

Kim Hjarðar

AUDR – WOMEN IN THE VIKING AGE

Sample translation

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Prologue

The feast of Aud the Deep-Minded

The day had finally arrived when Olaf Thorsteinson and Alvdís would get married. There had been an invitation to a great feast at Hvamm estate in Dalir in western Iceland. In the afternoon, when all the guests had gathered, Aud – Olaf's grandmother – pulled aside the curtain in her bedroom. With unsteady legs, she stepped out and towards the crowd that stood waiting in the semi-darkness. The flickering light of the hearth revealed a face clearly marked by time, worries and a life lived. We can see her before us. Her eyes were dark and intense and drew the attention of all those present. They looked at her and she looked at each one of them carefully in return. She straightened up as far as she could and walked with firmer steps across the room and over to them. First to her grandson Olaf, then to her brothers and after to all the great men who lowered their gazes in respect as she came towards them. The saga tells us that she took each of them by the hands, grasping as hard as she could, looked them in the eye and thanked them for coming. They then followed her into the banqueting hall, resplendent with food and drink, all at her expense.

Aud was helped up to the high seat by her brothers, and there was total silence in the hall as she made herself comfortable. She cleared her throat and with a hoarse voice said: "I hereby swear before my siblings, Bjorn and Helge, and all our friends and kinsmen who are here today, that I shall give this estate, and everything within it, to Olaf, my son's son, as a gift."¹ She then stood up and said that she would return to her chamber. Olaf took Aud respectfully by the arm and led her down from the high seat, and she went on by herself, stately and dignified, towards her chamber. She stopped suddenly at the door and looked back, and said that everyone should enjoy themselves and eat and drink what they wished, and that beer would be distributed among the common people so that they, too, could share in the joy of such a day.

When Olaf went to her chamber to see her the following morning, he found her sitting up in bed, as usual, but this time all life had gone from her. Toasts to Olaf's wedding and Aud's burial were drunk together. On the last day of the feast, Aud's body was transported to a burial mound that had been raised for her. She was laid in a ship within the mound, and many goods were placed in there with her before the mound was covered with earth.²

This is how the *Laxdaela Saga* concludes its tale of Aud the Deep-Minded, or “wise” as she is also known. One of Iceland’s most powerful people had died after a long and eventful life, and after having paid for a lavish banquet for her only grandson and passing everything she had on to him as an inheritance. I am using the word “people”, rather than “women”, because the status Aud enjoyed would not be so clear had I written “Iceland’s most powerful women”. To compare her only to other women would be to do her a disservice. Aud was an independent, rich and powerful leader with significant property in Iceland when she died. According to the *Laxdaela Saga*, she was buried in a ship with many grave goods. She paid for banquets and counted powerful men among her allies. It is said that it was Aud who first settled Breidafjord, an area in western Iceland, in the late 800s. Various Scandinavian and Icelandic sources from the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries describe her as the female ancestor of many of Iceland’s most powerful families. In the *Islendingabok* (Book of Icelanders), a history of the families and church of Iceland written between 1120 and 1133, the historian Are Frode Torgilsson (1068–1148) claims Aud as his direct ancestor, and also names the third bishop of Iceland, Torlak Runolvsson (1086–1133), as one of her descendants.³ Aud stands out clearly as a female chief with real power and prestige linked to her name. She represents the highest position a woman could achieve in the Viking period, and she was both a political and a religious leader.

Yet Aud was not alone in attaining positions normally thought of as the preserve of Viking-Age men. We will follow Aud, as far as possible, throughout her life, as a child growing up in Norway who travelled across the sea with her family to the Southern Isles (today’s Hebrides), as one of the wives of the Viking King of Dublin, as the mother of a king and a refugee in Scotland, and as a settler in Iceland. We will also look at the fates of other women, and the opportunities both they and Aud may have had in life and the alternative paths they could have taken. There are many examples of the Viking Age as an era of opportunity, including for women who wanted to change and improve their lot in life. A world where technological innovations in shipbuilding made travelling easier and more accessible, providing opportunities for trade, war-mongering and plundering, with great wealth to go around. When new farmland was discovered or conquered, both women and men were able to find a place of their own where they could flourish. Sailing ships opened up large areas around the North Sea, the Atlantic Ocean, the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea, the Caspian Sea and the Mediterranean Sea for enterprising Vikings, both male and female, in the early 800s.

Part 1

Childhood and youth

The expectations of women are formed from childhood onwards, and further into early adulthood. Women in the Viking age were shaped by the ideals and expectations society had of them. Women themselves played a crucial role by imparting knowledge, educating and preserving societal values. It was women who ensured that society's norms, practices and patterns of behaviour were successfully instilled in young girls and boys, meaning that they received an education that was practical and prepared them for society. And Aud? What opportunities did she have? Let us consider that more closely in this first section.

There are no sources that can tell us when Aud was born, so here we can only suggest a likely year. Aud was married off in around 853. A normal marriageable age for a woman was between 13 and 16 years of age. Aud could therefore have been born sometime between 835 and 840.

What awaited a girl once she had been born? Naturally, both male and female children were important to their parents and to society, but they were seen as unfinished people. They had neither the power nor the strength of a responsible adult. Childhood was thus not a part of a person's life held in high regard, but rather simply a stage on the path to adult life. Boys and girls were not allowed to do as they pleased. As a rule, girls would work on the farmstead or take care of the household, while boys would gradually take on responsibility for everything that went on beyond the estate.

Aud and her brothers and sisters must have had one of the best educations that a person could get in Norway at that time. They belonged to a privileged social class that was well travelled, wealthy and well established at the top of Norse society. This comes across very clearly in the depiction of Aud's family relationships in the Icelandic family sagas. Her father Ketill is mentioned in the *Laxdaela Saga*, *Eyrbyggja Saga* and the *Saga of Erik the Red*.⁴ Details of his lineage and family can also be found in the *Landnámabók* (Book of Settlements).⁵ In the *Laxdaela Saga*, the story of Aud begins with a short summary of Ketill's family: "Ketill Flatnose, son of Bjorn Buna, was a mighty and high-born chieftain (hersir) in Norway. [...] Ketill Flatnose was married to Yngvild, daughter of Ketill Wether, a man of great worth. They had five children, two sons and three daughters." "Hersir" is a term used to refer to the major landowners in western Norway; they controlled large areas of land, as well as trade and resources.

Children in the landowning class were raised and educated on their parents' estates or with foster parents where they could acquire specialist knowledge

and useful skills. Many children were used as pawns in political games, and they often had to grow up far from their own families. This affected both boys and girls, even though it was often the boys who were sent away, while the girls largely remained at home until they got married.

That both girls and boys were equally important is a truth that comes with caveats. Many suggest that there was a clear lack of women in Viking-age Scandinavia. One reason for this is the tradition for powerful men to have many women, both as partners and as part of their political alliance-building. Another, perhaps more important, reason was that far fewer girls made it to adulthood in comparison to boys. Resources were scarce for most people, and if the decision had to be taken as to whether to bring up an extra girl or an extra boy, the choice was to opt for the boy. We therefore see traces of an active selection, which was probably not uncommon in this type of society.

In both the sagas and legal materials, we come across the term “*bera út*” – “carry out” – which, in the Norse context, means to abandon a child in the wilderness, either to be found by others or to die.

It was the male chief who would make any such decision,⁶ but to abandon a child was a source of shame.⁷ It indicated that there were insufficient resources to raise the child, or that the woman had given birth to a deformed child and that evil spirits had therefore been unleashed upon her. The sagas indicate that defects, injuries and sickly appearances were among the reasons that children were abandoned. However, poverty still appears to have been the most important factor in the decision. Ibrahim ibn Yaqub, a Jewish traveller from Spain who came to the Danish Viking town of Hedeby (today’s Schleswig) in the 960s, wrote that surplus children were simply thrown into the sea.⁸ The old and sick could also be cast out in hard times to prevent them becoming burdens. This practice was a defensive measure in a society where people could not afford to look after those unable to contribute or take care of themselves in times of crisis. Such charity could lead to the downfall of the whole community.

Under Christian laws, abandoning a child was explicitly forbidden, but Christianisation did not always mean that customs changed in practice. In his *Islendingabok*, Are Frode Torgilsson tells us that one of the compromises agreed when it was decided to introduce Christianity to the Althing was to continue to allow children to be abandoned.⁹ In the *Saga of Gunnlaug Worm-Tongue*, there is a passage about this relating to the birth of the main female character in the saga, and one of Aud’s descendants, Helga the Fair.¹⁰

Overleaf: Children in the landowning class were raised and educated on their parents’ estates or with foster parents where they could acquire specialist knowledge and useful skills.

“In the summer, Thorstein prepared to ride to the Thing, and spoke to Jofrid, his wife, before he went from home. “So it is”, he said, “that you are with child now, but the child shall be cast out if you bear a girl, and nourished if it be a boy.”” The writer interjects to explain to the reader: “Now, at this time when all the land was heathen, it was the custom of men with little wealth, and many in their care, to cast children out, but to do so was always considered an evil deed.”¹¹ Thorstein was, however, a rich man, so the custom must have also been practiced among the higher social classes. In any case, selection, pure and simple, is the cause. There may also have been financial considerations at play, such as the tradition of dowries. There were long-term expenses related to female children, which some refused to take on, especially if they already had girls. The preference for sons is also seen in runic inscriptions on the many memorial stones in Sweden. The number of brothers mentioned there as heirs is conspicuously high compared to the number of sisters. In all probability, no child was a formal member of a family and could receive protection before being accepted by their father or the head of the family, although it must have been highly unlikely for children born into formal relationships to be rejected.

Children who were born in the Viking period must nonetheless be both healthy and wanted if they were to have a good chance of surviving. Children born in the winter, when it was cold and light was scarce, could fall ill more easily or the mother could struggle to get sufficient nutrition to maintain milk production. Many children lived for only a few hours after birth. The infant mortality rate was between 30 and 60 per cent, which is normal for a society without modern medicine.¹² In some urban Viking settlements, however, the figures appear to have been somewhat lower. In Jorvik (York) in England, it is estimated that approximately 17 per cent of the population died before reaching five years of age. Around 16 per cent of those who survived the first five years never reached twenty years of age.¹³ Overall, more than one third of the population never reached adulthood in the Viking period, most of whom were women. On rune stones in central Sweden, there are as many as six sons named in one family, but never more than two daughters.¹⁴ Studies of skeletal remains also show that many children suffered from malnutrition during childhood. In Sweden, it seems that as many as 7 per cent of men were malnourished as children, compared to 37 per cent of women.¹⁵ The unpalatable truth is that Vikings treated women differently. Girls received less food than boys and significantly fewer girls reached adulthood than boys.

When Aud was born, it was, in principle, up to Ketill, as the head of the family, to decide whether she would be given the chance to grow up.

Fortunately for Aud and her two sisters, they were born into a family rich in resources that was able to feed many mouths. Aud therefore got to live. After her birth, she was taken from the *dyngja* - the women's house - and into the hall where Ketill and many other family members, friends and allies of Ketill were present. Perhaps they were being entertained by a skald with music, poetry and tales of the achievements of Ketill and his family. Drinks were served in abundance on such occasions. The little baby bundle was then unwrapped and laid on a comfortable sheepskin by Ketill's feet. Ketill peered closely at her, turned her around, sized up her limbs. He then lifted her up high and showed her to the Gods and the people in the hall, and declared loudly, so that everyone could hear, that the child was his. Thereafter he sat her on his lap, indicating that she had been accepted.

There is, in fact, a historical eyewitness to a ceremony where a child was accepted in this manner. In 850, a group of Vikings made their camp by one of the large rivers running through modern-day Russia. The Arab writer Ibn Rustah recorded that there was an Arab traveller among them as their guest.¹⁶ He witnessed a feeling of great excitement in the camp; one of the men would become a father at any moment, just like Ketill in our tale. The women in the camp went back and forth to the tent with water from the pots that simmered over the fire, while the men sat pensively around the fire and waited. After a short while the news arrived – a boy had been born! The Vikings all roared loudly and clapped each other on the shoulder. One of the older women in the party then arrived carrying the boy. She laid him down, naked, on a fur rug in front of his father, and left. The father went over to the boy and examined him closely. He then drew his sword from its scabbard, threw it on the ground before the child and said loud enough for the whole gathering to hear: "I leave you no property. You shall have only what you can take with this sword." After this, he placed the boy on his lap and named him.

Ketill, of course, did not get a son on this occasion, and nor was he the leader of a roving band of warriors without any land of their own. He was a settled and established hersir with significant wealth in land. In addition, his ceremony took place indoors, but otherwise we must assume that the ritual was probably relatively similar. In contrast to the roving Viking chiefs, a healthy girl was a real asset for Ketill. By marrying her off, she was a potential means of acquiring future allies for him. This could contribute to increasing his wealth and improving his standing, or could bring him peace with his enemies and alliances against others. Before all that though, she was placed on his knee and given a name; little Aud had become part of the family.

The craftswoman

In the Oseberg grave, a tablet weaving loom for making woven braids was found. These were thin decorative bands used as belts or to adorn or border clothes or textiles.

Wool, together with iron, was the most important raw material the Vikings had. However, while iron was the preserve of men, wool was primarily that of women. Wool was laboriously processed before it could be used for weaving or embroidery. It was washed, sorted, carded and then spun with a spindle whorl and a spindle, before finally being coloured with plant dye, if the natural colour was not desired.

The women who spun the thread for Viking fabrics were well educated in this art, and produced wool and flax thread to be woven into many types of fabric and clothing. Flax was grown on farms and wool came from sheep farming. The poor likely used nettles instead of flax as the long fibres in the stems are the same. After having been processed, carded and washed, the thread could be spun. Spindle whorls are one of the most important types of tools we find in the graves of Viking women. They show that spinning must have been something that practically every woman could do. Women spun thread for all sorts of purposes – soft, warm woollen yarn for clothing, a stiffer yarn for weaving tapestries and producing wadmal, and so on, such as flax thread for clothing, and cloths and canvas for strips. We cannot rule out that spinning was considered a specialist job. For instance, people were aware of the fact that, depending on its intended purpose, wool must be spun either to the right or to the left, known respectively as z-twists and s-twists, and that the wool yarn produced was so thin that there could be 10 threads per centimetre in the warp of the fabric. This required advanced skills. Another fabric that has been found is worsted, wool combed in such a way that all of the fibres lie parallel with other before spinning.

Threads, particularly woollen ones, could be dyed. The Vikings loved colours and traces of many different plant dyes have been found in Norse textiles. In finds dating from between approximately 500 BC and the year 0, the predominant plant colour is yellow. Later traces have been found of red and blue. Red wool cloaks were particularly popular in the late Roman period. Yellow colouring may come from birch, heather, dyer's weed (*reseda luteola*)³⁹ or tansy, although it is not possible to say with any certainty which plant was used; indeed, they may all have been used together. The colours were made by mixing plant parts with water and warming the mixture to boiling point, thereby releasing the dyes. Wool was then put in the same pot to absorb the dye.

We know that red comes from common madder. Whether the madder root was imported and the dyeing process occurred in Norway, or whether pre-dyed clothing was imported, is uncertain. Blue comes from woad or, in very rare cases, indigo. Woad was cultivated throughout Europe and Scandinavia as a source of blue dye. The woad plant grows well in the Nordic countries, and using it as a dye is a simple, albeit slow, process. The first leaves of the year are gathered, and, after they have been dried and fermented, urine is added to the parts of the plant. The urine is converted into ammonia, which releases *indigotin*, the dye, from the woad, and the dye bath is then ready for use.⁴⁰

Other than yellow, red and blue, brown could be made by using walnut shells as a dye. Green was produced by mixing yellow and blue dyes, or by using yellow dye in iron pots, as the rust would react with the dye and turn it a greenish colour. Deep shades could be obtained through repeated dye baths.

Textile manufacturing was time-consuming and probably took up the majority of the daily time women had available to them. Several types of looms were used during the Viking period. Perhaps the most common was the warp-weighted loom, which could be around 170 cm high and had a wide warp. This loom could be used to weave large textiles for clothing, rugs and bedclothes. The most common product was homespun wadmal, which was also used as a medium of exchange with a fixed value. Wadmal is a type of thick, coarse and highly-napped fabric with a dense weave, and was also used an important means of payment and trade in the Viking period and the Middle Ages. In the oldest sources, six *alens* of wadmal (just under four metres of fabric) was equal to one *eyrir* (26.79g silver) in Norway and Iceland. To weave smaller pieces of cloth and strips, that is, narrow strips of decorative pictorial weaves, a two-beam vertical loom, such as the one found in the Oseberg grave, was used. This was much smaller than the warp-weighted loom and a housewife could use it to show that she had mastered the process or making colourful wall hangings, or to tell social, political or religious stories.

Also found in the Oseberg grave was a tablet weaving loom for making woven braids. These were thin decorative bands used as belts or to adorn or border clothes or textiles. In the same grave, pieces of maple wood around 2 mm thick were found. This is evidence of a high degree of specialisation. The woven braids from the Oseberg ship had complex patterns and often high-quality threads, and it would have taken tremendous skill to produce such high quality. The fabrics were wool, silk and something that could have been flax or nettle. In the Viking age, braid-weaving was textile art at the highest level. From Sweden and Denmark, we also know that there were woven braids with metal, where the warp was made of silk and the weft from a

metallic thread, or a metal-wrapped silk thread. Examples of such braids, as well as small embroideries using metal thread, were also found with the Gokstad discoveries.

One type of textile art that most women would have been able to make, and that must have been widely used by both men and women, was *nålebinding*. Known in English as knotless knitting, this involves making stitches from loops around the thumb. The process requires a flat needle, made of either wood or bone, and woollen thread. One starts by making a loop and pulling the needle and thread through. The knot formed is not tightened but rather forms the next loop. The size of the stitch depends on the size of the weaver's thumb. Wool is most often used in *nålebinding* as new thread is worked in during the fulling process. This allowed items to be produced relatively quickly, namely socks, gloves and toe caps for the outside of leather shoes that prevented people freezing or slipping in the winter.

Imported silk and brocade were also applied to luxury clothing as hems, embellished cuffs, collars or simply decoration. A set of richly decorated plaques made of whale bone have been found. These "smoothing plates" are assumed to have been ironing boards for linen and silk, used together with a seam smoother made from imported glass. Whale-bone plaques have been found in various parts of Great Britain, the Lofoten Islands and in Birka, Sweden. Other tools used in textile production that have been found include scissors, knives, weaving swords, and needles made of bronze, iron and bone.

Aud would have had to master all weaving techniques and relevant tools before she could be considered educated. As an adult, she used these skills to promote both her own and her husband's lineage and increase their political status, notably through pictorial weaving and embroidery. Harnessing such skills was a source of real power in the status-driven world of the banqueting halls, where such wall decorations were displayed.

There is considerable evidence that weaving on large looms could be detrimental to health.⁴¹ In many of the weaving huts that have been discovered through archaeological work, the conditions must have been terrible. They were sunk into the ground, with cramped, dark rooms filled with wool dust that damaged the lungs and shortened the lives of many women. Wadmal, part of the lifeblood of Viking society, was produced in large quantities. It is estimated that the amount of the fabric that would have been needed to equip all warships, cargo ships and fishing boats in the early 1000s would have been in the region of one million square metres.⁴² In the Viking Age, a spelsau sheep would produce 1-2.5 kilos of wool per year, so wool from two million sheep would have been needed to reach that target.

It would have taken three or four women around one year, with a ten-hour working day, to produce a normal sail measuring approximately 80 square metres. In addition, there was all the wool for rugs, clothes and much more besides, and as well as the colossal herd of sheep that would have been required, arable land had to be set aside to cultivate plants such as hemp and flax. These were also processed and turned into fabric by women, but were primarily used for sails, rope and rigging.

This was not something that any one housewife or the women in her family could do alone, but was rather something that demanded a workforce on an enormous scale. In written sources, it is very clear that this work was largely carried out by women, and we have to assume that most of it was done by female slaves.

Stone cross from All Saints Church in Weston, Yorkshire, which depicts a Viking holding a female prisoner by the neck.

There must have been an intense hunt for female slaves to be used in textile production, animal husbandry and housekeeping.⁴³ An old stone cross in the North Yorkshire town of Weston provides us with terrifying image of the Vikings' hunt for women. Anglo-Scandinavians carved two images on the sculpture in the ninth or tenth century. On the front, we see a warrior wearing a helmet, with a battle axe in one hand and a sword in the other. On the other side, there is also a man with a sword in one hand, but this man's other hand is firmly around a woman's throat. She has her hands together and probably tied, about to be carried off for a life of servitude. Perhaps she ended up as one of the many weavers who kept Viking ships afloat.

It is not so surprising that almost 30 per cent of the Scandinavian population at the time were not free. Those who were responsible for the organisation and management of these women must have primarily been housewives and their helpers. On a rune stone in Sweden, there is an inscription dedicated to the memory of a woman by the name of Odindisa by her husband, Holmgaut. The appreciative obituary reads: "There will come no better mistress to Hassmyra to look after the estate."⁴⁴ Odindisa had no equal when it came to managing a home. This would not have been the modest residence of a small family either, but certainly a large household that could include relatives, foster children, labourers, bondsmen and paupers. She is like a manager, with unlimited power and responsibility for the estate's resources. To have one's legacy marked on a rune stone would be something that only the most respected members of Norse society could hope to achieve. It bestowed a kind of eternal life. These skills must

therefore have been highly valued among women, just as prowess with weapons or battle victories were among men.

Only through hands-on experience could Aud manage to live up the expectations that society and her family had of her. It is difficult to say how great the difference would have been between the upbringing of a member of society's upper echelons and that of someone lower down the social scale. An upper-class woman may have been an administrator more than an active participant, which an ordinary farmer's wife would have been. Nevertheless, much must have been similar as the same ideals were largely shared by the entire class of free people.

If Aud had been an ordinary farm girl in the Viking era, her days could have looked something like this: as soon as she was old enough to help out, she would have had to wake each morning at dawn. One of a girl's tasks was to feed the animals. Afterwards, she would help the other women to fetch wood to build a fire to cook and create warmth. On medium-sized and large estates, a relatively large number of meals were served, but we must assume that there was not as much food to go around in comparison to smaller estates. When and how often one ate also varied with the seasons. In winter, when it was dark and there was no work on the land, there were probably fewer meals. In the summer months, meanwhile, the day may have played out like this: after having eaten a little flatbread for *åbit*, as the first meal of the day was called, the tables and benches would be washed and scrubbed. The floors in houses were made of hard-trodden earth and these had to be swept, while all of the excrement and food scraps that people and animals had left behind had to be cleaned up. Afterwards, Aud would have helped to set a fire under large iron pots for the morning meal. She would then have served thick and lumpy porridge to all labourers, and eaten a little bit herself, before she went to the stream or nearest water to wash clothes until it was time to prepare the late morning meal. This was a type of lunch that was eaten between 10 o'clock and noon. Following this, pots and vats would be scrubbed, animals would be fed and preparations would be made for the main meal, which was eaten in the afternoon.⁴⁵ Perhaps Aud would have managed to steal a few moments to do some embroidery in between? When dusk came, everyone would return to their homes and she would have been able to take out her sewing materials. Evening after evening, all year long, Aud and her sisters hunched over their sewing with only tallow candles, which gave off precious little light, to help them.

Spindles were used to spin yarn from wool and flax. A spindle whorl was put up to create rotation. Spindle whorls could be made of many different materials and be well finished or rough. Left column from top: bone spindle whorl decorated with lines from Birka. Under: fired clay spindle whorl from

Birka. Under: stone spindle whorl from Hoftuft estate in Valle, Aust-Agder with a runic inscription: "Gunnhild made this spindle whorl". Under: amber spindle whorl from Birka. Bottom: glass spindle whorl from Sarpsborg. Centre: spindle with copper spindle whorl from Skåre church in Stavanger. Right column from top: large rock spindle whorl with circle designs from Birka. Under: lead spindle whorl from Vestre Bøli in Vestfold. Under: bone or horn spindle whorl from Birka. Bottom: highly decorated spindle whorl from Birka.

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The concept of female warriors would certainly not have been unknown to Viking-age women, as illustrated by the many amulets that have been found that depict female warriors with weapons. Women also turned to weapons when they needed to – not as warriors, but in vengeance or defence.

Few traces remain of female Viking warriors. The Poetic Edda and many sagas must be interpreted as allegories that convey morals in the form of parables, rather than real events, and the warrior women in these tales must therefore be understood to be fictional.¹⁶² Nonetheless, as we have already seen, there are a number of finds that link women to weapons, but many of these weapon discoveries have alternative interpretations.¹⁶³ Major studies have also been unable to conclude whether women were warriors in the Viking period.¹⁶⁴ However, in the pagan period of the Viking age, society was likely permissive of a broad range of forms of self-expression or consideration of a person's gender. Gender in the Viking period should largely be understood in much the same way as it is today, with a wide variety of potential gender identities. Perhaps the woman in the Birka grave is the exception that proves the rule. She may be unique or simply different, or she may have originally lain in a double grave, which was not unusual in Viking times. Grave robbery, poor conservation conditions or improper methods when the grave was opened could have led to any other remains in the grave disappearing or being "lost". Perhaps, as much evidence indicates, all warrior women were simply a myth and are simply a reflection of what many people today wish the past had been.

In sum, we can assume that it is very unlikely that Aud would have met any female warriors in her lifetime. However, she would have been very familiar with the concept and it is probable that she herself believed that such women could exist. In a way, it makes them simultaneously real and unreal. Real because, for people at the time and after, they appeared to be an objective reality. At the same time, there is little trace of them in what we consider to be reliable contemporaneous sources, with the possible exception of the woman in grave Bj.581 in Birka in Sweden. Warrior women, if they existed, were not people who had been socialised as women but who happened to have weapons; rather, culturally, they were men in the

biological bodies of women. This appears to have been a possibility in the Viking age.

Silver brooches that show women in various roles and positions. These are generally considered to depict Valkyries and goddesses. Row one, top from left: a silver brooch found in Tissø in Denmark that depicts a female rider with lance, sword and wide-leg trousers; a gold gilt Valkyrie from Tissø; a Valkyrie found in England; a silver Valkyrie fibula from Galgebakken, Denmark; and a Valkyrie fibula from Denmark. These wear a kind of helmet on their heads and a long shift. Row two: a silver brooch of a female figure from Birka; the second shows a woman with a goblet from Klinta on Öland; the third is from Birka; and the fourth is from Grödinge in Södermanland. Row three: a gold gilt silver brooch from Tissø in Denmark that probably depicts Freya pulling on her plaits; the second shows a courtly lady, thought to be Frigg, found in Tuna in Uppland; the third is a lady with a goblet from Öland; and the fourth is a gold gilt female figure from Nygård in Klemensker parish, Denmark.

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Weddings and marriage

As there was no expectation that love would be a prerequisite for marriage, it was not expected that Aud would have any say in who she married. As we have seen, under Viking laws, it was not necessary either.

What if Olaf and Aud had actually fallen in love? Perhaps they had met at the feast of a shared ally, Eivind the Easterner, that her father had also attended. A feast was an opportunity to showcase one's daughters or look for a bride. Religious ceremonies, markets and gatherings of the Thing were also important meeting places. A father would willingly take his daughter to events where she not only cooked and cared for him, but where he could show off both her and her wifely skills to potential suitors and their families.¹⁹⁰ It is not impossible that Aud could have travelled with her father on his great ship from Bute to Dublin for this kind of peaceful occasion. There may have been political or religious gatherings, or the purpose could have simply been trade.

Dublin was a bustling trading town where just about anything could be found. Here there was jewellery made from silver, bronze, amber and jet by masters of the craft. There were beautiful fabrics of fine wool and silk, boxes and bags, shoes, instruments such as flutes and personal objects such as mirrors, tiny spoons to remove wax from the ear canal and small tweezers made of bronze. A young woman could find anything she may have wanted.

Perhaps she received a little pair of bronze gilt tweezers as a gift from Olaf when they met.

Sources tell us that a person in the Viking period could have had as passionate a relationship with love as we do today. The Vikings called love “*inn mátki munr*”, “the great passion”.¹⁹¹ However, Olaf and Aud would have had to exercise caution if they harboured any feelings for one another. Often the love that is described in poetry is love that has developed within a marriage, such as that in verse 25 of the poem *Rigsthula*, where a husband and wife sit and gaze into each other’s eyes as they hold hands. Love between two unmarried people was a far riskier business. If Olaf was bold enough, he could have come with a tender lay or *mansongar* for Aud. The poem *Hávamál* provides considerable guidance on how one should approach women. Verse 92 states: “Should you wish a woman to love you, give her gifts and pretty words, say how beautiful you find her; through flattery have many prevailed.” It was thought that love poetry could possess a magical power that could make women fall in love with the poet.¹⁹² In the *Hávamál* it was also said that Odin had two such magical poems shaped in runic forms that could bewitch women into letting him make love to them.¹⁹³

The sixteenth shall I know
when all the desire of some artful woman
I shall possess;
her mind I turn
and of my fair-armed lady,
all feelings do change.¹⁹⁴

We have already seen that sexual prowess was praised and encouraged, and constantly desired in the world of the gods. The goddess Freya was a kind of guardian of *mansongar*. Although she herself loved romantic poetry, mortal women had to be more circumspect. In the legal texts from the Christian Viking period, love poetry directed at a specific woman came to be considered an attack on her reputation, and implied that the poet had a more intimate knowledge of his beloved than was considered decent.¹⁹⁵ Earlier in the Viking age, people were more concerned with the idea that such poems could bewitch a woman into giving herself to someone she should not, than with the taboo nature of love affairs.

Egil’s Saga tells of a time that, when travelling in Østfold in Norway, Egil Skallagrimsson helped a farmer’s daughter who someone had attempted to enchant with love runes. When the farmer refused the courtship, the suitor enamoured of his daughter had tried to bewitch her. Unfortunately for him, he was not well acquainted with the art of runes, and he made her sick. Egil, who could write runes, said that if one was not sufficiently skilled, illness, rather than love, would be summoned. He destroyed the rune stick

and she returned to health, according to the saga. It is possible that this actually refers to a sexual assault and the resulting traumas. It was important to emphasise a woman's innocence in such cases. Acquiescing to an open or covert courtship aimed at marriage, or from a married man, would have a negative impact on both her reputation and the honour of her male relatives if it became known and nothing was done about it, or if it was not accepted by her family.

In the Icelandic family sagas, courting women is without doubt the most perilous task as man can undertake. The unwritten rule in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries was that the less a man saw of a woman before formal marriage negotiations began, the greater his chances of survival became. If a suitor who courted a woman was too slow to get her family to consider his proposal, he often fell victim to a blood feud with the woman's family.¹⁹⁶ It is likely that such limitations also existed in certain environments in the Viking era, especially among society's upper classes where women were largely treated as chattels. There is also a possibility that Christianity reinforced such attitudes in Norse society. In the Grey Goose Laws, *Grágás*, the Icelandic laws of the time, it was written that "if a man composes love poems for a woman, he shall be condemned as an outlaw. If a woman is twelve years or older, she may pursue the case herself. If she is younger, or does not wish to pursue it herself, her guardian shall do it."¹⁹⁷ All eighteen suitors in the family sagas meet tragic ends.¹⁹⁸ The reason that women's families often acted quickly can be illustrated by the fact that all eight of the cases where the family hesitated to take action ended with the girl falling pregnant.¹⁹⁹ Women themselves, however, appear to have appreciated the attention, visits, poetry and declarations of love.²⁰⁰ The taboo against declarations of love and romantic poetry, which was thought to contain magic and was therefore not considered fair play, may perhaps explain why it was unusual to court women with talk of marriage. If Aud had met Olaf before they became betrothed, she could have fallen in love with him, particularly if she had received his attentions. A woman like Aud, however, would have had few opportunities to sneak out with Olaf, so if Olaf had loved her in return, he would have had to take a formal approach.

The aim of Aud and Olaf's marriage was not to seal a religious pact, but to act as a civil law arrangement that protected the parties in different ways. This largely concerned the arrangements between the man and the woman, but also between the bride's family and the groom, his family and allies. In the case of Olaf and Aud, political ties were very clearly the underlying reason. Normally, a marriage would be entered into to bind families together, known as "*tengja saman*", and to ensure the continuation of the family line and manage the assets of the two families. A marriage was therefore known as a "*brud-kaup*", or "bride purchase". There could be many different reasons why a man or woman wanted to get married, but love was never one of them, if the legal sources are to be believed. If a man and a

woman were so foolhardy as to marry for love, without the approval of their parents or guardians, the man would be declared an outlaw.

There is an example of this in *Egil's Saga*. Bjorn, son of a hersir from Aurland in Sogn, who was a contemporary of Aud and Ketill and came from the same legal area in Norway, he fell in love with a woman known as Thora Lace-Hand. When his suit was rejected by her *fastnandi*, he kidnapped Thora and was declared an outlaw by King Harald. Bjorn and Thora had considered travelling on to Dublin, but they instead ended up in Iceland where King Harald's power could not reach them. They received protection there and had a daughter. This story, in contrast to many others, has a happy ending. With the help of powerful allies, Bjorn managed to reconcile with Thora's brother and establish a legal bride purchase; after three years, they were able to return to Norway.²⁰¹

It would happen that powerful men would send others to negotiate and ask for a woman's hand on their behalf, or that they would have someone who handled their affairs, even if they themselves were present. Such a spokesman would describe the suitor's excellence, his courage, his family and other qualities that could speak in his favour. One example of this is in *Njal's Saga*, and we can assume that the manner in which it takes place would not have been so different to others. Hrut, who was a great chief, went to the Althing with his brother Hoskuld to court Unn, the lawman's daughter. They went to his tent and Hoskuld said: "I have a purchase about which I would speak to you. Hrut wishes to become your son-in-law and buy your daughter [...]." To us, this appears disrespectful to both the woman and her family, but the very fact that the union was presented as a purchase makes it a legally binding agreement.

Who Olaf the White may have sent to Ketill to formally ask for Aud's hand is unknown, but it could have been the spider in Dublin's political web, Eivind the Easterner. He was, in any case, a person who garnered sufficient respect to attract Olaf's attention. He certainly had significant valuables with him that would have sealed the deal. For the marriage to be considered fully legal, Aud must be purchased with a "*mund*", or "bride price". This consisted of the valuables that Olaf was to give to Aud's family. In addition, she was to receive a "*morgen-gifu*", or morning gift, the day before the wedding, as a sort of compensation for the fact that she was now sexually available to him. These were valuables she acquired through a legal agreement between Olaf, on the one side, and Ketill, on the other. Aud would also bring a "*heimanfylgje*", or dowry, to her marriage to Olaf. This would represent her share of Ketill's inheritance, which was less than her brothers would get, but still considerable. The dowry would be managed by Olaf, but there were clear rules as to how he would do so. He was not allowed, for example, to combine it with his own assets or use it to pay off his debts. The dowry would be a safety net for Aud and would be returned to her should she and

Olaf one day divorce, something that was always a possibility in a society where alliances and political relationships changed rapidly.

The *mund* should at least equal the dowry from the bride's family. The morning gift became the woman's personal property, but the *mund* would be given to her parents or be "reinvested" by her parents in the home Aud and Olaf would share. That, in later law books, the *mund* is a sum for the bride, rather than her parents, may indicate a shift in comparison to the "bride purchase" of earlier times.²⁰² The minimum amount for a *mund* in the Viking Age was, according to the legal texts, between 8 and 12 silver pennies, which was equivalent to between 196 and 294 grams of silver.²⁰³ This would have been quite a lot for an ordinary man in that period. For powerful people, such as Olaf and Aud, the value would have been significantly higher. The reason for establishing a minimum *mund* amount was probably because society was preoccupied with ensuring that legitimate heirs could be supported. A man who could not afford the minimum price or "poor man's price" would have had no hope of being able to afford to bring up children, and therefore should not marry.²⁰⁴ In addition, the groom may have to give as much as a morning gift. This would, however, be given back to the man if his wife died childless or left him for no reason.

In the Viking age, everything of value was measured by weight in silver pieces. From archaeological finds, we have weights made of lead, bronze or iron, often stamped with small symbols. Small collapsible scales stored in round, bronze boxes have also been found. For one silver penny, which was equivalent to 24.5 grams of silver, one could buy 41 metres of wadmal, for example. A cow cost just over 2 pennies and an average slave between 10.5 and 12 pennies (around £7,900 to £8,150 today). An attractive, young female slave would have sold for twice as much.

In addition to securing the financial stability of the marriage, the payment of *mund* contributed to ensuring that children received full inheritance rights. There is an example of this in *Egil's Saga* when Hildrid's sons are denied their inheritance from her because she had been "married by force and taken home as a captive". They swore that they would find witnesses to confirm that she had been paid with a *mund*. This was the only chance they had to be entitled to inherit. Children born without a mother who had been "paid for" did not have automatic inheritance rights and were considered illegitimate. Paragraph 51 of the Gulathing Code of Law reads:

"Next, we need to know how we shall purchase women with *mund* so their child may inherit. The man shall give the woman [at least] a poor man's *mund*, which shall equal 12 pennies, and have witnesses to it; and he shall have groomsmen, and she shall have bridesmaids, and he shall give her a gift in the morning when they have spent the night together, as large as the one at the betrothal. Thus shall the children they have be legitimate."

In paragraph 188 of the Grey Goose Laws, we find the same again: “The child, if the mother is bought with *mund*, is entitled to inherit as long as it comes into the world alive and takes food.” A man who had a child with a concubine could also accept that child and make him or her legitimate, should he wish, but this did not happen automatically.

So how much might a powerful man like Olaf have had to pay for Aud’s hand? We do not know, but we do know that the amounts in similar transactions could be colossal. During Cnut the Great’s reign as King of England in the 1030s, one English suitor parted with an entire kilo of gold to convince a bride’s family to accept his courtship.²⁰⁵ An Anglo-Saxon woman from the time of King Alfred in the late 800s would have received five hides worth of land as her *mund*. Five hides were equivalent to over 500 square kilometres of land. The largest recorded *mund* in the Viking Age may have been that given by the Danish King Gorm the Old, according to Saxo Grammaticus, for his bride Thyra. In his book *Gesta Danorum* (The Deeds of the Danes), he tells us that she received all of Denmark as her gift! The *mund* and the morning gift could include clothes, jewellery and household goods, livestock and slaves, and often land and property. The amount was also dependent on whether the woman had previously been married. A divorced woman or a widow’s family often received a smaller *mund* and morning gift. This was probably because a part of the *mund* would secure her financial independence, and she had already partially accomplished that through her earlier marriage. Aud herself would likely have had the right to use parts of the *mund* as well as the morning gift, and could manage the assets as she wished. Upon her marriage to Olaf, she thus became a prosperous woman. Many women were widowed multiple times over the course of their lives, and they could therefore accumulate extremely large fortunes.

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Women as healers

The urban environment of which Aud had now become part was an unhealthier environment than the one from which she had come. A life lived in one place, tied to the textile industry and with almost indescribable sanitary conditions, made women in Dublin more susceptible to a range of deficiency diseases and infections than the more mobile men were. Clean water was almost impossible to come by in the city centre. The wells were often green and tainted by dead animals or faeces, which brought surface water that seeped into them. Vermin thrived in the damp, dark houses with small bed chambers where people lay on old hay, with poorly tanned hides and woollen rugs infested with lice and mites as bedclothes. Rats were

everywhere. They flourished in the shadows of the city, where food scraps and faeces provided sustenance for ever larger packs. In small urban homes, open fireplaces would ensure that lungs were filled with harmful smoke, and asthma and eczema were widespread. The winter was particularly punishing as many were forced to stay indoors for long periods.

Aud could see how quickly relatively young women aged and died in Dublin. Skeletal remains uncovered by archaeologists in Viking towns are characterised by signs of illness, such as sinusitis, iron deficiency and malnutrition, to a far greater extent than among the rural population.³⁰²

However, it was not only poor hygiene and diet that caused illness and disease among men and women. Long sea voyages, with weeks or even months on board an open Viking ship, were no joke. Aud herself must have experienced this first-hand. She travelled many times by sea during her lifetime, over the North Sea, the Irish Sea and the Atlantic Ocean. She would have been on board for days on end without dry clothes to wear, and felt the bone-deep chill one can experience at sea penetrate her body. It was also easy to get injured on board a ship. Slippery decks, cramped conditions and the motions of the sea could cause injuries and wounds. Even small cuts could quickly become infected or fatal if it was not possible to clean or dress them in time. Fractures could lead to deformed limbs if a splint was not properly applied. Both fractures and broken bones could cause deadly blood poisoning.

As well as all of the possible misfortunes that could befall someone on board a ship, far from land, it was scurvy that was most feared. The first symptom was often swollen, bleeding gums, after which teeth would fall out, blue spots would appear on the skin and the victim would eventually die from internal bleeding. There was little fruit or plant material that could last long on board and ward off the illness. Once first struck, you were marked for life. Food on board was simple and bland, and one simply had to get used to the taste. In order to preserve food on board, meat and fish had to be salted, dried, smoked or pickled.

In all the misery, however, there was someone who could give hope and help to the sick. Healers, and especially female healers, appear in many sources. In the sagas, there are women who care for the wounded. In Snorri's *Separate Saga of St. Olaf*, we have the story of Tormod Kolbrunarskald, who went to a wise healer woman after the Battle of Stiklestad in 1030. She tended his wounds, removed remnants of weapons and stuck her fingers into the wounds to check them. The healer also cooked a soup of onion and herbs that she made men drink, after which she would sniff the wounds to check for a smell of onions. This would tell her whether there was a hole in the stomach or the intestines. If there was, there was little she could do. If not, she would boil water to clean the wounds before she dressed them. She removed arrowheads with pliers and cut into wounds that ached. She would

have a large number of assistants to help her. It would have almost been as though she was managing a whole field hospital.

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Old age and death

According to the sagas, Aud quickly became old. Less than ten years after she arrived in Iceland, she died of old age. She was probably around 60 years old, a considerable age in Viking times, especially for women. Most women had children at a young age and experienced numerous pregnancies, which had a significant impact on their bodies. We have to assume that any age over 40 would have been enough to be considered very old.⁴⁰² Most people died far earlier, either from illness or toil.

The Grey Goose Laws establish an upper limit of 80 years for when a person shall be considered responsible for their own actions, even if they appear to have all their wits about them.⁴⁰³ Above that age, everyone lost their rights to marry or to manage their property without their relatives' consent. Such a limit was likely put in place to ensure that assets were passed to the next generation for use before they themselves became too old. Nonetheless, an 80-year-old would have been extremely rare at that time, and most people lost control over their wealth long before they reached such an age. A loss of independence can be compared to the situation of young people of 15 or 16 years of age. They, however, will gain their rights eventually. The elderly will not. There is a striking description of this in a lay in the *Laxdaela Saga* attributed to a once-feared warrior called Holmgang Bersi. He was old, sick and bedridden when he and his foster son, Halldor, were left alone in the house. Halldor was lying in his cradle, which overturned and the boy fell out onto the floor. Bersi was unable to help him, and so he wrote:

Here we both lie
lame on the bed,
Halldor and I,
we have no strength;
for me, it is age,
for you, youth,
but you will recover,
and I will not.⁴⁰⁴

For those who managed to become very old, a hard and shameful fate awaited. When another feared warrior, Egil Skallagrimsson, became old, he went deaf and was unsteady on his feet. He would stumble and fall, and women laughed at him. They teased him and said “You’re all spent now, Egil!” Egil gradually went blind too and would crawl around on the floor of the house while the servants complained that he was lying in their way. At 60 years of age, Aud would have retained her authority and power right up until death took her; there is therefore, to a certain extent, a clear distinction between those who had all their faculties and those who did not. Aud tried to preserve her dignity to the last. In the *Laxdaela Saga*, it says that: “Age had taken its toll on Unn [Aud] now, so she did not rise until midday, and she went to bed early.” Aud did not allow anyone to see her or speak to her between when she went to bed and when she was fully dressed the following day. If anyone had asked how she was, she was hale and hearty. Aud did everything she could to appear dignified and in control.

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Sample translation by Chloë Williams

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