book X. ch 15

²²⁷ *op.cit* book IV, ch 3

Historia Langobardorum

The history of the Lombards was written by Paul the Deacon between AD787 and AD796.²²⁸ Paul the Deacon was a Lombard monk who came from a noble family and had close contacts with the dukes of Friuli and also with the royal court of Pavia. Although he resided in the monastery of Montecassino, he travelled widely and even spent some years at the court of Charlemagne.²²⁹ He wrote *Historia Langobardorum* primarily as a history of the Lombard people and for the Lombard people. However, Paul was also interested in writing this work in response to the violent papal opposition to the Lombards, which the Church of Rome considered uncivilized barbarians and enemies of God. With his *Historia* Paul therefore hoped to give his people a place in “civilized” history and to prove to the Church that the Lombards also possessed a rich culture with sound values and so were worthy of respect.²³⁰

Historia Langobardorum is based in part on texts such as the *Origo gentis Langobardorum* (origin of the Lombard peoples) and on the various Lombard law codes. Most importantly, however, Paul the Deacon draws his information from oral sources, from the tales of travellers and nobles and from his personal experiences. His work starts with the Scandinavian origins of his people, possibly around the 2nd or 3rd century, and continues until the 8th century; the *Historia* is therefore more reliable in its final books, which record events contemporary to the author, some of which he may have been present at. Some scholars have attributed to Paul the role of political councillor, but he very probably never occupied such a position. He was, however, engaged in politics, as he spent much time in the company of kings and dukes.²³¹ *Historia Langobardorum* can be considered primarily as a chronological history of the Lombard people. Although it is not a propagandistic work, it nonetheless portrays the Lombards as possessors of a rich and civil history, and it also engages in political questions.

In *Historia Langobardorum* we not only find the history of the Lombard kings and dukes, but we also find many references to queens and noble women. In book I Paul describes the events that took place at the start of the history of the Lombards, and central to these events is a powerful queen called Gambara. Paul narrates of how the cold weather and lack of food forced the Lombards, then called *Winnili*, to choose certain families who would leave the homeland and seek a new place to live elsewhere. These families formed the migrating group of the Lombards and Queen Gambara was among them, being the mother of the two brothers who led the group. Although a faithful Christian, Paul decides to narrate the pagan tale of how the Lombards got their name and he

²²⁸ Capo 1992: XXVIII

²²⁹ op.cit XX-XXVIII

²³⁰ op.cit XXXIII

²³¹ op.cit XXV

dedicates various chapters to it. The Lombards had to cross the land of the Vandals, but these would not give right of passage without a battle, as they enjoyed the favour of the god Godan and were sure of victory. Queen Gambara therefore spoke to the goddess Frea, Godan's wife, during the night and the goddess agreed to help the Lombards. In the morning Gambara had all the Lombard women lined up on the battlefield with their hair in front of their faces. When Godan awoke and looked onto the battlefield he asked who those people with long beards were (long-beard being *lango-bard*) and Frea answered that he could not deny victory to the people he had just named. Thus thanks to Queen Gambara, the Lombards won the battle against the Vandals and were able to cross their lands.²³² Paul's description of Queen Gambara is very interesting as she is portrayed as a wise ruler and also as a priestess or prophetess who communicates with the gods. She is described as being "*mulier quantum inter suos et ingenio acris et consiilis provida; de cuius in rebus dubiis prudential non minimum confidebant*" (woman among them strong in intelligence and provident in advice; on whose wisdom they put great trust in difficult situations).²³³

Throughout the six books which make up the *Historia* we find many more female figures, who are often described as being strong, independent and also evil, not unlike Gregory of Tours's descriptions of Frankish noble women. One of these figures is Rosmunda, who is also mentioned in *Historia Francorum* as the killer of King Alboin. Rosmunda was the daughter of the Gepid King Cunimondo, who had been defeated in battle by the Lombards, and she was taken as a slave and became the wife of King Alboin. Alboin made Rosmunda drink from the skull of her father, a customary way of honouring worthy dead enemies among the Lombards and other Germanic tribes, but the Queen took this action as an offence. Rosmunda therefore had King Alboin killed by a servant and then also attempted to poison the servant, but he discovered her and she died with him.²³⁴

In book III of the *Historia* we find various references to the Frankish Queen Brunehilde (Brunhild), who features prominently in *Historia Francorum*. Paul the Deacon tells of her that she ruled the kingdom of the Franks, first jointly with her son and then alone, as her nephews were still children. This aspect of Queen Brunhild is very interesting and we have evidence that a woman was sometimes given the power to rule a kingdom if the heirs to the throne were too young. This custom is confirmed also in *Historia Francorum* and is derived from the inheritance laws of the time, which in the case of kings and queens apply to whole kingdoms rather than to single farmsteads or portions of land.

²³² *Historia Langobardorum*: book I, ch.3-8

²³³ *op.cit* book I, ch.3; my translation.

²³⁴ *op.cit* book II, ch.28

Probably the most important Lombard Queen mentioned by Paul the Deacon is Teodolinda, who is described in detail in chapter II of this thesis, in connection with the archaeological finds of her burial. Paul the Deacon presents Teodolinda as a good Christian, who had many churches built and dedicated to God. Teodolinda was also often in contact with Pope Gregory the Great, as we can see from the letters between them which are reported in book IV of the *Historia*.²³⁵ As we have seen, Teodolinda was accorded the honour of choosing the next Lombard king at the death of her husband. In Paul the Deacon's words:

Regina vero Theudelinda quia satis placebat Langobardis, permiserunt eam in regia consistere dignitate, suadentes ei, ut sibi quem ipsa evoluisse ex omnibus Langobardis vilum eligeret, talem scilicet qui regnum regere utiliter possit. Illa vero consilium cum prudentibus habens, Agilulfum duce[m] Taurinatium et sibi virum et Langobardorum genti regem elegit.

As for Queen Teodolinda, because she was much liked by the Lombards, they permitted her to remain in the royal palace, inviting her to choose from among all the Lombards the husband that she wished: obviously one that was such as to be able to hold the kingdom well. She counselled with the wise and chose as her husband and as king for the Lombard people Agilulf, duke of the Turinians.²³⁶

Teodolinda lived between the 6th and 7th centuries, so over 100 years before Paul the Deacon.

However, although he did not meet her directly, Paul came in contact with her descendants. In his work, like all Lombards, he remembers her as the most loved queen of these people.

Poetic Edda

The *Poetic Edda* is formed by a collection of mythological and heroic poems which were written down in 13th century Iceland. The poems therefore reflect the mentality of the Christian Middle Ages as well as containing elements of the Viking Age and the Migration Period. It is very hard to distinguish specific elements from each of these periods and this problem has been a matter of scholarly debate for many years.

The many contrasting arguments regarding the use of Norse literary material as a source for the Viking Age are not always directly applied to the *Poetic Edda*, but they are nonetheless valid for this source too. One particularly interesting view is that of the scholar Claus Krag, who has analyzed the reliability of *Ynglingatal* and *Ynglingasaga*; his arguments regarding *Ynglingatal* can be applied to eddic poetry. Krag maintains that the poem *Ynglingatal* is later than AD900 (to which it has been dated) because it contains elements derived from the Christian world. The genealogy of the Ynglings, for example, is greatly influenced by the process of euhemerism. Euhemerism is used to explain "the heathen gods as historical figures who had once been made the objects of a divine cult, as a result of devilish deception and magic, in the Christian view".²³⁷ Furthermore,

²³⁵ *Historia Langobardorum*: book IV, ch. 9

²³⁶ *op.cit* book III, ch. 35; my translation.

²³⁷ Krag 1991: 256

Ynglingatal, as well as many other 13th century Norse literary works, is greatly dependent on “*interpretatio Christiana*, in which the heathen cult is seen as a demonic inversion of the Christian one, and in which devils are worshipped”.²³⁸ Not only cults, but also human figures are affected by *interpretatio Christiana* in Norse literary sources: as Claire Cavaleri points out in her master’s thesis, the same principle is to be found in the *Vínland Sagas*. These sagas in fact, far more than being accounts of voyages to *Vínland*, are stories designed to teach appropriate Christian behaviour. Cavaleri has identified in the female characters of Freydís and Guðríd, paradigms for Eve and the Virgin Mary. Freydís is the evil woman who makes her own decisions, tricks people and is also a criminal, whilst Guðríd is a pious and passive woman who lets men make decisions for her, as is appropriate in a medieval Christian society.²³⁹ Freydís in particular can be compared to the figures of Brynhildr and Guðrún in the *Poetic Edda*, evil and pagan women who commit crimes and are condemned to a miserable life as a result of their “bad” (non-Christian) behaviour.

A different argument is offered by the scholar Bjarne Fidjestøl, who has analyzed the mythological poems of the *Poetic Edda* and identified, not 13th century elements, but archaic ones. Fidjestøl bases his arguments on analysis of style and meter of the poems and concludes that it is possible to extrapolate a general date for the oral forms of the poems from the written texts. From this he concludes that at least some poems are much older than the 13th century and therefore contain elements of this earlier period and can, to a certain extent, be used as a source for this period. Fidjestøl clearly states that it is impossible to date the origin of an eddic poem with any degree of precision, but he maintains that it is in some cases possible to establish a general period of composition, which can be as early as the Migration Period.²⁴⁰

Overall, the *Poetic Edda* can be a useful source in support of my thesis in that it gives evidence for the survival of the Germanic tradition in Scandinavia into the medieval period. Some of the characters present in eddic heroic poems, such as Atli (the Hun leader Attila), Guðrún and Brynhildr (Fredegund and Brunhild of the Franks) have historic origins as well as being mentioned in Germanic literary sources, and some events may also have a historical base. However, as the poems were written in the 13th century they reflect the views of this period and not of the original period in which the characters possibly lived. Women in eddic heroic poems are presented as strong and independent, but also as evil and dangerous. Also, their social status is never given: at most they are mentioned as being daughters of kings, but never queens. Furthermore it is important to remember that poems were composed primarily as entertainment and not as historical sources. What we have today is a set of entertainment stories modified to fit Middle Age Christian mentality.

²³⁸ Krag 1991: 256

²³⁹ Cavaleri 2008

²⁴⁰ Fidjestøl 1999: 187-263

Within these stories we still find traces of past historical figures, but nothing more than the names of some can be taken as a realistic element.

If we look more closely at the individual parts of the *Poetic Edda* we find a group of poems which go together and narrate the tale of the Niflungs. This story is also the base for *Volsungasaga* and the saga of the Nibelungs. The story starts with *Gripisspa* (Gripir's prophecy) and ends with *Hamdismál* (the lay of Hamdir). Two female characters stand out in these poems: the above mentioned Brynhildr and Guðrún. These women are central to the tale in that they bring about a series of deaths and feuds because of their acts of revenge. A fitting example can be found in *Atlakviða*, when Guðrún kills her sons by Atli and feeds them to him:

<i>Sona hefir þinna,</i>	Your own sons,
<i>sverða deilir,</i>	sharer-out of swords,
<i>hjörtu hrædreyrug</i>	hearts corpse-bloody
<i>við hunang of tuggin;</i>	you are chewing up with honey;
<i>melta knáttu, móðugr!</i>	you are savouring,
<i>manna valbráðir,</i>	proud lord, human flesh,
<i>eta at ölkrásum</i>	eating it as ale-appetizers
<i>ok í öndugi at senda.²⁴¹</i>	and sending it to the high seat. ²⁴²

Both these women are portrayed as strong and wicked, they wield swords and fight alongside men and commit extreme acts. In one poem Brynhildr rides to Hel in the wagon she was burned in to finally join her lover Sigurd. During her journey she meets an ogress and at the end of the conversation with her Brynhildr says:

<i>Munu við ofstríð</i>	Men and women
<i>alls til lengi</i>	those who are living
<i>konur ok karlar</i>	must spend all too long
<i>kvikvir fæðask;</i>	in terrible sorrow;
<i>við skulum okkrum</i>	but we shall never
<i>aldri slíta</i>	ever part
<i>Sigurðr saman.</i>	Sigurd and I will be together.
<i>Sökkstu, gýgjar kyn.²⁴³</i>	Now, ogress sink. ²⁴⁴

Guðrún, on the other hand, attempts suicide but doesn't succeed and only dies after many years and many sorrows. In the prose introduction to the poem *Guðrúnarhvöt* we read:

Guðrún gekk þá til sævar, er hon hafði drepit Atla. Gekk hon út á sæinn ok vildi fara sér. Hon mátti eigi sökkva. Rak hana yfir fjörðinn á land Jónakrs konungs. Hann fekk hennar.²⁴⁵

²⁴¹ *The Poetic Edda, Atlakviða* v. 36, Northvegr website.

²⁴² op.cit translated by Larrington 1996.

²⁴³ *The Poetic Edda, Helreið Brynhildar* v. 14, Northvegr website.

²⁴⁴ op.cit translated by Larrington 1996.

²⁴⁵ *The Poetic Edda, Guðrúnarhvöt*, Northvegr website.

When Guðrún had killed Atli she went to the sea. She waded out into the water and wanted to drown herself but she could not sink. She drifted across the fjord to the land of king Ionakr who married her.²⁴⁶

These characters echo what we read in *Historia Francorum* about the feud between Queen Fredegund and Queen Brunhild, although they are greatly embellished with heroic acts, murders, treachery and supernatural elements. If we consider the above mentioned arguments regarding *interpretatio Christiana*, we can see how this principle can be applied to the female characters of these poems and how a Middle Age Christian would view their behaviour as inappropriate and their suffering as a consequence of this.

Finally, the heroic poems of the *Edda* contain a large amount of magical elements: in the Helgi poems, for example, we find that women, who are described as human daughters of kings, are also valkyries at the same time, shield maidens of the god Odin. One example of this is found in *Helgakviða Hjörvardssonar*, where we learn about Helgi and Svava:

*Þau Helgi ok Sváfa veittust vórar ok unnust furðu mikit. Sváfa var heima með feðr sínum, en Helgi í hernaði. Var Sváfa valkyrja enn sem fyrr.*²⁴⁷

Helgi and Svava exchanged vows and loved one another very much. Svava stayed at home with her father, and Helgi went raiding. Svava was a valkyrie just as before.²⁴⁸

Elements such as reincarnation and return from the realm of the dead are also present in these poems and obviously reflect pagan folktale and myth rather than history. In *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*, for example, we see how the dead Helgi visits his mound and asks his woman Sigrún to tend to his many wounds, which are caused by her tears. Verse 42 of the poem reads:

<i>Út gakk þú, Sigrún</i>	Go outside Sigrún
<i>frá Sefafjöllum,</i>	out from Sefafell,
<i>ef þik folks jaðar</i>	if you want to meet
<i>finna lystir,</i>	the leader of the army,
<i>upp er haugr lokinn,</i>	the mound has opened up,
<i>kominn er Helgi,</i>	Helgi has come,
<i>dolgsþor dreyra,</i>	his wounds are bleeding,
<i>döglíngr bað þik</i>	the prince asks you
<i>at þú sárdropa</i>	to staunch
<i>svefja skyldir.</i> ²⁴⁹	his injuries. ²⁵⁰

In conclusion the *Poetic Edda* indicates that the Germanic tradition was well known in Scandinavia and that it was part of the Norse world. Therefore, other elements of Germanic society can also be applied to the Early Viking Age. This in turn supports the use of Germanic sources in relation to the Oseberg burial. The *Poetic Edda* is a valid source for the role of women in the Iron

²⁴⁶ *The Poetic Edda, Guðrúnarhvöt*, translated by Larrington 1996.

²⁴⁷ *The Poetic Edda, Helgakviða Hjörvardssonar*, Northvegr website.

²⁴⁸ op.cit translated by Larrington 1996.

²⁴⁹ *The Poetic Edda, Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*, Northvegr website.

²⁵⁰ op.cit translated by Larrington 1996.

Age and Viking Age because it contains elements and traces of the mentality of these periods. However, elements from the Middle Ages are also present in the poems and it is sometimes hard to distinguish the older features from the younger ones. The Edda is therefore not to be taken at face value: rather, its poems are to be analyzed in detail before being used as a source for the Viking Age and Migration Period.

Beowulf

Beowulf is a heroic legendary poem, written by an Anglo-Saxon around AD1000 according to the dating of the manuscript. The story told in *Beowulf* takes place in Scandinavia, more precisely in Denmark, and describes events that happened in the late 5th century. Scholars generally agree that many of the characters and events described in the poem are historical, although they are then seeped in legend and tales of sea monsters and dragons. In *Historia Francorum*, for example, we find mention of a Danish fleet which invaded Gaul and was lead by King Chlochliac,²⁵¹ which is King Hygelac in *Beowulf*. The poem is, however, not a historical work, but a literary composition designed for entertainment. Therefore, in order to use it as a source for the Iron Age and Viking Age, the same arguments which have been given for the *Poetic Edda* are to be applied.

Beowulf contains some historical facts and figures, but it also contains much fiction. Furthermore, it was written by a Christian and consequently we find Christian motifs throughout the poem. When looking at the women mentioned in *Beowulf* we find that they are portrayed in a way that is closer to the Germanic sources such as *Historia Francorum* and *Historia Langobardorum* rather than to the *Poetic Edda*. Although written by a Christian, the women in *Beowulf* do not seem to emphasize the “wrong” pagan behaviour, but are instead treated as respectful and wise figures. They are mentioned as queens and in the poem we see them making important decisions and speaking during royal councils, as well as performing the important Germanic function of cup bearers at feasts.

The most prominent female character mentioned in *Beowulf* is Queen Wealhtheow, wife of King Hrothgar of the Danes. She is first encountered in the action of passing round the hall with the welcoming cup of mead, which she hands to the warriors in order of importance, starting with her king. In this action she shows the visitors who the most powerful men are and establishes the hierarchy of the hall for them. As Wealhtheow serves drink to Beowulf she herself asks him to rid the Danes of the monster Grendel. When Beowulf returns victorious from the fight with Grendel, Wealhtheow presents him with golden gifts. She also speaks to the hall and expresses her wish that the Danish kingdom would remain in Danish hands, in the hands of her sons.²⁵² The character of Wealhtheow is presented as a woman who has the power to push certain political decisions within a

²⁵¹ *Historia Francorum*, book III, ch. 3

²⁵² *Beowulf* lines 1169-1232

hall of chieftains and retainers. Her words are listened to and considered, just as the words of a ruling man would be. She gives gold and obtains promises in return just like the king does with his retainers. This characterization reflects the Germanic culture far more than the Christian one although the poem was written by a Christian man.

One further female character who corresponds to the Germanic characterization of a queen is Hygd, the wife of the Geatish chieftain Hygelac. After the death of Hygelac, Hygd offers the kingdom to Beowulf because her son is too young to rule. In the poem Beowulf refuses and Hygd is therefore the effective ruler of the Geats.²⁵³

In *Beowulf* we find a variety of Germanic elements which have survived from the 5th to the 11th century, when the story was put into writing. The poem may be older than the manuscript and may have had various differing oral forms, but it is impossible to find evidence of this. What is important is that certain historical figures and events have survived through tradition and legend and are still partly discernable in the poem. The Christian elements in *Beowulf* are set in harmony with the older Germanic culture, rather than treating it as a demoniacal society. Therefore, it is possible that aspects such as the position of queens reflect Germanic practices as well as the Anglo-Saxon interpretation of them and can be used, to a certain extent, in support of my thesis.

Considerations on the literary sources and their connection to the Viking Age and the Oseberg burial

In this chapter I have given an overview of the literary sources which support the claim that noble women occupied an important and prominent position in Germanic society. I have also shown how Germanic society and Viking Age society are essentially the same thing and share the same principles. Germanic law codes from various tribes have many points in common with what we know of Viking Age laws from rune stone evidence, as described in Chapter II. What is most evident is that both sources indicate women's right to inherit property and to administer it, an aspect which applied to queens translates into inheritance and administration of kingdoms in certain circumstances.

A comparison of literary sources is more complex than a comparison of archaeological material because there are many more secondary factors which must be considered, such as varying points of view, purposes for creating the work, time in which the work was written, political situations etc. However, literary sources are nonetheless a useful element in the understanding of the Early Viking Age and consequently of the Oseberg burial.

²⁵³ *Beowulf* lines 2369-2379

Table 5: literary sources and the factors that influence their reliability

	<i>Date of written composition</i>	<i>Period it describes</i>	<i>Point of view</i>	<i>Genre/purpose</i>	<i>Lapse between events and composition</i>
Germania	1 st century	1 st century	Roman politician	Description of people, social and moral issues	Contemporary or near-contemporary
Historia Francorum	6 th century	Creation to 6 th century	Church: bishop; Gallo-Roman	Chronological history of people and events	From creation to contemporary
Historia Langobardorum	8 th century	Ca. 3 rd to 8 th century	Church: monk; Lombard	Chronological history of people and events	From 5 centuries to contemporary
Poetic Edda	13 th century	Possibly 5 th -6 th century	Medieval Christian Icelandic scholars	Poems primarily for entertainment, possibly Christian additions	7-8 centuries
Beowulf	11 th century	Possibly 5 th -6 th century	Christian Anglo-Saxon	Poem for entertainment with some Christian elements	5-6 centuries

Table 6: the role of high-status women in the literary sources

	<i>Queens</i>	<i>Daughters of kings only</i>	<i>Rule kingdoms</i>	<i>Evil</i>	<i>Magic/prophetic</i>	<i>Strong</i>	<i>Independent</i>	<i>Authoritative</i>
Germania					X	X		X
Historia Francorum	X		X	X		X	X	X
Historia Langobardorum	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
Poetic Edda		X		X	X	X	X	
Beowulf	X		X			X	X	X

Comparison of the elements which characterize women in the various literary sources shows a closer affinity between *Historia Francorum*, *Historia Langobardorum* and *Beowulf*. These three

works all describe women in a similar way, as queens with power, although *Beowulf* is a poem for entertainment and not intended as a record of history. The *Poetic Edda* and *Germania* instead present a different picture, one with evil and sometimes magical women who are never mentioned as queens and the other with strong and sometimes authoritative prophetesses who are also never described as queens. We have seen how especially the *Poetic Edda* is not to be taken at face value when used as a source for the Iron and Viking Age, although if its poems are analyzed carefully, it is still possible to discern social elements from these periods in the texts. Most importantly, the *Poetic Edda* confirms that Germanic elements were present in Norse society. Similarly, *Germania* is useful in determining the early origin of certain elements of Germanic societies, such as the social standing of women and the importance of prophetesses, but the information it contains must once again not be taken at face value.

In conclusion the literary sources support the results obtained from analysis of the archaeological material. High-status women in the Germanic Iron Age and in the Viking Age enjoyed a prominent social position and, in certain circumstances, could occupy the same role as men. Widows especially were not subordinate to men and had much power. Administration of property and decision making were tasks which belonged to women as much as to men and queens had the possibility of ruling kingdoms when they were widowed and had small children or no children. The Oseberg women belong to the Late Iron Age-Early Viking Age and therefore were part of a Germanic society with characteristics like the ones described in the various law codes and other literary works. According to these literary sources it was fully possible that one of the women was a queen and ruled a kingdom by herself as a king would have done, thereby receiving a king's burial.

Conclusion

Throughout my thesis I have attempted to argue in favour of the theory which I set out in the *problemstilling*, namely that the Oseberg burial is first and foremost a secular grave, in which religious or cultic aspects may also be represented, but are not necessarily the most important feature. My arguments are clearly against the idea that Oseberg is the richest burial in Europe, that it is unparalleled and that it is unique.

I have tried to present a summary of the finds and theories related to Oseberg and I have then compared the grave to a selection of burials which present similarities to it. Comparison to other ship burials, to other Scandinavian female burials, to sorceress burials and to Germanic Iron Age female burials has brought an interesting result: the Oseberg burial shares some features with all these types of burials, but especially with other ship burials. If it is to be considered unique, it is only because it does not fit completely in any of the above mentioned categories, but it contains elements from each of these. Its richness is to be measured on the basis of the items decorated with extensive artistic woodcarving rather than on the basis of the presence of precious metals. The richness of Oseberg is also given by its size and by the number of sacrificed animals, which is not oddly high as some scholars have suggested,²⁵⁴ but is representative of the tradition of the time in regard to chieftain's ship burials. A total of 21 animals was sacrificed at Oseberg; the same number was also sacrificed at Gokstad (when counting the peacock) and 15 animals were sacrificed at Ladby. At Hedeby only three horses were sacrificed, but in addition to these there were also two humans.

According to archaeological comparative analysis the Oseberg burial can therefore be considered as the burial of a powerful secular ruler who in this case was a woman, and who was accompanied in the grave by a relative, servant or priestess who died either at the same time or before the ruler and who was buried together with her. An alternative possibility is that the two women were relatives of the king, either mother and sister, or mother and wife, who died shortly after one another and who were so much loved by the ruler that they received a burial worthy of kings.

In the last part of my work I have focused on literary sources rather than archaeological ones. By including the Viking Age in the Germanic cultural sphere (which is possible because the Vikings were the descendants of that part of the various Germanic populations who did not move during the Migration Period), it has been possible to gain access to a much wider corpus of relevant written sources. First of all, Germanic law codes have proved extremely useful in the evaluation and understanding of the role and legal possibilities of women both in the Iron Age and in the Viking

²⁵⁴ Christensen & others 1992: 7

Age. Comparison to Viking Age memorial runestones has further proven that the Germanic inheritance patterns and the social position of women were still valid in the Viking period. Women had the right to possess property and to inherit either after or jointly with their close male relatives. In some special cases women, who although they owned possessions were always under the guardianship of a man, gained full rights over their property and were able to administer it as they wished: this was applicable to the categories of widows and unmarried women who had no close male relatives and no children left. If we apply this principle to queens, we can see how it was legally possible for a woman in the Iron Age and in the Viking Age to become the ruler of a kingdom. Further, the literary sources which I have analysed provide us with many examples of such women who, widowed and with small children or childless, gained the power to rule a kingdom, at least for a period of time. A female ruler would therefore gain the same status as a male ruler, and this status would be reflected in her royal burial. Therefore, powerful women like Queen Teodolinda of the Lombards stand out both in history and in archaeology as figures of extreme richness, greatness and power. It is possible that this is also the case with one of the women buried at Oseberg: she would legally have been able, in certain circumstances, to inherit and rule a kingdom and therefore be elevated to the highest possible social status and consequently receive an appropriate burial.

We have also seen how certain important and high-status female figures were also attributed prophetic powers or shared a special affinity with the gods, such as the prophetesses mentioned by Tacitus and the other Roman writers, and the first Lombard queen Gambara. The gift of prophecy was sometimes attributed to wise women, but their overall importance was nonetheless given primarily by their secular social status. Concerning Oseberg, it is fully possible that one or both the women had cultic or religious functions in their society and even that people would summon them from their mound after their death, but this cannot be considered the sole reason for which these women were placed in a kingly ship burial.

I believe that Germanic sources, both written and archaeological, are useful in the analysis of Oseberg because they help to put the burial into perspective. What with the scarce Viking Age sources seems a far away and inaccessible past, becomes tangible and closer through Germanic sources, so we can comprehend much better who the Oseberg women were. Mythical and magical functions are usually attributed when the past is dark and we know little about it for lack of sources. By using Germanic sources we are turning the lights on in this dark past and it all becomes clearer. The remote and obscure magical elements leave place to the secular and realistic ones. Thus Oseberg is, according to this study, not the grave of a demigoddess, but the grave of a powerful queen. This queen, being the head figure of the kingdom (if she was that and not more simply the

much loved mother or wife of a king), would naturally have presided religious ceremonies and held the function of a high priestess, but this could be just one of the roles commonly attributed to rulers before the coming to power of the Church institution. Before the separate powerful entity of the Church emerged, the spiritual aspect of a community was presided over by the ruler, as secular and spiritual were all part of everyday life and not two separate things.

In conclusion I can say that the initial hypothesis which I presented in the introduction to my work can be proved valid, to a certain extent, thanks to the analysed sources. Of course it is impossible to determine exactly which function the Oseberg women had in their community and exactly for what reason they were placed in a ship mound, but I think that by analyzing Germanic as well as Viking Age sources I have come closer to a plausible answer. The most important aspect of my arguments is that they prove that women could legally become rulers of kingdoms when the inheritance principles were applied to queens, as shown in Germanic law codes and some memorial runestones, and consequently they could receive a ruler's burial, as we have evidence for in the archaeological record. Germanic literary sources further enlighten the role of women in the Iron Age and Viking Age literary sources confirm this role.

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