



Norse and Viking Ramblings

A gentle wander through the Viking world

Saturday, 9 September 2017

Let's Debate Female Viking Warriors Yet Again

The Viking Twittersphere is currently alive with tweets about a new article with the arresting title of '[A female Viking warrior confirmed by genomics](#)'.* The article concerns the interpretation of a particular burial at Birka, in Sweden. Since I do not think this is a matter which can be dealt with in the space of 140 characters, even when 'threaded', and one or two have asked what I think, then I have decided to put a few thoughts down here while the matter is fresh. I would however urge you not to read this until you have read the article first - it is open access and available to all, following the link above. Don't forget to read the 'Supporting Information' as well. I would also point out that this is a preview of an article not yet fully published.

To put my cards on the table, I will say that I have always thought (and to some extent still do) that the fascination with women warriors, both in popular culture and in academic discourse, is heavily, probably too heavily, influenced by 20th- and 21st-century desires. At the same time, I also think it is interesting to debate these matters and I am happy to do so (although not with the type of people who write UTL words to the effect of 'I just KNOW there were women warriors in the Viking Age'). I try to keep an open mind, but I also get very frustrated by what I consider to be academic discourse that seems to be mostly concerned with grabbing attention in order to facilitate further funding and/or claim 'impact'. And academic discourse in which topics that have been of concern to the humanities for decades if not centuries are suddenly somehow 'confirmed' by those gods, the scientists, without giving sufficient consideration of the 'non-scientific' evidence which inevitably raised the questions in the first place. (And here I wish we used the word 'science' in the same way as the Germans do *Wissenschaft*, which would make all evidence 'scientific', i.e. subject to reasoned analysis and argument). What I am really interested in is the quality of academic discourse - I'm very sensitive to what I consider to be shortcuts in an argument or sloppy use of evidence. We are all guilty of these at times, but I believe it is one of the functions of academic debate to point these out to each other, which is why I am writing this, even though I know many of the authors of this article and consider them friends.

One more caveat - I am not a scientist (in the English sense) and not qualified to comment on the natural scientific experiments carried out for the article I am about to discuss and their results. But I think I am qualified to discuss the ways in which the results are interpreted, and I am certainly qualified to comment on the way the authors of the article use textual evidence, and also how they interpret more general cultural historical aspects of the period, which is something I have been thinking about for about four decades. Hence my weighing in here.

My approach below is to work through the article, picking up points that I think are relevant to the quality of the argument. I have not yet spent enough time thinking about this particular problem to be able to offer a well-reasoned, holistic counter-interpretation. I am not even sure yet that I think the authors are necessarily wrong, or that it is my job to counter their arguments if I do. But I don't think they make a good case, and I would like to take an opportunity to point out some matters which I would like people to take into consideration before jumping to accept the conclusions of the article. I'm afraid too many people will just read the title of the article and not think about it more before endlessly retweeting it (you know who you are!) or making it go viral on Facebook. So here goes.

About Me



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About This Blog

Welcome to my blog. During the day (and sometimes the night) I teach and do research into Old Norse language and literature and the Viking Age. The purpose of this blog is to record experiences and observations from my encounters with Vikings in the media, in popular culture, and on my travels in the Viking world. I record these for myself, but it might be that you, too, dear reader, are interested. If so, please feel free to comment.

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(1) I note that while the article has ten authors, they have chosen not to involve any specialist in language or texts, in spite of the fact that the article begins with reference to early medieval 'narratives about fierce female Vikings fighting alongside men', and concludes with a quotation from an Eddic poem in translation. The impression given is that the authors consider that no special expertise is required to handle this kind of evidence unlike bones, or DNA, or archaeological finds. The authors might argue that they cite people who do have such expertise, including myself. I would just point out that their primary reference to my work is to a semi-popular book published 26 years ago. (See also point 6., below). I would have thought they could have made the slight effort required to read what I wrote on the subject of women warriors in a recent monograph (*The Viking Diaspora* 2015, pp. 104-7), a less popular and more considered work. There (and elsewhere when I have written about such things) I do try to show that women warriors and/or Valkyries and/or shield maidens (they are all often mixed up) are not just 'mythological phenomena' as stated by the authors, but relate to a whole complex of ideas that pervade literature, mythology and ideology, without necessarily providing any direct evidence for women warriors in 'real life', which is what I take the current authors to be interested in. I do wish the authors would engage with these more subtle and complex interpretations, rather than just unthinkingly using texts both as the starting and the finishing point of their argument, without any indication of what narratives they have in mind, or even what kind, or any explanation of why a particular quotation might be relevant. An example of their sloppy thinking is when they claim that 'the material and historical records' both suggest that 'the male sex has been associated with the gender of a warrior identity' (a statement I think I understand, but it sounds awkward). This is to elide the nature of two very different types of evidence and does, in my view, a disservice to what they call 'historical records' (which may or may not be the same as the 'narratives' or 'mythological phenomena' referred to earlier). Needless to say, they do not specify what 'historical records' suggest this (or indeed what 'material records' do the same, whatever they are).

(2) Several times in the article the authors refer to an earlier article by the second-named author (Kjellström 2016)** which appears to be of great importance to their argument because in it she apparently provided 'a full osteological and contextual analysis', 'age and sex estimation results' and 'sex identification and a proper contextualisation' for the burial in question. The scientific analyses of the current article apparently arose out of a desire to confirm (as the title of the article suggests) these earlier results by scientific means. Having followed up the article in question, I can find nothing in it which explains why this osteological and contextual analysis suggests the deceased was a female - it's a rather general article summarising the author's osteological research on a large body of material which may well have included burial Bj 581, but does not say much about this particular burial. Without specifying its details, the earlier article does refer to a 'chamber grave furnished with fine armour and sacrificed horses' for which 'three different osteological examinations all found that the individual was a woman'. I suppose this is the grave under consideration in the most recent article, but interestingly, the author concludes that 'Whether these are not the correct bones for this grave or whether it opens up reinterpretations of weapon graves in Birka, it is too early to say' (the article was originally presented at a conference in 2013, not 2014 as suggested in the current article). This is because of problems arising from the fact that the graves were mainly excavated in the 19th century and there has been a certain amount of confusion regarding where various bags of bones came from. Extraordinarily enough, this is not even mentioned in the current article. It is admittedly covered, though fairly briefly, in the 'Supporting Information' to the current article, but I do think this element of possible doubt is crucial enough to have been mentioned in the main article, which is what most people will read - many will not even be aware of the status or significance of the 'Supporting Information', which contains both tables showing the scientific results and some discursive comments about sex and gender identities in Viking Age graves.

(3) Having concluded, to their own satisfaction, that the deceased in Bj 581 was indeed a female warrior, the authors go on to conclude, with very little discussion or justification, that she was 'a high-ranking officer', based apparently on the fact that the burial contained 'a full set of gaming pieces' which apparently 'indicates knowledge of tactics and strategy'. Another factor which may have led them to this conclusion, though it is not stated explicitly, is the fact that they determined that the individual was 'at least above 30 years of age'. By the end of the article, 'the individual in grave Bj 581 is the first confirmed female high-ranking warrior', because 'the exclusive grave goods and two horses are worthy of an individual with responsibilities concerning strategy and

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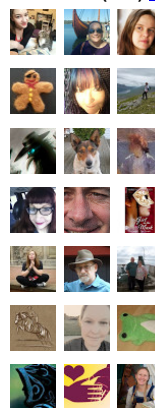
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battle tactics'. All this seems to me to move rather quickly from evidence to speculation which is presented as fact.

(4) The authors also note that there were 'No pathological or traumatic injuries' observed on the skeleton. They point out that 'weapon related wounds ... are not common in the inhumation burials at Birka' and elsewhere, so apparently the 'warriors' of these graves were either so good that they were never injured, or perhaps they weren't really 'warriors' at all. According to the authors 'our results caution against sweeping interpretations based on archaeological contexts and preconceptions' - they do not seem to recognise that if they take this principle to its logical conclusion, the interpretation of this and many other graves as 'warrior' graves is thereby called into question. They can't have their cake and eat it too. They also say nothing about whether there was any indication on the bones of the kinds of activities one might expect a warrior to have engaged in, as strenuous physical activity might be expected to have left some traces, particularly if they were good enough to avoid injury to themselves.

(5) Although the authors point out that 'previous arguments have ... neglected intersectional perspectives' they do not really pursue alternative explanations regarding Bj 581 either. Was it possible, for example, for a biological woman to have been buried with a full 'warrior' accoutrement, even if she had not been a warrior in life? After all, archaeologists are always cautioning us that 'the dead don't bury themselves' and they often seem not to like interpretations in which the deceased's grave goods are taken as representing their roles in life. But such perspectives do not seem to be applied here - they want the woman to be a warrior, so the scientific analysis makes her a woman and her 'archaeological context' makes her a warrior. No doubt other explanations are possible, still assuming that the bones have been correctly assigned to the grave-goods, but discussion of such alternatives would rather detract from that arresting title, and would probably have ruled out publication in the *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*. The authors might have been better advised to keep this article to the purely scientific data, and leave the interpretation of it to other contexts which might have given them more space to reason more carefully.

(6) Finally, a bit of a rant against the prevalence of short name+date references in scientific and archaeological articles. Reference to an article in a scientific journal in this way is OK when the article is only a few pages long, as they often are. But referring to a 230+-page book as Name Date is cheating. The interested reader who may want to follow up the point being 'supported' by such a reference is faced with having possibly to read the whole book, or to work out from the index which of several possible sections of the book contain the information on which the referring authors rely. And one does sometimes get the impression that authors using such a reference system have not really read the work in question, at least not carefully or thoughtfully.

These are some of my caveats which I would dearly love people to take into account before tweeting all over the world about women warriors in the Viking Age. It's too easy to take the title of an article at face value and send it round the Twittersphere without further thought. I do know I'm banging my head against a brick wall, since I have blogged, spoken and written about these matters before and have come to realise that the emotional lure of the woman warrior, especially in the Viking Age, is too strong for reasoned argument.

Nevertheless, I am still happy to engage in this debate. And just in case there is any doubt, although this blog is ostensibly anonymous, my name is Judith Jesch and I am happy to acknowledge what I have written above - with this kind of direct critique of an article by people I know well, anonymity would be completely unethical. I did consider sending this piece to <https://theconversation.com/uk> so as not to be anonymous, but previous experience with them suggests that long and complex pieces don't really work there. Taking complex research to the general public inevitably involves a loss of complexity. But it shouldn't do in an academic journal, and it is in the end the academic arguments I am most concerned with. I do also like trying to explain complex academic arguments to those who don't normally engage with them, but that's another story.

* Hedenstierna-Jonson C, Kjellström A, Zachrisson T, et al. A female Viking warrior confirmed by genomics. *Am J Phys Anthropol*. 2017;00:1-8.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/ajpa.23308>.



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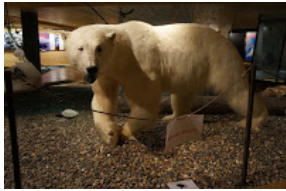
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****Kjellström A, (2016) People in transition: Life in the Malaren Vallye from an Osteological Perspective. In V. Turner (Ed.), *Shetland and the Viking World. Papers from the Proceedings of the 17th Viking Congress 2013* (pp. 197-202). Lerwick: Shetland Amenity Trust.**

Posted by [Viqueen](#) at 17:17 27 comments: [Links to this post](#) 

Wednesday, 12 April 2017

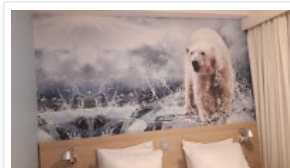
Writing the Ice-Bear II



Polar bear in the Svalbard Museum, Longyearbyen

I promised [to return to the topic of polar bears](#) and my memory was jogged by the news, a few days ago, that [a polar bear was shot in Newfoundland after being deemed 'a public safety risk'](#). In times of ecological crisis these magnificent animals are driven towards human habitation in search of food and it usually does not end well for them, as a hungry bear is a real danger to humans and it is not always easy or even possible to tranquilise and remove them. These latter options were not really available to people in former times and when polar bears drifted over to Iceland, it could go either way. The Icelandic annals record that, in 1321 a *hvítabjörn* came on the ice to Strandir in the north-west of Iceland, killing eight people and causing much destruction before he was finally killed on Straumnes. Another annal records that, in 1275, no less than 27 polar bears were killed in Iceland. Presumably, this was not all on one occasion (the bears tend to be quite solitary), but a result of the fact that, in that winter, *kringdi hafíss nær um allt Ísland* 'sea-ice encircled almost all of Iceland'. That this was an unusual event is suggested by the law in the Christian Laws Section of *Grágás* which stipulates that, while people are not supposed to hunt and fish on holy days, they can go out to catch a polar bear if one turns up. Another exception to usual practice in this law is that the bear belongs to 'whoever gives it a death wound', rather than whoever owns the land on which it is killed, which is otherwise when, for example, whales are stranded. The owner was then left with a nice pelt, for it is hard to imagine anyone wanting to eat a polar bear (though see below).

Curiously it seems that people did have tame polar bears, most likely caught as cubs (either in Greenland, or having sailed to Iceland on an ice floe) since taming an adult bear is surely an impossibility. *Grágás* stipulates that a tame polar bear is to be treated like a dog, namely that its owner needs to pay for any damage it does. While such a bear has no immunity if it harms people, if it is itself harmed, then the person who harmed it pays a fine and compensation for the damage to the owner.



Mural in Thon Hotel Polar, Tromsø



Available from the world's most northerly chocolatier.

Humans' curious love-hate relationship with bears of all kinds is suggested by the popularity of the name Bjorn, or names with -björn as the second element, then as now, and many stories turn on the human-like qualities of bears. There is a curious reciprocity in a story recorded in *Landnámabók* (the Icelandic Book of Settlements) about a certain Arngeirr, a settler in the north-east of Iceland and his son Þorgils. When they didn't return from looking for their livestock in a snow-storm, the younger son Oddr goes to search for them and finds them 'lying as food' for a polar bear, as *Sturlubók* puts it (*Hauksbók* at this point has a vivid image of the bear sucking the blood out of them). Oddr kills the bear and is said to have eaten it all. In fact, the saying was that he avenged his father in killing the bear, and his brother in eating it. But as a result he becomes evil and unruly, and shape-shifts at night so that the neighbours wanted to stone him to death for being a sorcerer. It's hard to imagine that eating a whole polar bear was very tasty so, while doing this was quite heroic, it does seem to



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have been in general quite a bad idea.

Another interesting aspect of polar bears in Old Norse texts is how frequently they turn up in dreams. But that is a matter I will leave to another blog.

Posted by [Viqueen](#) at 15:43 No comments: [Links to this post](#) 

Labels: [animals](#), [Greenland](#), [Iceland](#), [sagas](#)

Sunday, 19 February 2017

One Day Without Vikings?

I am a serial migrant. Twice in my life I have made the move to a new country (not including shorter stays of a few years in yet other countries), in both cases becoming a citizen and intending to stay. It looks like the second one is my forever home - I have now been a UK citizen for a quarter of a century and have no plans to move. In my first adopted country, I was schooled from a young age in the slogan 'No taxation without representation!' and that motivated me to become a citizen in my second adopted country - I was by then paying taxes and wanted to take a full part in the life of the country that was now home. I therefore naturally have an interest in tomorrow's [National Day of Action on Feb 20th to Celebrate the Contributions of Migrants to the UK](#), or [@1daywithoutus / #1daywithoutus](#).



But I also have a professional interest in the contributions of migrants, at least those in the past. If we take the long view historically, then of course everyone in these islands is a migrant, at least since the last Ice Age covered them, and I do think everyone should reflect on that simple fact, as well as on the contributions of migrants, whether over the last 10,000 years, or the last 10 years. Among the many identifiable groups who have made an enormous contribution to the life of these islands are the people of Scandinavian origin we call 'Vikings', who settled here between the ninth and eleventh centuries. To some they are best known for raiding and pillaging, as if they were the only people in the Early Middle Ages who did these things (they weren't). But most people also know that they moved into large swathes of eastern and northern England, into large parts of Scotland, and that they founded towns and other settlements in Ireland. These immigrants were not raiders and warriors, but farmers and traders, and families with women and children as well as men.


What was their contribution? Well, by farming the land and engaging in local, national and international trade, they made the contribution to the economy that we normally expect of immigrants (and the indigenous inhabitants, too?), and they paid their taxes. They came in sufficient numbers for their language and culture to become an indelible part of the language and culture of these islands. Even the first word in the previous sentence comes from Old Norse, this infiltration of some of the most basic features of the language (in this case a pronoun) being unprecedented in any other migration other than that of the Anglo-Saxons before them. At the other extreme, the English word 'law' comes from Old Norse - the Vikings gave us the very foundation of this nation's existence. It is not possible to have one day without Vikings, even now in the twenty-first century.

Words and place-names of Old Norse origin are around you, everywhere, everyday. You can find out more about the Vikings' contribution to the English language through the [Gersum project](#). You can learn more about English place-names of Old Norse origin at the [Key to English Place-Names](#). You can also find out about physical objects from the Viking period through for example the [Portable Antiquities Scheme](#) and the [Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture](#). And this year is the Year of the Viking, when you can come to Nottingham for a special British Museum / York Museums Trust exhibition opening in November. As well as the exhibition, there will be a lot of different events dedicated to explaining the contributions of those migrants, the Vikings, branded as 'Bringing the Vikings Back to the East Midlands'. These will be advertised on the website of the [Centre for the Study of the Viking Age](#) at the University of Nottingham, so keep your eye out there! Or just follow [Viking Midlands](#) on Twitter - the project is

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currently in its infancy but more information will follow soon.

In the meantime, remember the migrants, not just tomorrow, but every day!

Posted by [Viqueen](#) at 20:29 No comments: [Links to this post](#) 

Labels: [England](#), [Ireland](#), [language](#), [museum](#), [Old Norse](#), [onomastics](#), [Scotland](#), [viking](#)

Sunday, 5 February 2017

Writing the Ice-Bear I

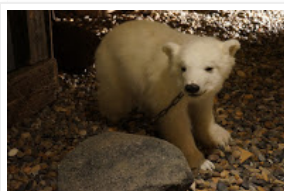


My excellent friend the [Snow Queen](#) (I call her that for reasons you may or may not be able to work out) [has written about our arctic adventures](#), so I don't have to. Thanks! But since the polar bear was such a leitmotif of our travels, particularly in Svalbard, I thought I'd follow up with a little footnote rounding up some of the polar bears in Old Norse-Icelandic literature. But just before that, if you think there is something funny about the franked stamp to the left (a genuine one on a postcard that I sent), you're right. There aren't 52 days in January. I'm assuming

that's a typo for 25 (the day after we left), but I'm wondering how it came about... Do they still use hand stamps with those rotating numbers for setting up the date?

Anyway, back to ice bears. Of course everyone's favourite and the best known example is from that staple of beginners' Old Norse courses, the [Tale of Audun from the West Fjords](#), as it has most recently been translated. I don't want to spoil the story for those who have not read it yet - it's a short tale that will give you great pleasure and also food for thought! But basically it concerns a young Icelandic who makes his way in the world by working for a travelling merchant in Norway and Greenland. In Greenland he gives all he has for a bear. Then, through a really risky series of voyages, involving treacherous stewards, encounters and delicate negotiations with the kings of Norway and Denmark, and a tough pilgrimage to Rome, he returns to Iceland a wealthy and respected person. The bear disappears partway through the story and we never really find out what happened to the creature. I guess its real role in the story is to illustrate both Audun's risk-taking and his cleverness. Having given all he had for a bear, a bear from Greenland, and therefore a rarity and a 'treasure' (as the story calls it), it takes real guts and wits to transform that bear into a fortunate outcome for himself, indeed an outcome that is not at all certain until the end. I haven't spoiled the story for you because it's how he does it that is the real interest of the tale. Indeed, the American professor of law [William Ian Miller](#) [has written a whole book](#) about the intricacies of this jewel of Old Icelandic narrative (though beware, students, there are two versions of the tale, with some interesting differences).

Given the long sea-voyages involved, and the nature of polar bears, one has to assume that when Audun first acquired it in Greenland, the bear was a cub (compare the stuffed version we saw in the museum, right). Audun was not himself a hunter, the story makes clear that he paid for it. The story also makes clear that things got a bit tricky when he couldn't afford to feed it any more, as it must have grown faster than he anticipated and a hungry polar bear is a fearsome sight to behold.



Tethered polar bear cub in Svalbard Museum, Longyearbyen

Audun's tale is set in the middle of the eleventh century. Giving polar bears to important people seems to have been quite the fashion back in those days, though we're never really told what these VIPs did with them. Presumably, they died an early death, but their skins would still have made a nice decoration for the royal hall. Iceland's first bishop, Ísleifr Gizurarson, took a *hvítbjörn* 'white bear' with him to the emperor

Heinrich III in Saxony on his inaugural voyage in around 1056, which did the trick as Heinrich gave him his protection for the rest of his journey throughout the empire, according to *Hungrvaka* (ch. 2). But Ísleifr did not go to Greenland for the bear, rather the text explicitly says the bear was *kominn...af Grænlandi* 'come from Greenland'. Perhaps someone else brought it, or the bear might have come floating to Iceland on an ice floe, something which still happens nowadays, [most recently last summer](#). Nowadays it does not generally end well for the bear because they are a real danger to both humans and livestock. And I wonder if Ísleifr's bear may not rather have ended up as a rug than as a real, living animal in Saxony....



Similarly, the hero of *Vatnsdæla saga*, Ingimundr inn gamli, having only recently arrived in Iceland, sails back to Norway to get some timber to build himself a splendid dwelling, and takes with him no less than three bears (a she-bear and her two cubs) as a gift for his patron King Haraldr Finehair, which he graciously accepts (chs 15-16). No doubt the bears played their part in the king's extremely generous return gift of a ship loaded with timber, but then Ingimundr was one of the few settlers of Iceland who was in good odour with that king. The other interest of the anecdote is that Ingimundr and his men found the bears on the ice during the winter, when there

was a lot of ice around. In the north of Iceland, a bay (Húnaflói), a fjord (Húnaþór) and a lake (Húnavatn) are all supposedly named after the bear cubs they found (*húnn* being the word for a bear-cub), as can be seen from the map above. Well, it's a nice story, though probably apocryphal.

In *Grœnlendinga þáttur*, a short tale set rather later, in the twelfth century, the inhabitants of Greenland twice try to use bears to ingratiate themselves with important people, only once successfully. In the very first chapter, we meet the important and well-respected Sokki, who feels the community is not complete without a bishop, and sends his son Einarr to Norway to arrange this, with gifts of walrus ivory and hides. Once the bishop thing is sorted (bishops didn't really like the Greenland gig), Einarr gives King Sigurðr Jórsalafari a bear which he happened to have brought with him from Greenland, in return for which he gets praise and honour from the king. Later in the tale, things didn't go so well with the Norwegian troublemaker Kolbeinn, who had killed Einarr and pleads his cause with King Haraldr gilli in Norway with the aid of the gift of a polar bear. But the king gathers that Kolbeinn is not telling the truth and *kómu eigi laun fyrir dýrit* 'no reward was forthcoming for the animal'. Soon afterwards, Kolbeinn gets his comeuppance and drowns.

These are just some of the most well-known instances of polar bears in Icelandic texts. Having started to look into it, I've realised there are many, many more, far too many to squeeze into one blog post. So I'll save some of them for another occasion.

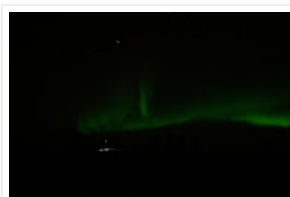
Posted by [Viqueen](#) at 19:04 1 comment: [Links to this post](#)

Labels: [animals](#), [Denmark](#), [Greenland](#), [Iceland](#), [museum](#), [Norway](#), [Old Norse](#), [onomastics](#), [sagas](#)

Sunday, 15 January 2017

The Towering Goddess

The Viqueen, I can report, is beyond excited at her upcoming trip to extremely northern latitudes in Norway in a couple of days' time. Heading north in January means that there are two desiderata above all, snow and the northern lights. It is true that the Viqueen has seen quite a lot of snow in her lifetime, and she even finally achieved one of her all-time goals when she saw the *aurora borealis* on a trip to Iceland last November (as proven by the rather murky photo, right). But global warming means snow is not as reliable as it once was, while one glimpse of some rather faint northern lights can only whet a Viqueen's appetite for even more, and perhaps even more spectacular, displays.



So what does a Viqueen do? Well she knows to pray to [Skaði for snow, for the skiing goddess/giantess](#) just cannot do her thing without it. But what about the northern lights? The Viqueen duly consulted her friend the Snowqueen on this important matter, and the oracle suggested that an appropriate deity to propitiate would be the otherwise not very well known goddess Gná. This sent the Viqueen back to her books to remind herself about this rather obscure figure, and what she found there is rather interesting.

Like many other obscure goddesses, Gná occurs a few times in kennings, where she is mostly just a synonym for 'goddess', in those woman-kennings where a goddess, any goddess, depending on the requirements of rhyme or alliteration, forms the base-word. Still, it is interesting that Gná appears in kennings in both very early poetry (Ölvir hnúfa, one of the poets of Haraldr Finehair in the 9th century) and quite late poetry (in the *Jómsvíkingadrápa* by the Orcadian bishop Bjarni Kolbeinsson, in the late 12th or early 13th century), suggesting a longevity in the minds of those who cared about these things.

Another bit of evidence that she was better-known in those days than she is now is the way in which she is mentioned in Snorri's *Edda*. There, she appears as no. 14 in the list of goddesses and her main characteristic seems to be as a kind of errand-girl for the top goddess Frigg (aka Mrs Óðinn). But then Snorri tells us a bit more, that she has a horse, called Hórfvarfnir, that can run on both the sky and the sea. Snorri also goes on to quote a couple of stanzas from a poem occasioned by her riding through the air. On being seen by 'certain Vanir' doing this, one of them asked:

'Hvat þar flýgr? / Hvar þar ferr / eða at lopti líðr?'

What flies there? What goes there, or travels in the air?

to which the goddess herself answers:

'Né ek flýg / þó ek fer / ok at lopti líðk / á Hórfvarfni / þeim er Hamskerpir / gat við Garðrofu.'


'I do not fly, though I go and travel in the air on Hórfvarfnir, whom Hamskerpir conceived on Garðrofa.'

(quoted from *Snorri Sturluson. Edda. Prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. Anthony Faulkes, 1982, p. 30, my translation)

Just a little snippet of mythological knowledge there, not unlike the many names, of mythological horses as well as many other things, that we find in *Grimnismál*. But what is perhaps more interesting than that is the fact that these two stanzas are among the very few Eddic, mythological stanzas in Snorri that must derive from longer poems that do not otherwise survive, again suggesting that this goddess was once better known than she is now.

Snorri then goes on to add, in some guesswork etymology, that 'From the name of Gná, a thing which goes up high is said to tower (*gnæfa*)'. So, indeed, an appropriate deity for the northern lights up there in the sky. The Viqueen can only hope that she recognises this humble approach and arranges things accordingly next week.

P.S. If you want to read a much more learned disquisition on the possible significance of Gná and other flying females in Norse myth and superstition, then do have a look at Stephen Mitchell, 'Gudinnar Gná', *Saga och Sed* (2014), 23-41.

Posted by [Viqueen](#) at 21:03 3 comments: [Links to this post](#) 
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Saturday, 12 March 2016

Darkness and Light at Midsummer

In London on Norse and Viking business yesterday, I took a bit of time to go to the splendid [Dulwich Picture Gallery](#) and check out their [Nikolai Astrup](#) exhibition. Publicity for the exhibition has tended to stress how little known he is outside of his native Norway, but



Nikolai Astrup
St. Hansbål ved Jølster vatnet
Wikimedia Commons

those of us who have lived in Norway couldn't possibly have escaped being fascinated by his paintings. Apart from a few short visits to the capital or abroad to study, Astrup spent most of his life in the same place, the farming communities in the [district of Jølster in Sunnfjord](#), and his motifs all derive from the landscape and the people around him. The paintings and prints look pretty good on the page, or the screen, but there is nothing like seeing them in the flesh. Seeing a large number of his works together really brings home how careful and subtle his use of paint is - there are so many different shades of blue and grey for the water

and the sky, and of green for the foliage. Almost every painting has a little luminescent glimmer in it somewhere, be it the summer night's reflections on the lake, or a full moon, or the warm light of a house window shining through the trees. These effects can only be appreciated by seeing the actual paintings.

One of Astrup's best-known and -loved motifs is found in his several works (such as the one pictured above) on the theme of Sankthansaften, or Jonsok, the pan-Scandinavian custom of big midsummer bonfire parties, on the 23rd of June, the eve of the feast of St John the Baptist. Growing up in a country parsonage, Astrup wasn't allowed by his strict father to participate in such 'pagan' practices, and clearly made up for this by painting the scene many times later in life (often with a wistful figure looking on from the edge of the scene). Which raises the question of just how 'pagan' these celebrations were.

Well it does not stretch the imagination to accept that northern countries, with their great contrasts of darkness and light, would mark the time of year when the days were at their longest, but starting to get short again, just as they [celebrated the time of year when the days were at their shortest](#) and getting longer again. But actual evidence for such celebrations is hard to find. One of the labels at the Astrup exhibition suggested that the St John's Eve bonfires went back to pagan times and were a recreation of the funeral of the god Baldr. But I don't think this idea is much older than [1858 when it was suggested by the Norwegian language reformer Ivar Aasen](#), who grew up a little north of Astrup, in Sunnmøre. The basis for this suggestion is not clear, though it is true that Baldr is 'so bright that light shines from him' (according to Snorri), and it is easy to equate his death with the turning of the sun.


The main medieval evidence for the festival comes from [ch. 19 of Ágrip](#), a historical work written in Norway in the late twelfth century, where it says of the missionary king Óláfr Tryggvason that he (edition and translation by Matthew Driscoll):

felldi blót ok blótdrykkjur, ok lét í stað koma í vild við lýðinn hátíðardrykkjur
jól ok páskar, Jóansmessu mungát, ok haustöl at Mikjálmessu.

abolished pagan feasts and sacrifices, in place of which, as a favour to the people, he ordained the holiday feasts Yule and Easter, St John's Mass ale, and an autumn-ale at Michaelmas.

This suggests, though not definitively, that these new Christian feasts took place more or less at the same time as the traditional celebrations, but it says nothing about the traditional midsummer feast being a celebration or recreation of Baldr's funeral. So that must remain a rather speculative hypothesis.

Nevertheless, it is quite likely that Astrup shared Aasen's romantic viewpoint, and the picture above does seem to echo the myth. Unlike most of Astrup's other Sankthans paintings, this one has no dancing couples and the mood seems to be quite sombre. According to Snorri, Baldr's funeral took place by the sea, on a ship which was launched and then burned. It is not I think too fanciful to see the bonfire, the boat on the shore, and the lone figure sitting by it, as echoes of this story, at least in Astrup's mind.

Posted by [Viqueen](#) at 14:14 [No comments:](#) [Links to this post](#) 

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The Poetry of the Shipping Forecast

Despite being the world's greatest landlubber, I have always loved the [Met Office shipping forecast](#), especially when broadcast late at night on [Radio 4](#), and I know I am not alone. Undoubtedly my own reason for this lifelong devotion is partly its splendid litany of place-names, beginning with that most evocative word of all, Viking, followed by North and South Utsire, named after [Norway's smallest municipality Utsira](#). The forecast then ends its ramblings round the rocks and waters of the northwest European archipelago (and some nautically nearby places) in suitably Norse and Viking fashion with Fair Isle, Faeroes and South-East Iceland.



Britannia Designs, Dartmouth

But it's not just this abundance of Norse and Viking references that I love. I would go so far as to argue that the shipping forecast follows some rules that make it into a kind of poetry, the kind of poetry I like.

(1) It is formulaic. The basic structure of the shipping forecast is the same every time, and it makes use of a [pre-determined and traditional vocabulary and phrases](#) with which both author and listeners are familiar. Occasionally moderate. Showers. Good. Cyclonic. 6 or 7 at first in west.

(2) But like all good formulaic poetry it rings the changes through variation. Moderate or rough. Rain or showers. Poor. Variable 4 becoming northwesterly for a time.

(3) It has a fixed structure, each part introduced by a formula to keep the listener orientated: 'The shipping forecast is issued...', 'The general synopsis at midday', 'The area forecasts for the next 24 hours'. Within each part the content is formulaic and always in the same order, though making use of variation as described above.

(4) Its formulaic nature gives it a regular, fairly predictable, if somewhat staccato, rhythm.

(5) It is primarily oral, though [you can also read it on the page](#).

(6) It has a function (even if not for me). I like poetry that has a function other than that of being poetry. Because of its important function the shipping forecast has to be read in clear and unemotional tones, which thereby emphasise the drama of 'rough or very rough', or 'severe gale 9'.

As you snuggle in your warm bed tonight, just spare a thought for those in peril on the sea.

P.S. I'm not the only lover of the shipping forecast who [owns the charming little dish pictured above](#). Thanks to my ever-vigilant other half who found it for me.

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