


1-1-2012

"Semiotics of the Cloth": Reading Medieval Norse Textile Traditions

Kristen Marie Tibbs
tibbs2@marshall.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://mds.marshall.edu/etd>

 Part of the [Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), and the [Medieval Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Tibbs, Kristen Marie, "'Semiotics of the Cloth': Reading Medieval Norse Textile Traditions" (2012). *Theses, Dissertations and Capstones*. Paper 231.

**“SEMIOTICS OF THE CLOTH”: READING MEDIEVAL
NORSE TEXTILE TRADITIONS**

A Thesis submitted to
the Graduate College of
Marshall University

In partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
History

by
Kristen Marie Tibbs

Approved by
Dr. Laura Michele Diener, Committee Chair
Dr. Whitney Douglas
Dr. Phillip Rutherford

Marshall University

May 2012

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....iv

Chapter

1. INTRODUCTION.....1

2. TEXTILE PRODUCTION IN SAGA LITERATURE AND SOCIETY.....9

Introduction

Construction and Authorship

Imagery of Textile Production

Archaeological Evidence of Textile Tools

Use of Color and Homespun in the Sagas

Economic Importance of Homespun

Conclusion

3. HEADDRESSES AND THE WOMEN WHO WEAR THEM.....29

Introduction

Sigrid Undset's Source Material

Written Examples of Head Coverings

Archaeological Evidence

Depiction of Headdresses in Artwork

Religious Head Coverings

Symbolism of Headdresses

Conclusion

4. THE VOCAL NATURE OF TEXTILES.....52

Introduction
The Herjolfsnæs Textiles
The Short-sleeved and Long-sleeved Garments
Hoods and Caps
In the Context of Mainland Fashion
Conclusion

APPENDIX 1: IMAGES.....71
APPENDIX 2: ENGLISH TO OLD NORSE VOCABULARY78
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....81

ABSTRACT

“Semiotics of the Cloth”: Reading Medieval Norse Textile Traditions

Kristen Marie Tibbs

Reading textiles from medieval Norse society supplements written sources and also provides insight into the voice of the individual who created these textiles. This project puts women and traditionally female tasks at the forefront of historical thought and analysis. I demonstrate that we can read textiles (via their material, color, style, and geographic location) alongside texts in order to expand our understanding of past cultures. Along with valuable archaeological remains of textiles and textile production tools, this research incorporates examples from the *Sagas of the Icelanders* in order to further understand the significance and symbolism of clothing and production in literature and daily life. I also focus on the finished head coverings worn by women in medieval Norway and analyze specific garments from the collection uncovered at Herjolfsnæs, Greenland in order to address questions about the complex social cues related to clothing and textile production.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

For thousands of years, textiles existed as an important part of society and central in the daily lives of women. The necessary compatibility of female labor with child care and breastfeeding led to women primarily engaging in repetitive, safe, and easily interrupted tasks.¹ The work necessary in the textile production (spinning, weaving, etc.) definitely fits these criteria; as a result, women took on the task of creating cloth and clothing for their families. With industrialization and developments in technology, most women today do not produce their own cloth via the methods of their predecessors. Now that spinning and weaving are no longer common tasks, archaeological finds of tools and textiles encourage questions about the lives and labor of past women. By studying the history of textiles and the role of textile labor as women's work, historians gain further insight into the cultures and people of the past. As Kathryn Sullivan Kruger explains in *Weaving the Word*:

The relationship between texts and textiles is, historically, a significant one. Anthropologists have long been intrigued at the various ways in which cloth embodies the unique ideas of a culture. They can trace the history of a culture through the record of its textiles, "reading" cloth like a written text. Indeed, this cloth transmits information about the society which created it in a manner not dissimilar from a written language, except in this case the semiotics of the cloth depend on choice of fiber, pattern, dye, as well as its method of production.²

The reading of textiles that Kruger describes is particularly important when studying a society or time period with a limited amount of surviving written sources. It is crucial for researchers to use everything possible to highlight and enhance the information found in written sources and physical evidence. Reading textiles dated to medieval Greenland and Norway provide

¹ Elizabeth Wayland Barber, *Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years: Women, Cloth, and Society in Early Times* (New York: Norton, 1994) 29-30.

² Kathryn Sullivan Kruger, *Weaving the Word: The Metaphorics of Weaving and Female Textual Production* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 2001), 11.

information about Norse society and female labor which supplements written sources related to Norway and its colonies. Ancient and nineteenth century studies of other archaeological finds inspired my decision to look at archaeological sources from a new and gendered perspective.

Norway, Iceland, and Greenland have an interconnected relationship dating back to the beginning of Norse settlement in Iceland during the mid to late ninth century.³ *The Book of Settlements*, written in the late thirteenth century, records the first settlers and settlement period in Iceland.⁴ At the time of Iceland's Norse settlement, King Haraldr Fairhair ruled Norway after unifying the entire country into one Norwegian kingdom. King Haraldr Fairhair's tyranny and aggression resulted in the fleeing of some Norse peoples to both Iceland and the British Isles.⁵ Although the Norse settlers were not the first people to make homes in Iceland, their colonization is a part of the much larger trend of expansion by Norse adventurers during the Viking Age.⁶ According to Ari Þorgilsson's *Íslendingabók* or *Book of the Icelanders*, Irish monks lived a solitary life on the island prior to the arrival of Norse settlers but soon left.⁷ The original settlers recorded in the *Book of Settlements* included both men and women and researchers estimate that the population of the island began with at least a few thousand people.⁸

Soon after this colonization of Iceland, Norse settlers began exploring even further west. *The Book of Icelanders* and *Erik the Red's Saga* recount the story of Erik the Red's settlement in Greenland at the end of the tenth century.⁹ This settlement marked the beginning of colonization in Greenland by Norse peoples from Iceland and Norway. Eventually the Western and Eastern

³ See Figure 1; Gunnar Karlsson, *The History of Iceland* (Minneapolis, Minn: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 11; Gwyn Jones, *The Norse Atlantic Saga, Being the Norse Voyages of Discovery and Settlement to Iceland, Greenland [and] America* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), 9.

⁴ Karlsson, *The History of Iceland*, 11.

⁵ Karlsson, *The History of Iceland*, 15; Jones, *The Norse Atlantic Saga*, 19.

⁶ Karlsson, *The History of Iceland*, 15.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

⁹ Karlsson, *The History of Iceland*, 28-29; Jones, *The Norse Atlantic Saga*, 45-47.

Settlements in Greenland included hundreds of Norse farmsteads and thousands of settlers.¹⁰ Both the Icelandic and Greenlandic colonies experienced a close relationship with Norway throughout their beginnings. In Iceland specifically, the relationship between the settlers and the King of Norway appeared to be that of a king and his subjects.¹¹ Throughout the four hundred years of the Greenland settlements, the colony depended on Norway for goods that they could not get from near-by Iceland. Even though this dependency on goods aided in their survival, the Norse Greenlanders eventually surrendered to the king of Norway and recognized Norwegian control in the thirteenth century.¹² Later in the thirteenth century, Iceland also lost its independence as a colony and became an official part of Norway.¹³

Although these Icelanders and Greenlanders had a definitely separate identity from Norwegians, the settlers did bring aspects of Norse culture with them to their new homes. For the purposes of this thesis, I focus on the traditions of textile production that Norse settlers (mainly women) brought with them to the colonies. From the beginning of the settlement, the long-haired Icelandic sheep provided wool necessary in the production of *vaðmál* or homespun cloth.¹⁴ *Vaðmál* held great importance in the everyday life of Norse settlers and served as a valuable commodity and export (especially in Iceland's trade relationship with Norway).¹⁵ The traditions of spinning and weaving necessary in the creation of cloth are evident from the excavations of both textiles and textile related tools throughout Greenland and Norway. These archaeological

¹⁰ Karlsson, *The History of Iceland*, 29.

¹¹ Patricia Pires Boulhosa, *Icelanders and the Kings of Norway: Medieval Sagas and Legal Texts* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 69.

¹² Jones, *The Norse Atlantic Saga*, 52-54.

¹³ Karlsson, *The History of Iceland*, 62.

¹⁴ Jesse L. Byock, *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas, and Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 263.

¹⁵ Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 149.

remains are an invaluable source in the understanding of the textile production process and overall existence of clothing styles in Norway and the Norse settlements.

Jenny Jochens' *Women in Old Norse Society* inspired me to focus on these medieval Norse women and their textile production. Jochens' discussion of gendered labor and the economic importance of homespun cloth specifically influenced my decision to further study how women's textile work could influence culture and also give voice to these medieval women. As I continued to study medieval women in undergraduate courses, I also developed a specific interest in the Norse women of Greenland. Else Østergård's *Woven into the Earth* inspired me to study these women and their clothing production in conjunction with that of other Norse women. Østergård's work served as my first exposure to archaeological finds related to textiles and the importance of continually asking new questions about these informative remains of past cultures.

Along with valuable archaeological remains of textiles and textile production tools, I use examples from the *Sagas of the Icelanders* in order to further understand the significance and symbolism of clothing and production. Early Icelandic sagas represent Iceland's transition to a written society after its official conversion to Christianity in 1000. King Óláfr Tryggvason was the Christian King of Norway from 995-1000 and attempted to bring Christianity to the entirety of Norway and all Norse settlements from the Viking Age.¹⁶ According to the *Book of Icelanders*, Iceland officially adopted Christianity in a fairly peaceful and unremarkable manner (perhaps due to King Óláfr Tryggvason's travel bans on the Icelanders as a way of influencing and encouraging their conversion).¹⁷ Once the Norse Icelanders adopted Christianity, monastic people introduced the popularity of written manuscripts and the Icelandic community began writing down their oral history. One example is the thirteenth-century Christian author of

¹⁶ Karlsson, *The History of Iceland*, 33.

¹⁷ Boulhosa, *Icelanders and the Kings of Norway*, 70; Karlsson, *The History of Iceland*, 33-35.

Laxdæla Saga who recorded events which occurred in Iceland between 890-1030. Prior to the twentieth century, those who studied or read Icelandic sagas believed that these writings reflected an accurate history of the Norse people.¹⁸ As scholarly study concerning oral traditions and manuscript origin developed, so too did debates about historical accuracy of the oral and written traditions. In 1913 the Swiss scholar Andreas Heusler defined the two opposing approaches to the study of Icelandic literature as *freeprose* and *bookprose*. The *freeprose* theory reiterated the existing belief that Icelanders accurately preserved these oral traditions until writing them down centuries later. Furthermore, *freeprose* theorists supported for the historical accuracy of oral tradition as a reputable source when studying Icelandic history. Scholars who adhered to the *bookprose* theory believed that although the Icelandic sagas were based on oral tradition, they were also rooted in written sources. The *bookprose* approach sought to discover the actual identity of saga authors and connect the sagas with existing written sources (Latin or Vernacular manuscripts) that reiterated and influenced the Scandinavian history outlined in the oral tradition.¹⁹

Scholars today recognize the discrepancies in both *freeprose* and *bookprose* theory due to the variability of individual sagas and their written histories. Historians acknowledge distinctions in oral traditions and literary authorship among the sagas (and even among chapters within a single saga). When compared to contemporary written sources and archaeological evidence, historians realize that saga literature does not always accurately record the history of major events (such as Scandinavia's conversion to Christianity or the settlement of Iceland). Instead,

¹⁸ Gisli Sigurðsson, *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition: A Discourse on Method* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 17-19.

¹⁹ Margaret Clunies Ross, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Old Norse-Icelandic Saga* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 39-41; Stefan Brink and Neil Price, ed., *The Viking World* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 305-306, 621; Ross Samson, ed., *Social Approaches to Viking Studies* (Glasgow: Cruithne Press, 1991), 3-10.

the recent scholarly focus has been to use the sagas as source material for insight into daily life and cultural customs in medieval Iceland. Furthermore, scholars such as Margaret Clunies Ross take the discussion of saga literature beyond the usual issues regarding historical accuracy and focus on how the content in the sagas both reflect and shape Iceland's culture. Although scholars generally do not want to discredit the historical intentions of the saga authors, this new focus in the study of the sagas also leads to a greater focus on the literary structure and importance of the sagas as literature instead of as accurate history.²⁰ In my research, I demonstrate that textiles and their production stand as a central literary theme in multiple sagas. This shared theme reflects similar subjects of fate, violence, and death among a large variety of saga literature. Once we recognize the theme of textile production in the sagas, it is then necessary to analyze its importance in Iceland's medieval economic and social culture. Although the authors recorded the characters and events centuries after the action, I argue that historians can still regard the sagas as strong representations of daily life and culture in early Iceland and Greenland.

In this thesis I examine the importance of the textile production process and specific garments in medieval Iceland, Norway, and Greenland. I consider a variety of literary sources and archaeological evidence in order to address the symbolism and functionality of specific garments as well as the actual labor process and its importance in Norse culture. I give primary focus to various types of head coverings for men and women. The variety of terms in Old Norse that indicate different styles of headdresses inspires many questions about the importance of describing these specific garments in spoken and written language. Female headdresses specifically held particular symbolism for the wearer in Christian Norse culture. The frequent

²⁰ Ross, 42-43; Brink, 306-309; Jenny Jochens, "The Church and Sexuality in Medieval Iceland," *Journal of Medieval History* 6, no. 4 (1980): 2; Theodore M. Andersson, *The Icelandic Family Saga: An Analytical Reading* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967).

mention in literature of the head coverings worn by both genders furthered my interest in this particular item of clothing.

I begin by considering the role of textile production as a central theme in both the Icelandic saga literature and Norse Iceland's society. I look specifically at how women engaged in various aspects of textile labor relates to the traditionally masculine themes of violence, revenge, and bloody battle. In addition to analyzing this relationship between textiles and violence in the sagas, I divide this chapter into two distinct parts in order to also study archaeological evidence alongside the saga literature examples. In particular, I discuss the textile-related finds from Greenland's "The Farm Beneath the Sand" and the Oseberg Queen's Grave in Norway. As well as analyzing the physical evidence, I include the saga literature in this portion of the chapter in order to discuss the economic and cultural importance of *vaðmál* or homespun cloth in medieval Iceland.

In the next chapter, I turn my focus from textile production to the finished head coverings worn by women in medieval Norway. I take the saga literature and the textile-related themes from the first chapter and analyze their appearance in Sigrid Undset's modern depiction of fourteenth-century Norway. I examine Undset's representation of head dresses in the *Kristin Lavransdatter* trilogy alongside physical evidence and medieval artistic and literary depictions of head coverings. By working off the material covered in the first chapter, I demonstrate how this modern fictional account shifts the narrative of the traditional saga plot to a female perspective and brings the depiction of textile production and dress to the forefront of the story. In this chapter I show how supplementing details from Undset's twentieth century depiction of medieval life with medieval Norse literature and evidence can enhance our view of the textile-related themes and add to our understanding of medieval textiles.

After discussing both the importance of textile production and female head dresses, I turn to the textile collection uncovered at Herjolfsnæs, Greenland. I use specific garments from this early twentieth-century archaeological excavation in order to address specific questions about the complex social cues related to clothing and textile production. I expand upon the information presented in the first two chapters about Iceland and Norway in order to ask new questions about the Greenland artifacts. This approach emphasizes the importance of understanding the relationship between material culture and ideas of gender when studying excavated garments. Furthermore, I give attention to the significance of the Herjolfsnæs garments in the understanding of Greenland fashion in written histories throughout the twentieth century.

I do not intend to suggest that Sigrid Undset's modern historical fiction serves as a definitive source for medieval history. I am certainly not suggesting that any fictional work based on a historical event, person, or time period is comparable to archaeological or written evidence. Rather, I demonstrate how a variety of sources and representations of textile-related themes highlights each other and inspire new analysis and research on the topic. In my analysis of female textile labor and its importance in Norse culture I do not intend to only emphasize a female perspective. Instead, I expand on the research that already exists by using gendered questions in order to further an understanding of these medieval Norse women and their role as textile producers.

CHAPTER TWO

TEXTILE PRODUCTION IN SAGA LITERATURE AND SOCIETY

INTRODUCTION

Textile production is one of the earliest forms of craft and indication of skill. The study of textile history provides insight into a society's culture by analyzing how textiles are used within that society on a daily basis; furthermore, textile history helps historians detail the daily life of those people who actually create cloth (usually women). Because archaeological evidence of textiles is often decomposed and fragmented, the field of textile history also relies on written and artistic sources to enhance any physical evidence.²¹ The Icelandic sagas provide supplemental written evidence that, when combined with archaeological finds throughout Scandinavia, are essential in the study of textile history. The characters in the saga literature who engage in spinning, weaving, etc. provide historians with the chance to add to the narrative of physical evidence. I include various sagas in this research in order demonstrate the use of a saga's literary structure as a way to expand on physical evidence of clothing production in both medieval Iceland and Scandinavia as a whole. My research in this chapter focuses on textile labor descriptions and imagery in saga literature. My analysis specifically demonstrates that textile work is important in the saga narrative and as central to the plot as commonly-studied themes of revenge, feud, and violence. The Icelandic sagas are not only about these traditionally masculine subjects but also concern female contributions to society, family, and economics through their creation of textiles.

²¹ E. A. Strand, et al., "Old Textiles-New Possibilities," *European Journal of Archaeology* 13, no. 2 (2010): 150-151; Elisabeth Crowfoot, Frances Pritchard, and Kay Staniland, *Textiles and Clothing: C.1150-C.1450* (London: HMSO, 1992) 1-3.

The combination of textile production and violence appears most obvious in the frequent mention of the Valkyries and their completion of traditionally female labor as they determine the fates of men. Analysis of images of textile-related labor in *Laxdæla Saga*, *Njáls Saga*, *Erik the Red's Saga*, and *Gisli Sursson's Saga* is essential when interpreting how textile production functions within society. Furthermore, these sagas offer information about textiles that expands on existing archaeological remains. This chapter is divided into two distinct parts in order to analyze this information in separate ways. The first part of the chapter focuses on the metaphor and imagery related to textile production that appears in the saga literature whereas the remainder of this chapter presents a discussion of the physical and written evidence.

CONSTRUCTION AND AUTHORSHIP

Although the actual authors of the Icelandic saga literature remain unknown, there is still a debate concerning the gender of the author of *Laxdæla Saga*. Because the female characters in *Laxdæla Saga* are considered the most active women among all the female saga characters, scholars continually speculate whether a woman wrote or translated this particular saga. In contrast to other sagas (such as *Njáls Saga*) the women in *Laxdæla Saga* are central to the story's plot and not merely characters that are in the story to encourage male action. This saga also pays close attention to the daily life of these strong female characters.²² The use of textile production terminology, actions, and examples of finished homespun serves as examples of traditionally female tasks included in the sagas. Archaeological excavations demonstrated the gendered division of labor which indicated that Norse women generally managed tasks inside the home,

²² Loren Auerbach, "Female Experience and Authorial Intention in Laxdoela Saga," *SAGA BOOK- VIKING SOCIETY FOR NORTHERN RESEARCH* 25, no. 1 (1998); Bjørn Bandlien, *Strategies of Passion: Love and Marriage in Medieval Iceland and Norway* (Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2005), 244; Stefan Brink and Neil Price, ed., *The Viking World* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 41.

whereas men were in charge of most outdoor labor. This is not to say that women only worked indoors; however, one of their primary household duties which often occurred inside was the creation of *vaðmál* or homespun cloth.²³ Beginning with the earliest written records regarding Iceland's climate dated to the mid-twelfth century, there is detailed evidence of both mild and severe weather on the island. Iceland's variable climate marked with cold temperatures, snow, and ice dictated the country's economy by hindering the ability to grow crops or maintain quantities of livestock.²⁴ It seems possible that concerns over Iceland's weather conditions prompted this division of labor and the continued use of warp-weighted looms and spindle whorls as textile technology that represents portability (whether inside or outside) and space-saving capabilities when working inside a homestead.

Although the presence of this labor in the saga narrative could indicate a female author, it is also likely that men observed women engaged in their gender-specific work. Depending on the size of a homestead, men and women often interacted in each other's work; as a result, men likely understood the labor involved in creating homespun (carding, spinning, weaving, etc.) even if they did not know how to carry out these tasks themselves.²⁵ The daily sewing of a man's sleeves provides one example of a daily activity in which men observed one type of female labor. Because male clothing consisted of wide sleeves, women often sewed the sleeves close to the wrist in order to ensure warmth and freedom of movement while the men worked outside in the harsh climate.²⁶ This practical female chore occurred in close contact and possibly served as a way in which men consistently observed a textile action on their own bodies. I believe my research demonstrates a neutral position in regard to the female/male author-debate; as a result, I

²³ Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 116-117, 134.

²⁴ Sarah Strauss and Benjamin S. Orlove, *Weather, Climate, Culture* (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 254.

²⁵ See Figure 2.

²⁶ Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 71, 126.

completed this project with the assumption that (regardless of gender) the unknown author of *Laxdæla Saga* definitely had extensive knowledge of textile labor.

IMAGERY OF TEXTILE PRODUCTION

Because textile production is an active theme in the sagas, actions related to textile labor often appear symbolically in the sagas alongside scenes involving violence, death, and battle. Consider, for example, the plot of *Laxdæla Saga* in which textiles foreground a story of love, revenge, and murder. *Laxdæla Saga* follows the family line of Ketil Flat-Nose and his daughter Unn the Deep-minded as they leave Norway for Ireland and eventually settle in Iceland. The plot continues to follow Ketil's descendants generations later, including the relationships among Gudrun, Kjartan, and Bolli. When Kjartan and Bolli leave for Norway, Gudrun promises Kjartan that she will wait for him and marry him upon his return; instead, he remains in Norway and she finally agrees (with the encouragement of her father) to marry Bolli. When Kjartan returns from Norway, he learns that Gudrun did not wait for him and he marries Hrefna instead.²⁷ As the drama surrounding this love triangle continues, Gudrun's jealousy results in the scene in which she convinced her husband, Bolli, and her brothers to kill Kjartan over his disregard for Bolli's land agreement with Thorain:

After Kjartan's body was taken to the farm at Tunga, Bolli rode back to Laugar. Gudrun went out to meet him, and asked how late in the day it was. Bolli replied that it was almost mid-afternoon, and Gudrun said, "A poor match they make, our morning's work—I have spun twelve ells of yarn while you have slain Kjartan."²⁸

²⁷ Keneva Kunz, trans., *Laxdæla Saga* in *The Sagas of the Icelanders*, ed. Örnólfur Thorsson (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 270-274, 354-358.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 372.

In this scenario Gudrun is actively engaged in textile work (spinning) while her husband murders Kjartan at her encouragement (though it is probably inspired more by her desire to rid Hrefna, Kjartan's wife, of Kjartan than it is over the issue of land). Later in the saga, readers again see Gudrun involved in textile labor (this time washing clothing) during Bolli's death at the hands of Halldor and his men. Because women beat their garments with a bat in order to wash the clothing in hot springs and streams, the chore itself evokes violent images. In this scenario, Gudrun spends her time furiously beating clothing with a potential weapon throughout this violent attack on her husband.

During Bolli's murder, Thorgberd (Kjartan's mother) claims that Gudrun "would be busy awhile combing Bolli's bloody locks."²⁹ Thorgberd's comments sparks an interesting comparison to Gudrun's typically female task (laundry) during Bolli's murder and then the other feminine task that she will take on after his violent death: combing his hair or preparing the body. Yet again, combing Bolli's bloody locks reiterates the textile process of combing raw wool in order to prepare it for spinning. Once Gudrun does return from the stream, Helgi (who pierced both Bolli and his shield, causing Bolli's entrails to fall out prior to the death blow by Steinthor Olafsson) uses Gudrun's decorative shawl to wipe Bolli's blood off of his spear.³⁰ Although perhaps a merciless gesture on Helgi's part, it is symbolic that he uses Gudrun's shawl (which she likely created herself) to clean the blood from his spear. This final action makes use of a female garment to mark the violent end of the love triangle between Kjartan, Bolli, and Gudrun which, of course, contains textile imagery and symbolism throughout. In the case with Gudrun, her actions coincide directly with the saga's scenes of murder and violence due to her significant involvement with both the death of Kjartan and Bolli. In these violent and malicious scenes, the

²⁹ Kunz, trans., *Laxdæla Saga*, 381.

³⁰ Ibid.

saga author contrasts these images of murder with Gudrun innocently engaged in daily chores of spinning and laundry. Furthermore, in the aftermath of Bolli's death, Gudrun will serve her dead husband by simply combing his bloody hair and preparing his body for death. From these examples it is obvious that (like violence, revenge, and death), traditional female labor serves as an important symbolic theme in the movement of the saga's plot.

As with these examples regarding Gudrun in the *Laxdæla Saga*, actions related to textile labor and typically female acts often appear in the sagas in connection with violence.³¹ A scene at the end of *Njáls Saga* contains a clear representation of the use of a standing loom.³² This example from *Njáls Saga* further demonstrates the theme of textile production and violence within saga literature. Once Earl Sigurd Hlodvisson arrives in Ireland, his men battle King Brian's army on Good Friday. Meanwhile in Scotland, on the morning of the fight in Ireland, a man named Dorrud sees twelve riders enter a storehouse. Upon walking over to the storehouse Dorrud makes an interesting discovery: "inside, he could see women with a loom set up before them. Men's heads were used in place of weights, and men's intestines for the weft and warp; a sword served as the beater, and the shuttle was an arrow."³³ Instead of riders, Dorrud sees the mythical Valkyries (who famously determine the fate of men in battle) engaged in weaving at a unique loom. In this scene from *Njáls Saga*, the author incorporates the famous skaldic *Darraðarljóð* poem which Dorrud hears the Valkyries chanting as they weave. In the beginning of the poem, the Valkyries further describe the parts of their loom:

³¹ Kunz, trans., *Laxdæla Saga*, 380; Kate D'Ettore, "Clothing and Conflict in the Icelandic Family Sagas: Literary Convention and the Discourse of Power," in *Medieval Clothing and Textiles V*, ed. Robin Netherton and Gale R. Owen-Crocker (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2009), 5-7.

³² This scene is not central to the main plot of the saga and it is possible that the author (or an additional writer) added it later.

³³ Magnus Magnusson, trans., *Njal's Saga* (New York: Penguin Group, 1960), 348-349.

Blood rains
From the cloudy web
On the broad loom
Of slaughter,
The web of man,
Grey as armour,
Is now being woven;
The Valkyries
Will cross it
With a crimson weft.

The warp is made
Of human entrails;
Human heads
Are used as weights;
The heddle-rods
Are blood-weft spears;
The shafts are iron-bound,
And arrows are the shuttles.
With swords we will weave
This web of battle.³⁴

Obviously, an actual medieval loom did not make use of men's heads, intestines, or weapons; however, the Valkyries' description of their loom in this scene is the most detailed written source for the common medieval warp-weighted loom (*vefstaðr*) or standing loom.³⁵ The actual structure of a warp-weighted loom results from two upright wooden posts and a wooden crossbeam (*rifr*).³⁶ Because of its simple structure of three separate beams, a home's size determines the loom's heights and length. A family could take apart the three separate beams when the home needed more space or when moving to a new home.³⁷ Without the survival of entire looms, historians must rely on fragmented archaeological evidence and literary sources for information on the weaving process.³⁸ The Greenland excavation site referred to as "The Farm

³⁴ Magnusson, trans., *Njal's Saga*, 349.

³⁵ Else Østergård, *Woven into the Earth* (Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 2004), 53; Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 137.

³⁶ See Figure 3.

³⁷ Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 136.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 136.

Beneath the Sand” resulted in the discovery of an entire weaving room and its contents dated to the year 1000. One of the rarest artifacts from the weaving room is the wooden beam that rested across the two wooden posts.³⁹ The weaving room and its contents reiterate the earlier discussion about the gendered division of labor that results in women completing much of their labor inside. The preservation of this loom beam also highlights the image of the Valkyries working at a warp-weighted loom and indicates further evidence of this loom in the weaving work of actual Norse women.

Whereas the Valkyries used men’s intestines for their warp (*varp*), the actual warp in this type of standing loom consisted of long threads hung from the crossbeam to the floor where the threads attached to weights (hence the name, warp weighted loom). An important feature of the loom beam from “The Farm Beneath the Sand” is the marks in the wood from where the warp threads attached to the beam and pulled down by the heaviness of the loom weights (*kljár*). Archaeologists uncovered loom weights made of soapstone at various excavation sites throughout Greenland (including “The Farm Beneath the Sand”). As the physical evidence indicates, the weights have a hole through which cord connects the warp thread to the weight. Archaeologists discovered preserved cord in three of the soapstone loom weights from “The Farm Beneath the Sand.”⁴⁰

The depiction of the Valkyries engaged in the traditionally female task of weaving indicates how the presumed male author of the poem observed women working at the loom. The Valkyries decided the fate of male warriors in battle; however, in this scenario they did not accomplish their task from the battlefield but instead in a domestic setting as they weave the

³⁹ Østergård, *Woven into the Earth*, 59-60.

⁴⁰ Østergård, *Woven into the Earth*, 54-55.

“web of war.”⁴¹ Bloody fighting is a common image throughout saga literature; yet, in *Njáls Saga* these images incorporate the textile action of weaving. Whereas Gudrun engages in spinning and laundry during the violent deaths of Kjartan and Bolli, the imaginary female Valkyries weave a cloth that controls the fierce battle and the deaths of many men including the leaders of both sides (Earl Sigurd Hlodvisson and King Brian). Gudrun perhaps functions as an allusion to these Valkyries as she instigates the deaths of Kjartan and Bolli from her own domestic setting. The mythical Valkyries appear in Snorri Sturluson’s *Prose Edda* (dated to 1200) and it is likely that the saga authors were familiar with both his work and the Norse gods from the Skald poetry.⁴² In the case of *Laxdæla Saga*, its estimated time of writing occurs 50-70 years after the *Prose Edda*.⁴³ Although the educated saga authors were Christian, they (like Snorri Sturluson) needed familiarity with Iceland’s pagan past in order to record the island’s history and folklore. This connection to the past is further evidence that the appearance of textiles in the saga literature can help scholars reconstruct the intangible social and cultural allusions of the time. This connection between the Valkyries and Gudrun’s character could perhaps serve as a reference that the original audience of the saga literature would have understood immediately.⁴⁴

The Valkyries also appear alongside textile imagery in the poetry inspired by Gisli Sursson’s ominous dreams. Written from 1270-1320, *Gisli Sursson’s Saga* follows Gisli as he leaves Norway after killing his sister’s suitors and then as he is exiled in Iceland after killing her husband.⁴⁵ When Gisli spends a summer hiding underground, he experiences multiple dreams

⁴¹ Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 350.

⁴² Snorri Sturluson, and Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur, trans., *The Prose Edda* (Charleston, S.C.: BiblioBazaar, 2008), ix-1.

⁴³ Kunz, trans., *Laxdæla Saga*, 270.

⁴⁴ The modern reader may also recognize a comparable connection to Arachne’s weaving competition with Athena in Greek mythology.

⁴⁵ Martin S. Regal, trans., *Gisli Sursson’s Saga* in *The Sagas of the Icelanders*, ed. Örnólfur Thorsson (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 496-498.

that inspire him to immediately recite verses once he awakes in the morning.⁴⁶ After one of these dreams, he spoke a notable verse:

I thought I felt how
the valkyrie's hands,
dripping with sword-rain,
placed a bloody cap
upon my thickly grown,
straight-cut locks of hair.
That is how the thread-goddess
woke me from my dream.⁴⁷

As the translator indicates, *sword-rain* in this instance refers to blood and *thread-goddess* denotes a woman. Gisli's verse includes mention of a Valkyrie controlling his fate (and waking him from the dream) when she places the bloody cap on his hair. Notably, he also refers to the Valkyrie not simply as a woman but as a thread-goddess which perhaps harkens back to the image of the Valkyries working at the loom. Whereas, in that previous example, the Valkyries controlled the fates of men in battle through their weaving, in this dream the Valkyrie's bloody hands ominously place a headdress on Gisli's head. The fateful connotation of this dream is clear to Gisli as the continued image of the Valkyrie eventually result in his fear of darkness and loneliness.⁴⁸ Eventually Eyjolf and his men confront Gisli at his hideout and a gruesome attack ensues. In this final battle, Gisli recites his last poem as his guts spill out from his body and he uses his last effort to kill Thord.⁴⁹ After a summer filled with these foreboding dreams, Gisli faces his violent death without backing down to his attackers. The emphasis on Gisli's hair that receives the bloody cap echoes Thorgerd's comment in *Laxdæla Saga* concerning Gudrun combing Bolli's "bloody locks" after his death. Although all three of these sources clearly indicate a world of strong symbols and imagery, the Valkyries in *Njáls Saga*, and *Gisli Sursson's Saga*

⁴⁶ Martin S. Regal, trans., *Gisli Sursson's Saga*, 549-552.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 550.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 550-551.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 552-555.

offer poetic instances in which the symbolism of these mythical women coincides with violence and death. The Valkyries' significance in Iceland's culture is apparent in these two literary sources as they make use of the famous myth alongside ominous scenes that foreshadow the fate of both major and minor characters. Unlike *Laxdæla Saga*, the verses spoken by or about the Valkyries signify female action which inspires death and violence by these mythical characters as opposed to actual characters (such as Gudrun). Together, these examples from *Laxdæla Saga*, *Njáls Saga*, and *Gisli Sursson's Saga* demonstrate how the cultural image of textiles, battle, and fate appear intertwined in multiple texts.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE OF TEXTILE TOOLS

The inclusion of textile activities (such as Gudrun's spinning) in medieval saga literature further indicates the importance of this labor that has existed for thousands of years. Archaeologists discovered a large quantity of textile tools in Greenland; fortunately, the permafrost in Greenland's soil also preserved some garments in their entirety. The weaving room discovered in "The Farm beneath the Sand" contains 174 actual textile fragments and hundreds of additional textile-related artifacts (such as those needed for spinning and weaving). There are few spindles among the Greenland textile finds because they are essentially sticks made of wood and not as easily preserved as other materials. On the other hand, excavations uncovered hundreds of spindle whorls (the weights involved in the spinning process) made of soapstone. There is further archaeological evidence of medieval textile tools throughout Scandinavia, including the discovery of a spindle and stone spindle whorl at the Oseberg Queen's Grave in Norway (dated to the ninth century).⁵⁰

⁵⁰Else Østergård, *Woven into the Earth* (Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 2004), 45-52.

The strings and untwisted fibers on the skirt of the Paleolithic Venus figure uncovered in France and dated to 20,000 B.C. indicate mankind's early use of spun fibers.⁵¹ Excavations also uncovered precious metal spindles from the early Bronze Age which indicates the spinning of threads by noblewomen.⁵² Furthermore, the image on a Greek vase dated to 560 B.C. depicts women engaged in multiple forms of textile labor, including spinning.⁵³ All three of these examples offer a glimpse into spinning's long presence throughout history. The spinning of yarn is a necessary step in the creation of cloth because spun yarn is required in order to weave a finished product. Theories in the field of textile history (along with modern experiments of re-creation) indicate that the process of spinning the yarn is far more time consuming than actually weaving the cloth. If Icelandic women are constantly creating all of the cloth for a household, they are also in constant need of the yarn. Gudrun's claim in *Laxdæla Saga* that she has a more productive morning because she spins twelve ells of yarn while Bolli only kills Kjartan, could indicate the amount of time spinning actually takes. In addition to the activity's inclusion in written sources, women in the act of spinning yarn are depicted in medieval art. For example, the fourteenth century fresco in Kirkerup, Church which depicts women spinning yarn while holding and watching over children.⁵⁴ Images of spinning such as this fresco add to the archaeological and written evidence that women engage in spinning yarn as a part of their daily lives.⁵⁵

USE OF COLOR & HOMESPUN IN THE SAGAS

The use of the medieval Icelandic word *skarlat* in the sagas indicates the finely woven, high-quality textile known as medieval scarlet. As John H. Munro explains in his study of

⁵¹ Elizabeth Wayland Barber, *Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years: Women, Cloth, and Society in Early Times* (New York: Norton, 1994), 43-44.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 209-211.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 220.

⁵⁴ See Figure 4.

⁵⁵ Østergård, *Woven into the Earth*, 45-52.

medieval scarlet, the word "scarlet" is not used until the eleventh century when it begins to signify specific textiles in Old High German and Latin. While often a vivid red color that is associated with modern definitions of scarlet, medieval scarlet also appears in the Middle Ages in an array of other colors further indicating that the term does not solely indicate the fabric's color but primarily its quality as a luxury woolen cloth. Together, *Laxdæla Saga* and *Njáls Saga* constitute over half the references to the term *skarlat* among all of the Icelandic sagas.⁵⁶ In Chapter 22, King Harald of Norway demonstrates his favor towards Olaf Hoskuldsson at Christmas by giving him clothing made of medieval scarlet.⁵⁷ In this example, the Old Norse "öll klæði skorin af skarlati" describes this complete set of scarlet clothes.⁵⁸ By specifying the scarlet nature of the clothing, the author emphasizes the importance of the fabric. Although the saga literature frequently describes clothing by its color, this use of the term "skarlati" highlights its uniqueness as valuable instead of simply describing clothes of a bright color. Olaf's son, Kjartan, also shares an affinity for scarlet clothing. After Kjartan unknowingly battles Norway's King Olaf Tryggvason in a swimming competition, the king drapes his own cloak over Kjartan's scarlet tunic. Later, when Kjartan announces that he will remain in Norway instead of returning to Iceland as the king's missionary, King Olaf presents Kjartan with new clothing pieces made of scarlet cloth.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Anna Zanchi, "'Melius Abundare Quam Deficere': Scarlet Clothing in *Laxdæla Saga* and *Njáls Saga*," in *Medieval Clothing and Textiles IV*, ed. Robin Netherton and Gale R. Owen-Crocker (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2008), 21-26; John H. Munro, "The Medieval Scarlet and the Economics of Sartorial Splendor," in *Cloth and Clothing in Medieval Europe: Essays in Memory of Professor E. M. Carus-Wilson*, ed. N. B. Harte and K. G. Ponting (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1983), 13-19.

⁵⁷ Kunz, trans., *Laxdæla Saga*, 311.

⁵⁸ "Haraldur konungur gaf Ólafi að jólum öll klæði skorin af skarlati."

⁵⁹ Zanchi, "'Melius Abundare Quam Deficere': Scarlet Clothing in *Laxdæla Saga* and *Njáls Saga*, 28; Kunz, trans., *Laxdæla Saga*, 347-352.

The Norwegian kings in the saga demonstrate the royalty and luxury associated with scarlet when presenting gifts of the clothing to Olaf and Kjartan. The costly dye process involving kermes results in scarlet developing a reputation as the medieval successor to classical “royal purple.”⁶⁰ Because it is produced from the dried bodies of the female kermes insects found in the Mediterranean region, cloth colored with this animal dyestuff costs much more than comparable cloth dyed a red color with madder root.⁶¹ Although Greenland and Iceland likely imported the madder-dyed cloth as well, its availability throughout medieval Europe reduced its cost as compared to the kermes-dyed cloth imported along further trade routes.⁶² Once Kjartan returns to Iceland, he dresses in his new scarlet clothing when he goes to meet Bolli and the Osvifssons after learning of Gudrun and Bolli’s marriage. The use of the high-quality clothing by both Kjartan and Olaf displays a royal gift from abroad and also indicates their public status as refined men. Kjartan shows enough concern for his clothing again when he quickly dresses in a scarlet tunic so that he can speak to Gudrun and the other women as they walk by discussing the seating arrangement at his and Hrefna’s wedding. Kjartan seems to care enough about his status to appear in scarlet clothing around men and women, no matter how trivial the situation.⁶³

A scene in *Laxdæla Saga* further emphasizes the importance of the status associated with medieval scarlet when Gudrun’s son, Bolli Bollason, also returns to Iceland both wealthy and well-dressed. According to the saga, Bolli had “become such a fine dresser by the time he returned from his journey abroad that he wore only clothes of scarlet or silk brocade...He

⁶⁰ See Figure 5/

⁶¹ See Figure 6; Munro, “The Medieval Scarlet and the Economics of Sartorial Splendor,” 14-39; Zanchi, “‘Melius Abundare Quam Deficere’: Scarlet Clothing in *Laxdæla Saga* and *Njáls Saga*,” 22.

⁶² Østergård, *Woven into the Earth*, 90.

⁶³ Zanchi, “‘Melius Abundare Quam Deficere’: Scarlet Clothing in *Laxdæla Saga* and *Njáls Saga*,” 28-29; Kunz, trans., *Laxdæla Saga*, 359-362.

became known as Bolli the Elegant.”⁶⁴ The author’s descriptions of Bolli’s clothing indicate that it is the most elegant and noticeable among all the male characters who adorn scarlet clothing and his noble bearing while wearing the rich clothing gains him the attention of all the women. Whereas Olaf and Kjartan receive their scarlet clothing from Norway’s royalty, Bolli’s scarlet is a gift from the emperor of Byzantium. Perhaps the attention given to Bolli’s scarlet clothing reflects the combination of the distinguishable fabric with unfamiliar Byzantine clothing styles that would have been available to him while abroad.⁶⁵

Unlike *Laxdæla Saga*, the examples of scarlet clothing in *Njál's Saga* do not indicate gifts from abroad; instead, wealthy characters appear in the story already wearing their scarlet clothing. For example, Halgerth wears a scarlet embroidered cloak during her marriage deal with Glum.⁶⁶ Later in the saga, Eyolf Bolverksson also wears a scarlet cloak to the Althing.⁶⁷ Because the author of *Njál's Saga* does not specifically indicate that either of these scarlet cloaks were gifts from foreign royalty, we can perhaps conclude that Iceland’s wealthiest residents imported these expensive garments and used them as gifts amongst themselves. On the other hand, the mention of these cloaks could imply that these garments initially entered Iceland as gifts from kings but eventually passed through Iceland’s wealthy families over time. The specific mention of the scarlet clothing on both Halgerth and Eyolf indicates its continued significance as a symbol of wealth; however, the actual origins of the clothing may not serve as similarly important or impressive details in the story.⁶⁸ Despite how characters in *Laxdæla Saga* and *Njál's Saga* obtained them, the medieval scarlet garments in both sagas serve as noteworthy indications of wealth, prestige, and importance.

⁶⁴ Kunz, trans., *Laxdæla Saga*, 419.

⁶⁵ Zanchi, “‘Melius Abundare Quam Deficere’: Scarlet Clothing in *Laxdæla Saga* and *Njáls Saga*,” 28-31.

⁶⁶ Magnusson, *Njál's Saga*, 66.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 292.

⁶⁸ Zanchi, “‘Melius Abundare Quam Deficere’: Scarlet Clothing in *Laxdæla Saga* and *Njáls Saga*,” 33-37.

ECONOMIC IMPORTANCE OF HOMESPUN

In addition to this imagery of costly scarlet clothing, finished homespun also served as an important commodity in medieval Iceland's economy and in the saga literature. Images of expensive clothing of bright colors or luxurious materials are rare among the actual use of homespun in everyday clothing. Whereas the saga authors include descriptions of exceptional garments, there are also scenes in which women create typical clothing out of finished cloth as a part of their household duties. One example of this occurs in *Gisli Sursson's Saga* when Aud (Gisli's wife) and Asgerd (Thorkel's wife) are at work in the farmstead's "women's area" and Asgerd asks Aud to "cut a shirt" for her husband.⁶⁹ Although this scene holds importance in the larger story of their relationships with their husbands, it also describes women in the sewing stages of a garment once they already completed the spinning, weaving, and creation of the homespun cloth.

In addition to homespun's necessary use in the creation of a family's clothing, it also holds an important position in regard to economic exchange. Iceland's use of silver as currency resulted from Viking expeditions that brought the metal and foreign coins to the island. A decline in these Viking expeditions in combination with Iceland's conversion to Christianity strained the economy as the silver supply depleted and citizens began economically supporting the clergy via tithing. Due to an increase in sheep on the island, women at this point produced abundant wool cloth; as a result, cloth began replacing silver as a means of exchange in the eleventh century. By the twelfth century this transition from silver to cloth established itself in society as laws dictated prices for items in ratios of homespun to silver and the Church described donations in terms of homespun. The laws measured cloth in units of ells which equaled the length of a man's arm

⁶⁹Regal, trans., *Gisli Sursson's Saga*, 509.

from the elbow to fingertips. Furthermore, the law ounce or *logeyrir* determined that one “ounce” of cloth indicated cloth with a length of six ells.⁷⁰ In addition, Norway and other Scandinavian countries reportedly used woolen cloth for some types of payments since women throughout the Nordic countries also engaged in similar production of homespun.⁷¹

As Iceland’s chief medium of exchange, homespun became prominent in the repayment of debt on the island. Examples from *Gisli Sursson’s Saga* demonstrate this transition from silver to homespun. With abundant murder, outlawry, and revenge it is no surprise that this saga is full of references to payments of debt and compensation. In section nineteen of the saga, Thorkel (Gisli’s brother) stops to collect a debt on his way to the Thorsnes Assembly. At the farm, he tells the farmer’s wife to “throw some homespun cloth over the saddle of my horse...and when my companions arrive, tell them I’m sitting in the main room counting silver.”⁷² Later in the story, when Gisli asks Thorkel for help, Thorkel offers to give him silver, horses, or anything else. Gisli responds to this offer by asking for “three hundreds of homespun cloth” which Thorkel gives him along with some silver.⁷³ With the action taking place in late tenth century Iceland, these two examples involving Thorkel demonstrate a transition as silver and homespun appear together in his debt collection and in the aid he gives to Gisli.

Homespun cloth as currency puts a female activity in the midst of the saga action because it is necessary for the repayment of debt and Gisli’s survival while an outlaw. In addition to its importance in Iceland, homespun served as Iceland’s chief export and trading commodity abroad.⁷⁴ Erik the Red’s Saga offers an example of both the importance of brightly colored cloth to both the Norse people and other cultures (as discussed in the previous section) as well as

⁷⁰ Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 147-149.

⁷¹ Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 149.

⁷² Martin S. Regal, trans., *Gisli Sursson’s Saga*, 527.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 533.

⁷⁴ Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 154.

demonstrates the centrality of cloth in foreign trade when Karlsefni and Snorri trade with the Vinland natives. At first, they are able to trade a hand's length of their red cloth for one of the native inhabitant's pelts. As they begin to run out of cloth, the natives remain willing to give up one of their animal pelts for a smaller piece of the fabric.⁷⁵ In Old Norse, the saga describes the cloth that the natives most desired as "rautt skrúð" or costly red stuff.⁷⁶ This desire for the bright red cloth indicates a shared interest in colored textiles among both the Scandinavian explorers and the Vinland natives. In this case, the use of "skrúð" when describing the red cloth likely indicates that it is costly and valuable because it is red. Despite any other foreign goods that Karlsefni and Snorri may have brought with them, the red cloth remains the most valuable object even when they are not interacting with people that would share the same cultural significances and implications related to colored cloth (specifically in regard to medieval scarlet).⁷⁷ This scenario from *Erik the Red's Saga* demonstrates the economic importance of homespun as a valuable commodity in Icelandic culture and reiterates that the trade of this good in measurements of ells is not an unusual experience for the explorers.

In addition to homespun cloth's important position in Iceland's economy, textiles held a central position in the gift-giving culture. In the instance of goðis, giving valuable gifts and showing hospitality increased their popularity and political position. Amongst the friendships of average medieval Icelanders, gifts could strengthen or weaken a relationship.⁷⁸ One example of gift giving occurs in *Gisli Surrson's Saga* after Vestein, Gisli's brother-in-law and close friend,

⁷⁵ Keneva Kunz, trans., *Erik the Red's Saga* in *The Sagas of the Icelanders*, ed. Örnólfur Thorsson (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 670.

⁷⁶ "Þeir Karlsefni brugðu þá skjöldum upp, ok er þeir fundust, tóku þeir kaupstefnu sín á milli, ok vildi þat fólk helzt hafa rautt skrúð."

⁷⁷ Zanchi, "'Melius Abundare Quam Deficere': Scarlet Clothing in *Laxdæla Saga* and *Njáls Saga*, 31-33; Kunz, trans., *Laxdæla Saga*, 419-420.

⁷⁸ Jesse L. Byock, *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas, and Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 88.

returns to Iceland. Gisli sends Hallvard and Havard (two farmhands) to meet Vestein and invite him to a feast. Once the men catch up with Vestein, he tells them to return by boat to the feast and give Gisli the message that he is on his way.⁷⁹ The next day, Vestein presents “a tapestry of sixty ells long and a headdress made from a piece of cloth some twenty ells long with three gold strands woven along its length, and three finger bowls worked with gold” as gifts to Gisli, Aud, and Thorkel.⁸⁰ As with the examples concerning the repayment of debt in *Gisli Sursson’s Saga*, this gift giving scene includes textiles (although these items are not just average homespun). In an ominous moment that foreshadows later events in the story, Thorkel (Gisli’s brother) refuses to accept any of the gifts from Vestein because he “cannot see how they will be repaid.”⁸¹ In this scenario the gifted textiles are central to the movement of the saga because they set up the reader for Vestein’s murder soon after this scene. Additionally, the cloth serves as an allusion to the fate of the overall relationship between Vestein, Thorkel, and Gisli. Thorkel’s reaction to the cloth and headdress echoes the serious theme of violence related to textile production in *Laxdæla Saga* and the death connected to the Valkyries’ loom in *Njal’s Saga*.

Outside of its importance to the plot of *Gisli Sursson’s Saga*, this example also demonstrates the social frequency and importance of gift-giving, hospitality, and rare items in Iceland’s culture. Although Kjartan gave Hrefna a headdress under far different circumstances, it (in addition to this example) offers a scenario that emphasizes the economic value associated with textiles in the saga literature. The saga literature provides modern readers with scenes that serve as important written sources concerning homespun’s use in Iceland’s culture. As a vital export and currency, abundant homespun was in high demand and Iceland needed the long production process in female labor. Everyone wore the finished product, slept under it, and used it when

⁷⁹ Martin S. Regal, trans., *Gisli Sursson’s Saga*, 509-514.

⁸⁰ Martin S. Regal, trans., *Gisli Sursson’s Saga*, 515.

⁸¹ Ibid.

trading or repaying debt; as a result, this female craft remained visible in seemingly all aspects of daily life. While we cannot know what this visibility meant to these Norse women, it does speak volumes about their abilities in spinning, weaving, and sewing. Today, it seems as if homespun's significance gave women an interesting level of control over Iceland's economy from the eleventh to the thirteenth century. Their successful construction of cloth from the raw wool exhibits an exceptional level of craftsmanship and a creative process that most modern people (whether male or female) do not undertake in their daily lives.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the examples from *Laxdæla Saga*, *Njáls Saga*, *Erik the Red's Saga*, and *Gísli Sursson's Saga* show the importance of textile production in both saga literature and Iceland's society. While women are not always at the forefront of saga action, their textile labor is symbolically, culturally, and economically central to the plots. Similar to male-dominated saga themes regarding violence and battle, textile production is central to understanding the cultural imaginations and worthy of analysis. As this chapter demonstrates, the *vaðmál* that resulted from this labor held a prominent place in Iceland's economy from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries as both currency and a valuable export. In the next chapter, a discussion of this homespun cloth after its construction into specific garments reveals further importance of the female labor in Scandinavian life, art, and literature. I focus on head coverings because of their frequent depiction in literature and symbolism for the wearer. I analyze the use of female headdresses and textile related themes from saga literature in Sigrid Undset's depiction of life in fourteenth century Norway. By using the information analyzed in this chapter, I demonstrate how Undset's modern fictional account shifts the narrative of the plot to a female perspective and brings the depiction of textile production and dress to the forefront of the story.

CHAPTER THREE

HEADRESSES AND THE WOMEN WHO WEAR THEM

INTRODUCTION

The 1920s *Kristin Lavransdatter* trilogy is Nobel-prize winning author Sigrid Undset's epic that follows the life of Kristin Lavransdatter and the dynamics of her relationships from childhood to her roles as wife and mother. For the trilogy, Undset relied on strong historical evidence when shaping her fictional characters and the detailed plot line set in fourteenth-century Norway. Even though the trilogy reads as historical fiction, I conceptualized these books to serve as an accessible starting place in research concerning women's clothing and textiles. Undset's trilogy is well-researched and represents one example of how the larger genre of historically accurate fiction can be used to spark insight, discussion, and research into primary source material. Undset includes incredibly detailed descriptions of the garments worn by both the male and female characters throughout the trilogy; however, my research focuses on the headdresses and their importance as a representation of marital and social status in medieval culture. After recognizing the textile-based themes in the saga literature alongside archaeological evidence, we can then see how these sources and their themes are used in Sigrid Undset's modern representation of medieval Scandinavia.

The linen wimple that covers her hair continually appears throughout the three-book story line and acts as a visible symbol of marital status for the main character Kristin Lavransdatter.⁸² Readers also follow Kristin's various head coverings as a child and the different styles she adopts according to fashion and her changing status. By combining Undset's incorporation of

⁸² See Figure 7. Traditionally, a wimple is a cloth worn over a woman's head and around her neck and chin. It covers all of the hair and leaves only the face visible.

headdresses in her novels with physical evidence, artistic representation, and written examples from saga literature and the *Poetic Edda*, my research works outward from this modern fictional source in order to further define the significance of the headdress for medieval women. Unlike the majority of saga literature, *Kristin Lavransdatter* shifts the narrative to Kristin's perspective and places women and their consciousness at the plot's focus. In doing so, *Kristin Lavransdatter* brings the details of textile production and dress to the forefront of the story and leads readers to ask questions about the material culture of the medieval world. Through reading Undset's depiction of medieval life from the female viewpoint, I am inspired to look at the information and themes in the saga literature from a new angle. My approach of combining medieval source material with its representation in modern literature reiterates a recent development in the medieval academic world in which scholars attempt to "bring the medieval and modern into productive critical relation."⁸³ In this chapter I demonstrate how the sources discussed in previous chapters influenced Undset's writing of *Kristin Lavransdatter* and expose readers to accurate details of medieval material culture.

SIGRID UNDSSET'S SOURCE MATERIAL

Although Sigrid Undset did not explicitly state or cite the sources used in her historical fiction, I draw conclusions about these influences from her childhood experiences. Sigrid Undset's father, Ingvald, was a Norwegian archaeologist who encouraged his daughter's education, specifically by exposing her to archaeological studies and teaching her how to read Old Norse. Additionally, Sigrid Undset's childhood home contained many artifacts from her father's own research in Europe as well as from his archaeologist peers around the world. This

⁸³ BABEL Working Group, *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies*, (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

childhood provided an exposure to the past that was uncommon for most girls growing up in the late nineteenth century. After her father's death in 1893, Undset continued her formal education and began writing her first novel. In 1909 Undset completed *Gunnar's Daughter* set in Norway and Iceland at the beginning of the eleventh century. This short novel addresses themes of revenge, violence, Norwegian national identity, and incorporates saga language as it tells the story of Vigdis Gunnarsdatter.⁸⁴ Undset's initial writing ventures (such as *Gunnar's Daughter*) inspired her to study fourteenth century Norway so that her medieval stories could accurately represent daily life, language, and historical events.⁸⁵ As an adult, Undset claimed that *Njal's Saga* influenced both her own life and the themes in her writing.⁸⁶ Like the sagas and other Norse literature, *Kristin Lavransdatter* focuses on matters of honor, fate, and medieval farmstead life. Additionally, the trilogy contains incredible detail about culture in fourteenth century Norway—including aspects of dress and adornment.

Kristin Lavransdatter explored how the changing economic and social landscape in fourteenth-century Norway affected the daily behavior of everyday people. Reportedly, medievalist Fredrik Paasche also suggested that Undset read documents from the *Diplomatarium Norvegicum* in order to research the laws and living conditions in medieval Norway.⁸⁷ In consideration of the ongoing speculation of Undset's source material, my research will offer a comparison of the head coverings described in *Kristin Lavransdatter* with medieval written sources, archaeological evidence, and artistic representations. Although I focus on archaeological

⁸⁴ Sigrid Undset and Arthur G. Chater, *Gunnar's Daughter* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1936).

⁸⁵ Yola Miller Sigerson, *The Art of Compassion: A Biography of Sigrid Undset, Nobel Laureate for Literature* (Philadelphia, Pa: Xlibris, 2006), 41.

⁸⁶ Tim Page, ed., Tiina Nunnally, and Sigrid Undset, *The Unknown Sigrid Undset: Jenny and Other Works* (South Royalton, Vt: Steerforth Press, 2001), x-xi.

⁸⁷ Now almost entirely available online (in the original languages of the documents—Old Norse, Latin, and Danish), the *Diplomatarium Norvegicum* consists of over 20,000 documents connected to Norway from 1050-1590. Specifically, these 'diplomas' include lawsuits, inventories, and letters; Sigerson, *The Art of Compassion*, 138.

evidence discovered after Undset's completion of *Kristin Lavrandatter*, I demonstrate how similar artifacts could have influenced Undset's own historical understanding of fourteenth-century Scandinavian clothing along with the same written and artistic examples.

WRITTEN EXAMPLES OF HEAD COVERINGS

The first book of the trilogy, *The Wreath*, begins with Kristin's life at age seven and continues through her marriage to Erlend Nikulaussøn. In the most recent biography of Sigrid Undset, Yola Miller Sigerson describes *Kristin Lavransdatter* as "a profound study of human behavior, it is a spellbinding, meticulously researched adventure story about medieval Norway—and the adventures are both physical and psychological ones."⁸⁸ The dynamics of Kristin's relationships, her illicit affair with Erlend, and her struggle with Christianity are central to the plot of all three books. For every stage of Kristin's life and her internal development, there is also an outward display of status and her life's stages through her headdresses and hair styles. As an innocent child, Kristin wears her hair loose without a daily headdress. When she leaves Jørundgaard (the family's homestead) to travel with her father, Lavrans, "Ragnfrid coiled up Kristin's long golden hair and fastened it under her old blue cap."⁸⁹ As Kristin and Lavrans leave the farm, "Kristin waved to her mother. They could see her out on the green in front of the farm buildings back home; she waved to them with a corner of her linen veil."⁹⁰ Undset immediately presents a contrast between the head covering of a child and that of a married woman. According to archaeological studies by the Royal Irish Academy, children in Viking Age Ireland (while the area was under Norwegian control) often wore lightweight caps that tied around the neck, exposed the hairline around the face, and were then left open in the back. These short linen caps

⁸⁸ Sigerson, *The Art of Compassion*, 153.

⁸⁹ Sigrid Undset, *Kristin Lavransdatter*, trans. Tiina Nunnally (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 7.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

were also likely worn by adult women underneath outer headdresses such as Rangfrid's linen veil.⁹¹ Shortly after this example from Kristin's early childhood, readers also see Kristin admire Fru Aashild when she comes to Jørungaard to tend to Kristin's younger sister, Ulvhild, after her back injury. Kristin describes Fru Aashild with "an elegant white linen wimple [that] framed her face and was fastened tightly under her chin with a gold brooch; over it she wore a veil of soft, dark-blue wool, which fell loosely over her shoulders and onto her dark, well-fitting clothes."⁹² This association of the wimple as elegant or attractive to a (albeit fictional) young girl, reflects the symbolism of the wimple as a blatant statement of a woman's marriage. For fourteenth century girls who are expected to eventually marry and organize their own households, characters such as Fru Aashild and Ragnfrid represent a girl's future lifestyle and dress as an adult woman.

The Wreath also includes colorful details about the betrothal and marriage process. In the days before her wedding, Kristin wears her hair loose for the last time before her marriage to Erlend. After their wedding mass and feast, guests take the couple to the bridal bed where Kristin notices, "the finely pleated, snow-white linen cloth. This was the wimple that married women wore and that Erlend had bought for her; tomorrow she would bind up her hair in a bun and fasten the cloth over it."⁹³ When Kristin's younger sister, Ramborg, marries Simon Darre later in the story, she also receives a "gilded chest that was up in the bridal loft at Formo; there were twelve costly wimples inside, and this was what her husband was going to give her on their first morning."⁹⁴ The communal knowledge of these marriages reflect trends in thirteen and fourteenth century Europe where public knowledge of a marriage was necessary for the Catholic

⁹¹ See Figure 8; Elizabeth Wincott Heckett, *Viking Age Headcoverings from Dublin* (Dublin: Irish Royal Academy, 2003), 46-48.

⁹² Undset, *Kristin Lavransdatter*, 46.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 281.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 517.

Church and the couple's friends, family, and neighbors. Large attendance at a marriage ensured that the entire nearby region knew about the legal and ecclesiastical aspects of a couple's union.

⁹⁵ Furthermore, the veil as a morning gift to Kristin from her new husband reflects property and gift giving trends within a marriage. The earliest Norwegian law indicated that the morning after witnesses saw the couple to their bridal bed, the bridegroom should give the bride a "morning gift" to indicate to the wedding celebration that their marriage had been consummated. ⁹⁶ Undset outlines this tradition in her description of the first morning following Ramborg and Simon's marriage: "With laughter and bold teasing, they watched as Simon placed the wimple of a married woman over his young wife's head. Cheers and the clanging of weapons filled the room as Ramborg stood up, straight-backed and flushed beneath the white wimple, and gave her husband her hand."⁹⁷ In both examples from the novel, Erlend and Simon's morning gift to their new wives is the married woman's wimple that Kristin admired as beautiful on her mother, Fru Aashild, and other married women throughout her childhood and teenage years.

In addition to the sexual and marital change represented by the wimple as a morning gift, headdresses also indicate a woman's social status. For example, the *Poetic Edda* offers examples of medieval written reference to Norse married women's headdresses. The mythological poems in the *Poetic Edda* were copied into *The Codex Regius* in the 1270s and likely originated prior to Iceland's conversion to Christianity in 1000.⁹⁸ The *List of Rig (Rigsthula)* describes how the Norse god Heimdall visits the households of three different couples in order to physically and

⁹⁵ Mia Korpiola, "An Act or Process?" in *Family, Marriage, and Property Devolution in the Middle Ages*, ed. Lars Ivar Hansen (Tromsø, Norway: Dept. of History, University of Tromsø, 2000), 33-34.

⁹⁶ Kathrine Græsdal, "Joint Ownership in Medieval Norway," in *Family, Marriage, and Property Devolution in the Middle Ages*, ed. Lars Ivar Hansen (Tromsø, Norway: Dept. of History, University of Tromsø, 2000), 81-82.

⁹⁷ Undset, *Kristin Lavransdatter*, 519.

⁹⁸ Carolyne Larrington, trans., *The Poetic Edda* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), x-xi.

metaphorically creates the class structures of society. For this research, the description of the women's clothing at each household is most notable. At the first house Rig finds:

the door was ajar;
in he stepped, there was a fire on the floor;
a couple sat there, gray-haired, by the hearth,
Great-grandfather and Great-grandmother
in an old-fashioned head-dress.⁹⁹

As Rig continues on to the second house he sees a second couple working by the fire:

The man was whittling wood for a cross-beam.
His beard was trimmed, his hair above his brows,
his shirt close-fitting, there was a chest on the floor.

On it sat a woman, spinning with a distaff,
stretching out the thread, preparing for weaving;
a head-dress was on her head, a smock on her body,
a kerchief round her neck, brooches at her shoulders.
Grandmother and Grandfather keeping house.¹⁰⁰

In the final household of Mother and Father, Rig observes that

the lady of the house was admiring her arms,
stroking the material, straightening the sleeves.
Her head-dress was set straight, there was a pendant on her breast,
a short, full cape and a blue-stitched blouse;
her brow was brighter, her breasts more shining,
her neck was whiter than freshly fallen snow.¹⁰¹

Finally, when Lord, the son of Mother and Father (the third, wealthy couple that Rig visits), marries Erna she is described as wearing the bridal veil after their marriage as they lived together and raised their children.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Larrington, trans., *The Poetic Edda* 246.

¹⁰⁰ Larrington, trans., *The Poetic Edda* , 248.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 249-250.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 251.

Of the various headdresses described in the above examples, the “old fashioned headdress worn by Great-grandmother was likely a more traditional wimple that covered the entirety of the hair, neck, and shoulders.¹⁰³ In further analysis of the clothing described in the *List of Rig*, scholars used details of the other clothing pieces in order to predict the exact types of head covering worn by Grandmother and Mother. Based on her archaeological finds and reconstructions, Elizabeth Wincott Heckett describes the Grandmother’s headdress and kerchief as representative of the style in which the hair tied up underneath a band that went around the head while a separate shawl covered the shoulders. Additionally, Heckett predicts that the noble Mother portrayed in the final scenario whose headdress was “set straight” could be wearing an expensive silk cap (similar to the shorter style of Kristin’s previously mentioned childhood cap).¹⁰⁴ The costly wimples that Simon gave Ramborg on their wedding day could perhaps mimic the Mother’s more expensive headcovering. The reference to wimples made of a more expensive material could indicate the use of silk (similar to the cap) or a higher quality/imported wool or linen. These descriptions from the *Poetic Edda* demonstrate different types of female headdresses for different classes and ages of women. In this case, the banded head dress with pinned kerchief is appropriate for the farming class on a daily basis while the smaller, more expensive cap appropriate for wealthier women.¹⁰⁵

Similarly to the imagery in the *Kristin Lavransdatter* series and the *List of Rig*, the Icelandic sagas often include detailed descriptions of the headdresses worn by both male and female characters. *Laxdæla Saga* follows the family line of Ketil Flat-Nose and his daughter Unn the Deep-minded as they leave Norway for Ireland and eventually settle in Iceland. The plot

¹⁰³ See Figure 7.

¹⁰⁴ Elizabeth Wincott Heckett, *Viking Age Headcoverings from Dublin* (Dublin: Irish Royal Academy, 2003), 7.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

continues to follow Ketil's descendents generations later, including the relationships among Gudrun, Kjartan, and Bolli. When Kjartan and Bolli leave for Norway, Gudrun promises Kjartan that she will wait for him and marry him upon his return; instead, he remains in Norway and she finally agrees (with the encouragement of her father) to marry Bolli.

In this saga a headdress takes on a central role when Ingiborg (King Olaf of Norway's sister) gives Kjartan a white headdress with gold embroidery (intended specifically as a gift to Gudrun) as he finally prepares for his return trip to Iceland. Once Kjartan reaches Iceland he learns that Gudrun is married to Bolli. Meanwhile, Thurid (Kjartan's sister) and Hrefna examine the contents of Kjartan's boat upon his return and Hrefna puts on the white headdress intended for Gudrun:

Hrefna sat þá enn með faldinum. Kjartan hyggur að henni vandlega og mælti: "Vel þykir mér þér sama moturinn Hrefna," segir hann, "ætla eg og að það sé best fallið að eg eigi allt saman, motur og mey." Þá svarar Hrefna: "Það munu menn ætla að þú munir eigi kvongast vilja bráðendis en geta þá konu er þú biður."¹⁰⁶

Because Gudrun is no longer available to him, Kjartan decides that he should possess both the headdress and the girl wearing it.¹⁰⁷ Kjartan's attitude towards marriage implies his status as a male in Iceland's society who has the ability to choose which man's daughter he would like to consider as a potential bride in a marriage settlement. As the saga explains later, Hrefna did not specifically refuse Kjartan's marriage offer but left the decision to her father.¹⁰⁸ Although readers cannot know if Hrefna could or would have successfully refused a marriage to any suitor, her

¹⁰⁶ "Hrefna still sat there with the headdress. Kjartan looked closely at her and said, 'It seems to me the headdress befits you well, Hrefna.' he said, 'And also I think it suits me best that I possess both together, the lady's headdress and also the girl.' Then said Hrefna, 'Many men think that you shall possess the wife you wish for suddenly and get the wife you wait for.'"

¹⁰⁷ Keneva Kunz, trans., *Laxdæla Saga in The Sagas of the Icelanders*, ed. Örnólfur Thorsson (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 357-358.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 361.

indifference reflects her status as a female in the saga in which conversations over marriage take place between fathers and potential husbands.

No matter Kjartan's actual feelings for Hrefna, he chooses her as a potential wife and considers her a respectful item comparable to the headdress. Despite Ingiborg's intentions, Kjartan claims that the headdress should belong to his wife even if she is not Gudrun. At the feast for the Winter Nights, shortly after Kjartan and Hrefna's marriage, Gudrun asks Hrefna to wear the white headdress so that "everyone would be able to see one of the greatest treasures ever brought to Iceland."¹⁰⁹ Kjartan immediately objects to this idea claiming that "it's more important to me that Hrefna should possess this treasure than to provide our guests at this time with a moment's diversion."¹¹⁰ Despite giving his new wife the place of honor at his table (which also used to be Gudrun's seat), he does not want Hrefna to display the headdress (which similarly reflects her new position) to everyone at the feast. The next day, Gudrun asks Hrefna if she can see the headdress upon which she examines it without commenting.¹¹¹ In this scenario Ingiborg gives the headdress to Kjartan to use as a wedding gift for his presumed bride, Gudrun but instead he gives it to Hrefna upon their marriage. Although we see later in the saga that this specific headdress is not worn by Hrefna on a daily basis after their marriage, it does reflect a similar gift-giving trend to that of Erlend's morning gift to Kristin. As a married woman in Norse culture, it seems likely that Hrefna had a less costly headcovering for everyday wear. Although the plot of *Laxdæla Saga* does not take place in Kristin Lavransdatter's Christian Norway, Hrefna possibly covered her hair for practical, cultural, or fashionable purposes on a daily basis and not just for special events such as the feast for the Winter Nights.

¹⁰⁹ Kunz, trans., *Laxdæla Saga*, 362.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 363.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 363.

The feminine nature of bridal headdresses and the symbolism they hold for a married Norse woman become comedic and ridiculous when men are depicted in this particularly female head covering. The *Poetic Edda* includes an entertaining description of a male character in a female bridal headdress. *Thrym's Poem* depicts the gods Freyia and Thor in a humorous manner and the poem was often used as a ballad. In this poem, Loki and Thor make fun of Freyia's famous promiscuity by implying that she would take a giant as a sexual partner and as a husband. Like Freyia's sexuality, Thor's famous characteristic of masculinity is also mocked throughout the poem.¹¹² The implications of Freyia marrying a giant result in Freyia's anger and Thor's subsequent dressing up as a woman:

Then Heimdall said, the whitest of the gods—
he can see far ahead as the Vanir also can:
'Let's dress Thor in a bridal head-dress,
let him wear the great necklace of the Brisings.

'Let keys jingle about him
and let women's clothing fall down to his knees,
and on his breast let's display jewels,
and we'll arrange a head-dress suitably on his head!'

Then said Thor, the vigorous god:
'The Æsir will call me a pervert,
if I let you put a bride's veil on me.'

The said Loki, son of Laufey:
'Be quiet, Thor, don't speak these words!
The giants will be settling in Asgard
unless you get your hammer back.'

Then they dressed Thor in a bride's head-dress
and in the great necklace of the Brisings,
they let keys jingle about him
and women's clothing fall down to his knees,
and on his breast they displayed jewels,
and arranged a head-dress suitably on his head.¹¹³

¹¹² Larrington, trans., *The Poetic Edda*, 97.

¹¹³ Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 99.

Whereas in the saga literature dressing in the clothing of the opposite sex is grounds for divorce, here it serves as a comedic scenario in which a masculine god takes on the role of a bride and wears female clothing, jewels, and the bridal veil.¹¹⁴ This fantastical example of a Norse god dressed as a woman offers a lighthearted depiction of an entertaining head covering for men in Norse literature and culture.

In addition to gift giving trends, readers also see changes in how Kristin covers her hair in the second book of Undset's trilogy, *The Wife*, when Erlend is imprisoned in Oslo. Upon his release, Simon (Kristin's brother-in-law) observes that as soon as Kristin had arrived in Oslo, "she had begun fastening her wimple in a different manner than before. Here in the south only the wives of small-holders wore the wimple in the old-fashioned way she had worn it since she was married; tightly framing the face like a nun's wimple, with the end crossed in front so her neck was completely hidden, and the folds draped along the sides and over her hair." Now, in southern Norway, Kristin adopted the more common fashion of placing the white linen cloth "smoothly on her head" with it hanging straight back "so that her hair in front was visible, and her neck and shoulders were free."¹¹⁵ This description of Kristin's changing wimple reflects actual changing trends in female head coverings in Northern and Western Europe throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth century as other types of bands, caps, and kerchiefs developed from the wimple style.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Specifically, Gudrun's divorce from Thorvald on the grounds of his low-cut shirt in *Laxdæla Saga* (and discussed later in this chapter).

¹¹⁵ Undset, *Kristin Lavrandatter*, 693.

¹¹⁶ James Laver, Amy De La Haye, and Andrew Tucker, *Costume and Fashion: A Concise History* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2002), 50-103.

As Lucia Sinisi explains in “The Wandering Wimple,” the anonymous author of the early thirteenth century *Ancrene Wisse* instructs nuns to cover their hair based on the teachings of Saint Paul. Specifically the *Ancrene Wisse* quotes the apostle as informing women to cover their hair and “not wimple!”¹¹⁷ This specific rejection of the wimple for nuns in mainland Europe resulted from the changes in shape, material, and color that developed along with its popularity for lay women. Fashionable variations to the wimple contrasted the more traditional veil which remained simple and unadorned. This early rejection of the wimple for nuns indicated changes in the head covering for married women as the styles no longer reflected the simplistic veils of the monastic world.¹¹⁸ Specifically in Scandinavia, import documents dated to the thirteenth century indicate the value of a *strik* or small cap. In this case the *strik* consists of less material and is less expensive than a long veil; furthermore, the *strik* is described as a practical daily head covering for women.¹¹⁹ In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the Swedish terms *lue* and *huva* also indicated cap-like headwear used as underwear for both men and women.¹²⁰ As women began adopting shorter more practical head coverings, legal codes in fourteenth century Sweden indicated *huvas* as types of daily clothing and veils as “best sets of clothes.”¹²¹ Artwork from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries also depict women wearing small caps that reflect the style of the *huva* or *lue* previously worn underneath larger veils.¹²² The head coverings depicted in artwork only cover the women’s hair and the back of her neck (leaving the shoulders and front of the neck visible). The ties on these caps were long and tied around the head instead of under the

¹¹⁷ Lucia Sinisi, “The Wandering Wimple,” in *Medieval Clothing and Textiles IV*, ed. Robin Netherton and Gale R. Owen-Crocker (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2008), 46-47.

¹¹⁸ Sinisi, “The Wandering Wimple,” 39-49.

¹¹⁹ Camilla Luise Dahn and Isis Sturtewagen, “The Cap of St. Birgitta,” in *Medieval Clothing and Textiles IV*, ed. Robin Netherton and Gale R. Owen-Crocker (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2008), 110.

¹²⁰ Dahn and Sturtewagen, “The Cap of St. Birgitta, 108-109.”

¹²¹ Dahl and Sturtewagen, “The Cap of St. Birgitta,” 111.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 112-119.

chin.¹²³ In the trilogy, Kristin's character only adopts this modern fashion that kept the hair in front visible and her neck and shoulders free while in Oslo and continues the traditional style of a wimple as a married woman at Husaby, then as a widow, and finally as a nun.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

In addition to modern and medieval literary depictions of textiles, researchers also possess the ability to analyze archaeological remains. Due to the fragile nature of textiles, the discovery of an entire piece of clothing is a rare find; therefore, one way to supplement the often fragmented physical evidence is with written descriptions of clothing. The textile finds from Birka, Sweden (important as a central trade point for medieval Scandinavia) are one example of partial physical evidence that may reflect textiles similar to those referred to in written sources. Excavation of over 1100 graves at Birka reveal a variety of archaeological finds, including a large quantity of textile remains. The materials and types of weaves in most of the Birka textile finds have been identified; however, it is more difficult to distinguish what specific garment a fragmented piece may have come from. Specifically, the finds include potential pieces of headgear with gold and silver trimmings and embroidery.¹²⁴ As in Birka, similarly woven textile fragments were found among the Oseberg finds in Norway. Also too fragmented and deteriorated to attribute to a specific garment, the similar weaving and embroidery could perhaps indicate that they are also potential pieces of headdresses.¹²⁵ Perhaps these fragments constituted a female

¹²³ Ibid., 120; Marybelle S. Bigelow, *Fashion in History: Western Dress, Prehistoric to Present* (Minneapolis, Minn: Burgess Pub. Co, 1979), 119.

¹²⁴ Agnes Geijer, "The Textile Finds in Birka," in *Cloth and Clothing in Medieval Europe: Essays in Memory of Professor E. M. Carus-Wilson*, ed. N. B. Harte and K. G. Ponting (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1983), 80-99.

¹²⁵ Arne Emil Christensen, Anne Stine Ingstad, and Bjorn Myhre, *Oseberg Dronningens Grav: Vår Arkeologiske Nasjonalskatt i Nytt Lys* (Oslo: Schibsted, 1993).

headdress similar to the white headdress with gold embroidery that Ingiborg gives Kjartan in *Laxdæla Saga* or the costly wimples given to Ramborg as her morning gift from Simon.

The textile discoveries in the house sites from modern day Fishamble Street, John's Lane, and High Street in Dublin, Ireland offer further evidence of eleventh and twelfth century head coverings. Of the silk and wool textile remains, there are five different possible types of head coverings including scarf and veil-like textiles.¹²⁶ Of the various remains, the "veil-type silk" is the only piece large enough to be worn as a wimple. The finished edges on the ends of the silk remain widthwise; however, the cloth is broken lengthwise and lacks the finished edges, indicating that it was originally longer. According to archaeologists, the "veil-type silk" could have been pinned in place to cover the forehead, neck, and shoulders in the style of a traditional wimple.¹²⁷ Again, Kristin's use of the traditional style with full coverage reflects the style of this authentic full coverage veil dated to the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

Undset depicts both Kristin and Ramborg donning their silk wimples in situations where they each demonstrate prestige and honor: Kristin at the king's banquet and then Ramborg as a new mother proudly receiving a visitor. In *The Wife* when Kristin reminisces about attending a feast at the King's palace "wearing a silk wimple and with all her best jewelry adorning her red bridal gown, she had sat there among the most high-born women at the banquet."¹²⁸ Readers find the portrayal of silk wimple's again when Kristin visits Ramborg after she gives birth to her first child. Ramborg "was lying in bed, in honor of her guest. She had adorned herself with a silk wimple and a red gown trimmed across the breast with white fur."¹²⁹ Although these two examples demonstrate the fictional characters' use of silk headdresses in different situations, they do echo

¹²⁶ Heckett, *Viking Age Headcoverings from Dublin*, 1-3.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹²⁸ Undset, *Kristin Lavransdatter*, 473.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 558.

the actual use of silk instead of homespun wool or linen by wealthier women when on display. Drawing upon Undset's focus into the daily lives of typical medieval people, an invitation to the king's banquet and the birth of a child reflect important occasions among the daily routines of non-royal women such as Kristin and Ramborg. Because trade routes ran through Birka, Sweden, past Scotland and then to Dublin, shared clothing styles resulted throughout Europe.

The silk used in textiles (such as for the "veil-type silk") found at Fishamble Street and John Lane were likely imported from Byzantium along these trade routes.¹³⁰ The imported silk was not cultivated in Norse settlements like other materials such as linen or wool; as a result, garments made from silk represented luxury goods in medieval Scandinavian and their controlled settlements. The use of silk in Christian church hangings, altar covers, and liturgical vestments led to the need of the imported material as early as the fifth century. At that point in time, Byzantium, China, Persia, and India each had their own silk industry and exported the cloth.¹³¹ The actual production of silk and the early silk markets were remarkably complex and affected by politics, geography, and religion. As silk moved westward, Europe considered the material an important and rare commodity regardless of where it originated.¹³² Silk production expanded and by the twelfth century Italian silk-weavers dominated the silk market. Sharon Farmer's research focuses on the importance of Paris' small silk industry during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries as silk remained a luxury item and the industry continued to move into Europe.¹³³ The development of silk markets in Italy and France by the thirteenth century perhaps provided other Western European and Scandinavian countries with easier access to imported silk cloth and silk

¹³⁰ Heckett, *Viking Age Headcoverings from Dublin*, 106; Bigelow, *Fashion in History*, 107.

¹³¹ Hsin-ju Lui, *Silk and Religion: An Exploration of Material Life and the Thought of People, AD 600-1200* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996) 9, 113.

¹³² Hsin-ju Lui, *Silk and Religion*, 123-187.

¹³³ Sharon Farmer, "Biffes, Tiretaines, and Aumonières: The Role of Paris in the International Textile Markets of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries" in *Medieval Clothing and Textiles II*, ed. Robin Netherton and Gale R. Owen-Crocker (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2006), 73-78.

garments. Undset's portrayal of Ramborg and Kristin wearing silk wimples reiterates the existence, trends, and availability of silk veils throughout Scandinavia.

Undset again demonstrates varied material for headdresses in a scene from *The Wreath* when Fru Aashild spots four armed men on horseback heading towards her home and prepares to receive her unexpected guests by starting a fire in the hearth, cleaning the room, and preparing food. Most importantly here, Undset described Fru Aashild's actions as she changes out of her "rough muslin kerchief" and puts on a white linen wimple.¹³⁴ The kerchief that Fru Aashild wears while alone in her home is reminiscent of further usage of the scarves and caps found at Fishamble Street and John's Lane. Although these excavations did not uncover any muslin garments, the shape of a kerchief is similar to that of the scarf that (in modern replications) is tied under the chin and left open in the back (similar to Kristin's childhood cap) or covers the hair entirely by tying the fabric around a knotted bun.¹³⁵ Upon receiving visitors, Fru Aashild took off her more revealing garment and put on a wimple that fully covered her hair (as was proper for married women).

While this detail is not central in *The Wreath's* plot or in helping the reader understand the reason for Fru Aashild's visitors, Undset chooses to include this significant change in headdress. Because excavations of the sites at John's Lane and Fishamble Street did not begin until the later part of the twentieth century, it is obvious that Sigrid Undset did not draw upon these exact artifacts as she wrote the details of her characters' headdresses.¹³⁶ It seems likely that Undset acquired this information about from similar archaeological information (perhaps using her father's collection, research, or friends) or from documents in the *Diplomatarium Norvegicum*. Undset's examples of silk wimples and informal muslin kerchiefs offer possible

¹³⁴ Undset, *Kristin Lavransdatter*, 211.

¹³⁵ Heckett, *Viking Age Headcoverings from Dublin*, 50.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

written representations of these archaeological discoveries; furthermore, the discovery of these various head coverings suggest a change in style and material as a result of a woman's activities at home and in public.

DEPICTION OF HEADDRESSES IN ARTWORK

Artwork also verifies the historical accuracy of Undset's descriptions of headdresses in the *Kristin Lavransdatter* trilogy. In addition to the written evidence in the *Sagas of Icelanders*, the *Poetic Edda* and textile remains, we also see medieval female headdresses portrayed in artwork. In the fresco mentioned in the previous chapter, the woman seen spinning thread on a distaff while watching children has her hair and neck covered by a white head covering.¹³⁷

Additionally, the queen pieces from the twelfth century Lewis chess set found in Lewis, Scotland wear short veils under their crowns similar to actual silk veils. Because historians and archaeologists theorize that the sculptor who created this walrus-ivory chess set was trained in a Norwegian environment (perhaps in Lewis while it was under Norway's control), the head coverings on the queen pieces provide further evidence of head covering usage.¹³⁸

The Oseberg tapestry serves as another artistic example of head coverings. The fragmented textile found at the Oseberg ship burial was probably once part of a larger wall hanging. The pieces of this tapestry that did survive in Greenland's permafrost show scenes of men, women, and animals in a variety of colors. Most notably here are the men from the tapestry who are shown wearing gowns, trousers, cloaks, and caps on their heads.¹³⁹ Although it is hard to determine the exact details of a head covering on a five to ten centimeter figure in a tapestry, the

¹³⁷ See Figure 4; Østergård, *Woven into the Earth*, 46.

¹³⁸ Heckett, *Viking Age Headcoverings from Dublin*, 7.

¹³⁹ Judith Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1991), 124-125.

men's heads may be covered by a typical hood like those found at Herjolfsnæs and worn by Thorgils in *Laxdæla Saga*. On the other hand, their caps could represent a similar style to those worn by women and children. Because there is not similar artistic representation of women wearing only the small caps like those found at the excavation sites in Dublin, some textile historians theorize that women wore the small caps underneath linen wimples. If women wore them underneath outer head dresses, they would obviously be invisible in visual depictions of medieval women wearing wimples. The prevalence of the caps in various sizes suggests that the garment was common for children, women, and men at the excavated settlements in Dublin. Those made of silk or higher quality wool would suggest economic or societal status of the wearer and likely not be worn as just underwear with a women's outer head piece.¹⁴⁰

RELIGIOUS HEAD COVERINGS

In addition to analyzing Kristin's childhood experiences and her use of the traditional wimple after her marriage, Undset often focuses much attention to Kristin's religious beliefs. In the final book *The Cross*, Kristin enters (the real-life) Rein Abbey once she becomes a widow and her sons are grown or deceased. Before taking the vows of a nun, Kristin is "allowed to wear the same attire as the sisters: a grayish white woolen robe—but without the scapular—a white wimple, and a black veil."¹⁴¹ This description of Kristin's new daily wardrobe as a nun is reminiscent of her encounter with nuns as a teenager when she arrives at the Nonneseter convent and "stared uneasily at the many black-clad women with white wimples framing their faces."¹⁴² In the final pages of *Laxdæla Saga*, Gudrun also becomes a nun in Iceland which could perhaps serve as a similar example or situation used by Sigrid Undset of a woman trading in the

¹⁴⁰ Heckett, *Viking Age Headcoverings from Dublin*, 108.

¹⁴¹ Undset, *Kristin Lavransdatter*, 1086.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 101.

headdresses that represented her marriages and other secular relationships for that of a monastic veil.¹⁴³

As a nun, Kristin continues engaging in textile labor because the sisters at Rein were responsible for “preparing, spinning, and weaving the flax and then sewing the cloth into clerical garments” during their work hours.¹⁴⁴ While no linen fabrics survived with the other textiles found at the Oseberg Ship, there was a single flaxseed found among cress seed which could suggest that flax was grown on or near the Oseberg farm.¹⁴⁵ Furthermore, the flaxseed found with these remains supports Undset’s portrayal of the nuns at Rein Abbey preparing flax and wearing linen wimples as evidence of the crop throughout Norway.

SYMBOLISM OF HEADRESSES

Although both Gudrun and Kristin end their lives in a monastic setting, Gudrun’s experience (in terms of symbolism) also intertwines with Kristin’s life story. In addition to both creating and wearing headdresses, the garment is also symbolic for Kristin, Gudrun, and other women depicted in medieval literature. Continuing the example of Gudrun from *Laxdæla Saga*, we see how her headdress serves as a representation of her relationship with her first husband Thorvald. When a young Gudrun visits with the wise Gest Oddleifsson, she uses this encounter as a chance to hear his interpretation of a series of four dreams she has experienced throughout the winter. In the first dream, Gudrun explains:

I seem to be standing outdoors, by a stream, wearing a tall head-dress that I felt did not suit me well at all. I wanted to change the head-dress but many people advised against it. I refused to listen to them, tore the head-dress from my head and threw it into the stream. The dream ended there.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ Kunz, trans., *Laxdæla Saga*, 420-421.

¹⁴⁴ Undset, *Kristin Lavransdatter*, 1089.

¹⁴⁵ Anne Stine Ingstad, *Textiles of the Oseberg Ship*, 20.

¹⁴⁶ Kunz, trans., *Laxdæla Saga*, 329.

After hearing her description of the dream, Gest informs Gudrun that the headdress in the dream represents her first husband who she will expect to be a great match but instead will disappoint her (just as the tall headdress does not suit her). In the end, Gest explains that Gudrun will care little for this first husband and will leave him as she leaves the headdress in the stream.¹⁴⁷ At age fifteen Gudrun is married to Thorvald (whose wealth is his only notable quality) without her consent. As the dream predicts, she cares little for Thorvald; furthermore, Gudrun believes she deserves the most expensive treasures from him because she is married to him against her will and does not actually like him. Eventually Thorvald slaps Gudrun out of anger for her costly demands and she decides to repay him with divorce. Thord (Gudrun's rumored love interest) suggests that she make Thorvald a low-cut shirt so that she can claim her divorce because he wears women's clothing.¹⁴⁸ Interestingly enough, Gudrun uses a decidedly female article of clothing as grounds to divorce the husband represented in her dreams by another piece of women's clothing (the headdress).

As with the dream sequence when an unwanted headdress represents Thorvald, in the previously mentioned scenario between Kjartan, Gudrun, and Hrefna the highly desired headdress can be seen as symbolic for Kjartan himself. Ingiborg gives up her treasured relationship with Kjartan and presents him to Gudrun via the headdress; however, once Hrefna marries Kjartan she cannot display the exquisite headdress that represents their marriage since the relationship results only because Gudrun is unavailable and Kjartan is expected to marry. Furthermore, Gudrun longs to see Hrefna's headdress because it represents both a man and a

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 329-330.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 332-333.

physical item that are originally intended for her possession.¹⁴⁹ In the end, Gudrun takes both the headdress and Kjartan from Hrefna when she goads her brothers and husband into killing Kjartan after he disrespects a land agreement Bolli has with Thorain.¹⁵⁰ Although not actually in her earlier dream sequence, Kjartan (as the headdress) still represents the greatest treasure to Gudrun. If Gudrun cannot have him in her possession, neither can Hrefna.

While Kristin's character does not have identical experiences to those of Gudrun, Undset uses her wimple as a blatant indication of her complicated relationship with Erlend. Like Gudrun, Kristin is headstrong in being with the man she most desires and breaks off her betrothal to Simon Darre in order to officially pursue her relationship with Erlend. After causing much drama and complicating her relationships with her family, Kristin finally achieves this public and legal marriage to Erlend. Covering Kristin's hair with the wimple that Erlend gives her serves as a visible image of their now legally consummated relationship. Where the men in Gudrun's life are represented by real and symbolic headdresses, Undset uses the important symbolism related to this garment in order to display the change in Kristin and Erlend's relationship from illicit to socially acceptable. Kristin's own headdresses throughout the storyline are central to the plot as they serve as evidence of her union first to Erlend and then to Christ once she joins the sisters at Rein Abbey. Because headdresses symbolize the long lives of both Gudrun and Kristin, the link between headdresses, hair, and femininity in both of these literary pieces is abundantly clear. As unmarried girls their long feminine hair hung loose and indicated their beauty. Headdresses as a valuable piece of clothing then held a central position in their adult lives as both lay and monastic women. The importance of the female headdress for medieval Norse women resonates

¹⁴⁹ A. Jakobsson, "Laxdaela Dreaming: A Saga Heroine Invents Her Own Life," *Leeds Studies in English* 39 (2007): 45.

¹⁵⁰ Kunz, trans., *Laxdaela Saga*, 367-371.

in continued ideas of femininity, frequent use of wedding veils in marriage, and female monasticism today.

CONCLUSION

While Undset's trilogy can be read for its historical accuracy of details concerning daily life in medieval Norway, it also shares similar textile related themes to that of the saga literature and the *Poetic Edda*. Throughout the story, Kristin and the other characters wear various types of head coverings that reflect actual styles and represent symbolism in life and culture. This discussion of the importance of head dresses throughout the three books serves as an example of how Sigrid Undset's characters relate to other literary and actual medieval women; furthermore, the details in *Kristin Lavransdatter* reiterate Undset's historical knowledge and influence. As with recent developments in medieval studies, my research uses this case of twentieth century historical fiction in order to bring together the modern and the medieval. The shift in perspective that Undset incorporates in *Kristin Lavransdatter* invites readers to reframe their understanding of source material and see everyday life accurately depicted in an accessible fiction epic. By supplementing these details from a modern piece with actual Norse literature, artwork, and archaeological evidence, my research demonstrates that these sources highlight each other and add to our understanding of medieval textiles. With legal documents, literature, and artistic representation, the volume of evidence makes it abundantly clear that Scandinavian women wore various headdresses. In addition to presenting and analyzing some of these examples, my research demonstrates these headdresses as nuanced social objects and indicate the complex social cues they possessed as a result of their material, style, and occasions for wear. In the next chapter, I consider these questions (and more) with a specific collection of Greenlandic artifacts and the application of a gendered archaeological approach.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE VOCAL NATURE OF TEXTILES

INTRODUCTION

After countless hours spent collecting wool, spinning it into thread, and weaving homespun cloth, the time has finally arrived. The finished fabric is ready for cutting. Even though the garment's shape is based on the shape of the wearer's body, it must also serve the practical purposes of keeping the wearer warm in the unforgiving Greenlandic weather and leave them room to comfortably work on the farmstead. As she cuts from the large piece of fabric perhaps she remembers the church door with its arches and slanted angles.¹⁵¹ She thinks of the clothing of her neighbors and the images evoked from the outlandish stories of tight fitting gowns that traders and travelers brought back to the island. Despite the style of dress she may desire to wear, she knows that she will wear this dress on a daily basis while working and caring for her family. After the amount of work necessary to reach this point in production, it is critical that she precisely cut out the panels and avoid wasting any of the *vaðmál*. She knows that this garment (whether fashionable or not) must last her as long as possible and will probably need patched and fixed over the years. Undoubtedly, many factors motivate the creativity and skill necessary for the cut and design of a garment. Hundreds of years later we cannot absolutely know the mindset of this woman as she creates articles of clothing; however, images of these uncovered garments evoke questions and theories about her daily life, culture, social status, and inspirations.

As Roberta Gilchrist explains in *Gender and Material Culture*, "To address gender through archaeology will not necessarily require new data, but rather new questions and thinking

¹⁵¹ Østergård, 93. In her own analysis of the cutting of the garments, Østergård references a specific woodcutting of an Icelandic church door that could be considered inspiration for the shape of the garments.

regarding the nature of gender and society.”¹⁵² This idea of new questions rather than new data sparked my interest for this research to raise questions concerning the archaeological finds of specific garments from medieval Greenland. Janet Spector’s archaeological work on nineteenth-century Native American artifacts and women presented the option for archaeologists and researchers to compose a story about artifacts in addition to the standard archaeological report.¹⁵³ While my research varies from Spector’s in terms of time, geography, and culture, her desire to connect with the past and uncover the story behind artifacts reflected a similar purpose in my thesis project.

In the late twentieth century, archaeologists began to increasingly study the relationship between material culture and societal ideas of gender.¹⁵⁴ Archaeological writings of the past gave primary focus to men and the artifacts that represented typical male activities such as hunting.¹⁵⁵ Archaeologists believed past societies adhered to a strict division of labor that reinforced the image of women as responsible for domestic duties and dependent on men. This strict binary is a simplistic basis for understanding past cultures. By including gender in the analysis of artifacts, archaeologists gain a more complex understanding of an item’s purpose. Margaret Conkey and Joan Gero present the idea that “as gender is recognized as structuring archaeological materials at all levels, from single events to general systems, then what things ‘are for’ is necessarily redefined.”¹⁵⁶ When applying this concept to clothing artifacts, we can look beyond their more obvious purposes of modesty, warmth, or decoration. Instead we can ask,

¹⁵² Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture*, 2.

¹⁵³ Spector, *What This Awl Means*, 1.

¹⁵⁴ Roberta Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture: The Archaeology of Religious Women* (London: Routledge, 1994), 1; Rosemary A. Joyce, *Ancient Bodies, Ancient Lives: Sex, Gender, and Archaeology* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2008), 23-25.

¹⁵⁵ Janet Spector, *What This Awl Means: Feminist Archaeology at a Wahpeton Dakota Village* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1993), 7-8.

¹⁵⁶ Joan M. Gero and Margaret Wright Conkey, *Engendering Archaeology: Women and Prehistory* (Oxford, UK: B. Blackwell, 1991), 20.

what does the finished product teach us about the creator in terms of social and cultural structure? Can garments represent an artistic process by the individual who created them? Can modern day researchers read artifacts as a narrative for the creative and gendered voice of the creator?

Poul Nørlund's excavation of garments in Greenland in 1921 significantly added to twentieth century understanding of medieval clothing styles for the average lay person. Nørlund's early reports on his finding did not examine the technology or labor involved in the creation of the garments, their significance in Greenlandic cultures, or their place in the context of similar textile finds. Else Østergård approached these questions when she studied the garments at the end of the twentieth century. The different methodology used by these two archaeologists almost a century apart reflects the newer emphasis of gender and material culture when studying excavated textiles. In her definitive work on the subject, Østergård definitely asks new questions about the Greenland textiles; however, my desire to ask even more questions about these important garments leads me to expand upon both Nørlund and Østergård's analysis. By studying these garments with new questions, I will shape an image of the flesh and blood women in the past that created clothing for their family and community. I focus on four specific artifacts worn by Greenlanders of different gender and age in order to uncover this connection between material items and social ideas of gender in Norse Greenland. I chose these four artifacts because of their significance in Nørlund's original writing, Østergård's later analysis of them, and their continued appearance in fashion histories throughout the twentieth century.

THE HERJOLFSNÆS TEXTILES

In 1839 the manager of a Greenlandic trading post found mysterious pieces of cloth on the beach near Herjolfsnæs. This strange find reflected similar discoveries of bones, clothing, and

coffin remains along the coast.¹⁵⁷ These reports throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century eventually prompted the excavation of the churchyard at Herjolfsnæs in 1921.¹⁵⁸ Herjolfsnæs in Southwest Greenland was the first church in the Norse Eastern Settlement on the island and written records reference this church beginning in the twelfth century.¹⁵⁹ Poul Nørlund led the important 1921 archaeological excavation and discovered coffins, clothing, and wooden crosses preserved in the frozen soil.¹⁶⁰ In total, Nørlund's excavation uncovered an astounding 110-120 burial sites and seventy different textiles which were soon put on display at the National Museum in Copenhagen.¹⁶¹ For Nørlund, the significance of these textiles finds centered on the idea that these were "everyday clothes" of medieval people as opposed to ecclesiastical vestments or royal costumes which informed the bulk of medieval clothing artifacts to that point.¹⁶²

In 1971 Else Østergård worked on the recreations of these original garments for a National Museum exhibit. In the 1980s Østergård worked with the garments again for the Danish and Greenlandic National Museums as they analyzed and studied the garments in order to create the most authentic reconstructions possible.¹⁶³ Nørlund does not focus on the technology or construction of the garments in his writings on the textile finds; as a result, Østergård studied the construction process of these garments for a research project in the 1990s in an effort to reflect

¹⁵⁷ Poul Nørlund and W. E. Calvert, *Viking Settlers in Greenland and Their Descendants During Five Hundred Years* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1936), 106; Else Østergård, *Woven into the Earth: Textiles from Norse Greenland* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2004), 17.

¹⁵⁸ Østergård, *Woven into the Earth*, 17.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁶⁰ Nørlund, *Viking Settlers in Greenland and Their Descendants During Five Hundred Years*, 106-107.

¹⁶¹ Østergård, 17-19.

¹⁶² Nørlund, 107.

¹⁶³ Østergård, 19-20.

on the skills and lives of Norse women in Greenland.¹⁶⁴ According to Østergård, radiocarbon dating indicates that a few of the textile finds from Herjolfsnæs date to 1180-1530.¹⁶⁵

The textiles from Herjolfsnæs serve as examples of specifically Greenlandic *vaðmál*. Although the Icelandic women who settled in Greenland brought the existing weaving tradition with them, a unique product eventually developed. This *vaðmál* has more weft threads (horizontal) than warp threads (vertical) which indicates that the warp threads underwent more hits from the sword-beater (*skeið*) as a woman threaded the numerous weft.¹⁶⁶ Østergård's twentieth century analysis of this specifically Greenlandic *vaðmál* contradicts Nørlund's original observation that he, "cannot indicate a single feature about these garments that may be called peculiarly Greenlandic..."¹⁶⁷ Because Nørlund did not intend to study the actual skills and processes necessary to create these garments, it is not surprising that he is uninterested in the actual cloth that someone cut in order to make the clothing. Perhaps the increased number of weft threads offers further strength to the cloth or more warmth in Greenland's harsh climate.

Despite the purpose of this altered *vaðmál*, a possible reference to it appears in the saga literature. In Eirik the Red's Saga, Leif (Eirik's son) ends up in Hebrides on his way from Greenland. On the island, Leif meets Thorgunna and asks her to leave Hebrides and come with him. When Thorgunna refuses, she also reveals to Leif that she is pregnant and he presents her with gifts including a "vaðmálmöttul grænlenzkan."¹⁶⁸ This gift of "vaðmálmöttul grænlenzkan" refers to a specifically Greenlandic women's mantle. Leif gives Thorgunna this Greenlandic gift in addition to a gold ring and a belt of walrus tusks (which could only be

¹⁶⁴ Østergård, *Woven into the Earth*, 20.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 127.

¹⁶⁶ See Figure 9; Østergård, 62-63.

¹⁶⁷ Nørlund, 110.

¹⁶⁸ Keneva Kunz, trans., *Eirik the Red's Saga* in *The Sagas of Icelanders: A Selection*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 660. The entire sentence reads: "Leifr gaf henna fingurgull ok vaðmálmöttul grænlenzkan ok tannbelti."

obtained in Greenland) and indicates both its value and significance for a woman living in Hebrides. Since women wearing a *möttull* appear in other sagas, the actual mantle itself does not seem as notable as its Greenlandic nature as a gift from a Greenlander.¹⁶⁹ Perhaps this specifically Greenlandic mantle serves as a literary reference to a garment made from the Greenlandic *vaðmál* that developed since the settlement of the island.

THE SHORT-SLEEVED & LONG-SLEEVED GARMENTS

Nørlund No. 38 and Nørlund No. 39 is the first pair of artifacts grouped together for this research that also reflect this fictionalized account of a Norse Greenland woman. Nørlund No. 38 is a long-sleeved garment made from *vaðmál*.¹⁷⁰ According to Østergård's analysis, the original weft on the garment was light grey and the original warp was dark grey. Furthermore, the garment's basic construction consists of a front piece, back piece, four panels on each side, and pocket slits. The garment is narrow at the waist and full from the hip to the bottom. In total the garment is barely over four feet long (1230 mm).¹⁷¹ This garment stands out from the rest of the Herjolfsnæs finds because of its diagonally cut panels on the sides and decorative elements such as the braided cords on the pocket slits and bordered sleeves.¹⁷² The cut of the eight side panels is narrower at the top and wider at the bottom. According to Østergård's study of the garment's construction, this amount of accurate cutting was both difficult and time consuming. The distinctive waistline differs from the rest of the garments and Nørlund indicated in his original report that this dress had the tightest waistline of all the garments.¹⁷³ The connection between No. 38's notable waistline and fashion in mainland Europe is a significant issue that multiple

¹⁶⁹ Sandra Ballif Straubhaar, "Wrapped in a Blue Mantle: Fashions for Icelandic Slayers?" in *Medieval Clothing and Textiles I*, edited by Robin Netherton and Gale R. Owen-Crocker (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell, 2005), 60.

¹⁷⁰ See Figure 10.

¹⁷¹ Østergård, 160-161.

¹⁷² Østergård, 161-162.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 94, 162.

researchers addressed over the last century. I address the topic and its relation to understanding social and cultural status later in this chapter.

Nørlund No. 39 is a short-sleeved garment also made from *vaðmál*.¹⁷⁴ In addition to the variation in sleeve length, this garment's color differs from No. 38. Østergård indicates that this item has an undyed weft and a tannin-dyed warp. The basic construction for this piece includes a front piece, back piece, two panels on each side, and a white patch on the chest. Like No. 38, this garment is just over four feet long in the front but measures slightly shorter in the back. The right side is about one and a half inches (40mm) longer than the left side and the left sleeve is also one and a half inches longer than the right sleeve.¹⁷⁵ Nørlund's later writing on the garment only indicates that it was one of two short-sleeved garments that he uncovered and the best preserved dress among the finds.¹⁷⁶

HOODS AND CAPS

In addition to the long-sleeved and short-sleeved female garments, women also constructed other pieces of clothing for the male members of their families. As with the discussion in the previous chapter of Kristin's childhood cap, male children also donned various head coverings. It is easy to imagine this Greenlandic woman as a mother who thoughtfully constructs clothing for her son that is similar to that of his father. In addition to covering his body with garments and stockings, the boy will also need to cover his head when working and traveling outside in the harsh weather. The trend of caps as common headgear and the necessity of warm, durable hoods influenced a child's clothing as well as that of an adult. Perhaps the boy wants to wear a hood just like the one worn by his father or older brother. In this case, the mother remembers the

¹⁷⁴ See Figure 11.

¹⁷⁵ Østergård 163-164

¹⁷⁶ Nørlund, *Viking Settlers in Greenland and Their Descendants During Five Hundred Years*, 115-116.

hoods worn by visitors to Greenland and creates a head covering for her son that is practical, masculine, and attractive.

Nørlund No. 80 and Nørlund No. 86 constitute the second pair of artifacts I grouped together for this analysis and evoked this image of a mother creating clothing for her young son. Nørlund No. 80 is a child's liripipe hood made of *vaðmál*.¹⁷⁷ Originally white, this hood is a little over thirteen inches (340mm) tall and forms a small 'horn' above the forehead. The edges around the face opening and bottom (which sits on the shoulders) still include the original finished hems.¹⁷⁸ Hoods (whether for children or adults) consisted of two pieces of *vaðmál* and an additional section for the liripipe. The creation of these detailed hoods required significant cutting ability in order to form the trademark "horn" and the curve around the shoulders in the back.¹⁷⁹ Nørlund No. 86 is a child's cap also made from *vaðmál*.¹⁸⁰ Østergård's description indicates that this cap originally had a grey warp and light grey weft but was later altered with a lichen dye (*korkje*) in order to give it a red color. The construction of the cap includes a crown piece on top with four side pieces.¹⁸¹ Nørlund's report indicated that he found this child's cap inside the child's hood (No. 80) on the head of a "chap of ten years or so."¹⁸²

According to Nørlund, liripipe hoods such as this date to the fourteenth century. His writing indicates that by the thirteenth century hoods that also protected the shoulders were parts of everyday clothing in Scandinavia. Alongside images of the liripipe hoods from Herjolfsnæs, the book explains that the liripipe itself served only a decorative purpose that originated from hoods with hanging bags on the back that eventually shrunk. In order to support his claim that

¹⁷⁷ See Figure 12.

¹⁷⁸ Østergård, 217.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹⁸⁰ See Figure 13.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 220.

¹⁸² Nørlund, *Viking Settlers in Greenland and Their Descendants During Five Hundred Years*, 124.

the liripipe hood appeared frequently in Scandinavia during the fourteenth century, Nørlund includes artwork from an Icelandic law manuscript, a mural in Denmark, and a Danish ballad that all feature the liripipe hood.¹⁸³ It is problematic that Nørlund assumed that hoods were a specifically male garment and not worn by women.¹⁸⁴ Medieval women wore a variety of head coverings, including hoods.¹⁸⁵ Although the hood in this case came from the body of a male child, it is important in our understanding of these garments that we not assume women in Greenland never wore hoods (with or without the liripipe).

The saga literature contains examples of many different women wearing hoods. One of the less typical women described in a hood is the prophetess Thorbjorg. In *Erik the Red's Saga* Thorkel invites Thorbjorg to his farmstead so that everyone nearby can hear her prophecy as to when their recent hard times in Greenland would end.¹⁸⁶ Upon Thorbjorg's arrival, the detailed description of her clothing and appearance indicate that "hon hafði á hálsi sér glertölur, lambskinnskofra svartan á höfði ok við innan kattarskinn hvít."¹⁸⁷ Most notably here is Thorbjorg's "lambskinnskofra svartan á höfði" which indicates a head thing of black lambskin. This term "höfði" often translates more specifically and indicates the style of a hood.¹⁸⁸ The prophetess' notable black lambskin hood serves as one example of a female Norse Greenlandic character in the saga literature wearing a hood as part of her outerwear. The continued use of women's hoods in Norway until the nineteenth century is an additional example of this head covering that could translate to Greenland. Although these Norwegian female hoods do not have the decorative liripipe like those from Herjolfsnæs, they share a similar style and are made from

¹⁸³ See Figure 14; Nørlund, *Viking Settlers in Greenland and Their Descendants During Five Hundred Years*, 119-122.

¹⁸⁴ Østergård, 132.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 147.

¹⁸⁶ Keneva Kunz, trans., *Erik the Red's Saga*. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*, edited by Örnólfur Thorsson, 653-674 (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 658.

¹⁸⁷ "She had herself glass beads to her neck, her head thing of black lambskin and with an inside of white catskin."

¹⁸⁸ Kunz, trans., 658.

vaðmál. Norwegian women wore these hoods overtop of other headdresses while traveling and while working outside in cold weather.¹⁸⁹

It is likely that women living in Greenland's harsh climate also wore hoods for similar purposes. With an average temperature of 33.8° F (1°C) during the summer growing season in both the Western and Eastern Settlements in Greenland, it is easy to imagine how low temperatures dropped during the actual winter.¹⁹⁰ The majority of Greenland lies above the Arctic Circle and this placement resulted in periods of cooling throughout the medieval period. Drastic changes in the temperature during these cooling trends would result in additional sea ice (which made travel to and from the island difficult) and affected hunting, fishing, and farming for Norse Greenlanders on the island.¹⁹¹ For the rest of the world living below the Arctic Circle, these changes in climate did not necessarily have the same dire results. No matter how well-prepared these Norse Greenlanders were for the cold temperature and icebergs, living in an area where fish and shrimp freeze to death in the water if summer temperatures do not reach 35° F indicates the importance of warmth in the survival of both humans and animals.¹⁹² While liripipe hoods were a distinct style of hoods for medieval men, the hood as a category of head coverings was important for everyone's protection from cold temperatures or negative changes in the weather.

In addition to the existence of liripipe hoods in Greenland and women's hoods in Norway, the Icelandic saga literature also describes this useful garment. In addition to the white embroidered female headdress discussed in earlier chapters, *Laxdæla Saga* also depicts a masculine hooded cloak and its unique symbolic purpose in the storyline. At the Althing (while

¹⁸⁹ Østergård, 132.

¹⁹⁰ Kirsten A. Seaver, *The Frozen Echo: Greenland and the Exploration of North America, Ca. A.D. 1000-1500* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1996), 118.

¹⁹¹ Seaver, *The Frozen Echo*, 112-118.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 118.

there to pay compensation for Helgi's death) Thorgils Hulluson has a strange encounter with his own black, hooded cloak that is drying outside of his booth. As the author explains in chapter 67, "people heard the cloak speak this verse: wet on the wall it hangs, yet knows of wiles, this hood; it will not dry again, I do not hide that it knows of two."¹⁹³ Not surprisingly, those who hear the hooded cloak speak are quite amazed. The next day, Audgisl chops off Thorgils' head with his axe while Thorgils counts out the payment to Helgi's sons (the author also reports that onlookers heard Thorgils' head continue counting out loud as it flies off his body).¹⁹⁴ Although the action in the saga literature occurs prior to the trend of the specific liripipe hoods in European fashion, this reference to Thorgils' hooded cloak suggests a similar fashion for Norse men prior to the popularity of separate hoods that covered the shoulders.

Although Thorgils' hooded cloak does not reflect the later trend of the liripipe hood, it does indicate the common use of hoods and hooded garments as outer clothing in early Iceland. While color is the greater focus of Sandra Ballif Straubhaar's article "Wrappen in a Blue Mantle: Fashions for Icelandic Slayers?" she does include an extensive list of blue and black textiles found in the saga literature.¹⁹⁵ Not surprisingly, the textiles that deserve mention or description in the sagas are often outerwear (perhaps due to the significance of color seen by others, impending violence, or the importance of disguises). This list of dark colored clothing worn by men and women (as well as their symbolism) includes a variety of Old Norse words for various styles of cloaks, hooded cloaks, mantles, and hoods. Along with the extensive use of different terminology to represent this huge variety of outerwear, the excavation of the churchyard graves at Herjolfsnæs included multiple hoods of different styles. Although some of the hoods from the

¹⁹³ Keneva Kunz, trans., *Laxdæla Saga*, 400-401.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 401.

¹⁹⁵ Sandra Ballif Straubhaar, "Wrapped in a Blue Mantle: Fashions for Icelandic Slayers?" in *Medieval Clothing and Textiles I*, edited by Robin Netherton and Gale R. Owen-Crocker (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell, 2005), 56-62.

site have been radiocarbon dated to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the longer hoods with shoulder capes have not received the same dating. Despite this, similar styles of hooded capes excavated in Bocksten are radiocarbon dated to 1290-1420. Though this date range is a few centuries later than the action in the *Laxdæla Saga*, the excavated hoods could be similar to head coverings mentioned in the saga (specifically in regard to Thorgils' symbolic hooded cloak).¹⁹⁶

With abundant evidence and examples of liripipe hoods as a popular male headcovering, it is easy to forget that the child's cap (Nørlund No. 86) found inside the child's hood (Nørlund No. 80) also provides an example of a male head covering. Although the three caps found at the Herjolfsnæs churchyard did not undergo radiocarbon dating, Østergård does reference an ivory carving of a Norse Greenlander wearing a similar cap in an effort to demonstrate the popularity of the headgear among men and boys.¹⁹⁷ This artistic representation of a Norse Greenlander wearing a cap offers unique imagery of a man wearing a hood unlike the more typical hooded cloak or liripipe hood. Obviously, the male child's cap found within the liripipe hood at Herjolfsnæs indicates the use of the hood as an outer garment and the cap as worn underneath. Once a boy removed his hood (perhaps when inside church or his family's farmstead), the cap underneath would be visible. The ivory carving and the discovery of a cap underneath a hood indicates that caps were likely used as headgear for boys and men when further protection was unnecessary.

IN THE CONTEXT OF MAINLAND FASHION

Nørlund's exciting discovery of these garments in the Herjolfsnæs churchyard impacted twentieth century understanding of medieval clothing and fashion. In addition to the previously

¹⁹⁶ Østergård, 17-31 and 131-132.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 132.

discussed Greenlandic *vaðmál* used for these garments, the style furthers their specific classification as garments from medieval Norse Greenland. While Nørlund's archaeological reports on the garments definitely indicate their European nature, he does not analyze or classify these garments as exclusively Greenlandic. In Robin Netherton's article on the fitted gowns uncovered at Herjolfsnæs, she discusses Nørlund's comparison of the fitted garments (such as No. 39 and No. 38) to fashion on mainland Europe.¹⁹⁸ Netherton specifically dissects how Nørlund described the style of the gowns in his 1924 report. His use of the French term "cotehardie" is particularly problematic to Netherton because it implies a larger trend of fitted clothing styles for both medieval men and women.¹⁹⁹ Apparently, the use of this generic term and its association with a much larger mainland fashion leads readers to assume the Greenland finds reflect the European fashion of close-fitted clothing.²⁰⁰ Nørlund's actual description of the close-fitted fashion explains that the shape of the dresses "follows the lines of the body to the hips and then descends in soft, ample folds to the lower edge."²⁰¹ This shape led to his conclusion that the garments were an additional example of the French "cotehardie" trend which initially just referred to a type of lined outerwear in French.²⁰² The assumption that these garments served as further examples of broader European fashion reiterates the discussion of Nørlund's observation that there was nothing particularly Greenlandic about these textiles. Since the material is specifically Greenlandic, it seems likely that the style of the garments might warrant a classification outside of mainland European fashion. If the Norse Greenland women

¹⁹⁸ Robin Netherton, "The View from Herjolfsnes: Greenland's Translation of the European Fitted Fashion" in *Medieval Clothing and Textiles. Vol. 4*, ed. Robin Netherton and Gale R. Owen-Crocker (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2008), 143-171.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 151-152.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 152.

²⁰¹ Poul Nørlund and Annie Fausbøll, *Buried Norsemen at Herjolfsnes, An Archaeological and Historical Study*, (Reitzel, 1924), 141-142.

²⁰² Netherton, "The View from Herjolfsnes," 151.

altered *vaðmál* to suit their needs on the island, perhaps they also altered clothing styles that existed on the mainland.

Gxgp'vj qwi j Nørlund's stylistic description of the short and long-sleeved dresses appears problematic to modern researchers, in the early twentieth century his report influenced historians who used these notable garments when writing about the history of European clothing and fashion in a different way. Instead of critiquing his classification of the garments as a part of European fitted fashion, researchers used his reports as the definitive source for Greenlandic clothing. The 1928 English edition of Carl Köhler's *A History of Costume* included additions by the editor concerning the recently discovered Herjolfsnæs garments. Specifically, the English edition declares that the "clothing on the bodies gives accurate indications of the style of dress and the tailoring art of that age."²⁰³ Early descriptions of the garments in important fashion histories such as this one led to the continued understanding of the garments as a reflection of the larger European fashion. Blanche Payne's *History of Costume* follows this precedent and specifically refers to garment No. 38 (which I focus on in my own analysis) in her section on fourteenth century fashion for women. Payne suggests that the cut of No. 38 without a seam line at the waist explains the depiction in European art of fitted gowns without the common waist seam.²⁰⁴

These two uses of the fitted Herjolfsnæs gowns in fashion history highlights the clothing as directly connected to mainland Europe but not as Greenlandic in terms of style. Netherton's overall critique of this precedent that Nørlund unknowingly set in the 1920s does not center on the idea that Greenland did not actually follow European fashion. As previously discussed, the

²⁰³ Carl Köhler and Emma von Sichart, *A History of Costume* (New York: Dover Publications, 1963), 158.

²⁰⁴ Blanche Payne, *History of Costume: From the Ancient Egyptians to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 191-193.

liripipe hood found at Herjolfsnæs reflects a fashion trend that came to Greenland directly from mainland Europe. In the case of the short-sleeved and long-sleeved gowns, Netherton addresses the fact that this fitted fashion in mainland Europe targeted wealthy Europeans who could afford a skilled tailor and did not need practical clothing for everyday work.²⁰⁵ Based on what we know about medieval Greenland and textile production, women created both their own cloth and clothing; as a result, it is obvious that they did not rely on hired tailors to cut and fit their garments and did not purchase fabric for their everyday clothing. In his reports on the archaeological excavation at Herjolfsnæs, Nørlund indicated that:

The dead had been shrouded in the clothes they had worn when alive. In many cases they are worn and patched, so that one can see they have been poor people, or that when interring them their heirs have been mean with the good garments in the clothes chest. The main thing is, however, that they were *every-day clothes*, for that is what makes them so interesting and valuable to us.²⁰⁶

His analysis of the garments indicates that he realized the importance and usefulness of this clothing to the Norse Greenlanders. He described these buried people as poor with worn and patched clothing; yet, he attributed their style to that of expensive, impractical fashion. Living on a farmstead in fourteenth century Greenland did not allow for women to wear impractical clothing on a daily basis. It seems that even if a woman had greater skill at cutting and creating a beautiful garment, she still made this garment from Greenlandic *vaðmál* and intended to wear it while laboring on her farm not because she is a wealthy, upper-class European. Although possibly inspired by the supposed popularity of fitted fashion, women in Greenland definitely translated this particular style of a closely fitted robe to suit their own needs.

²⁰⁵ Netherton, 157.

²⁰⁶ Nørlund, *Viking Settlers in Greenland*, 107.

These differences are even more obvious when considering how fitted the Herjolfsnæs garments were on a woman's body. As Netherton explains, the garments from Herjolfsnæs do not have an opening anywhere along the torso that a woman can tighten by lacing or buttoning the garment shut.²⁰⁷ Based on the depiction of fitted fashion in artwork and the few surviving garments, the extreme fitted fashions in mainland Europe relied on tightening a garment once it was on the body (which led to the constraint and impracticality of this fashion for women who needed to move and work).²⁰⁸ Whoever constructed No. 38 and No. 39 intended for these garments to be pulled over the head and onto the body; as a result, these dresses were loose enough to fit over a woman's shoulders.²⁰⁹ It seems obvious that if a wool garment can fit over a person's shoulders, it might fit close to their body but will not draw tightly around their waist as reflected in the mainland fashion.

Even though Nørlund recognized his findings as the clothing of the average Norse Greenlander, his lack of interest in the actual construction of the garments possibly explains how he overlooked these details. Even though mainland fashion could influence Greenland clothing production, these women did not intend to make or use them in the same way. If No. 38 and No. 39 are in fact the garments of the "everyday" woman, then she requires a dress that allows her to take care of children, watch over animals on the farmstead, work alongside her husband in the harsh climate, and engage in even more textile-based activities. Assuming that average Greenlanders wore similar clothing to upper and middle-class European women demonstrates the importance of new and gendered questions in archaeology. In order to understand these finds, we must consider how and why women wore the garments on a daily basis.

²⁰⁷ Netherton, 158.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 160

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 158.

Further from Norway and the rest of mainland Europe than Iceland, it is important to consider that these Norse Greenlanders have their own identity. Medieval Greenland evokes images of a mysterious, unfamiliar, and disconnected world in the dangerous arctic; yet, the settlers who chose to inhabit Greenland may not have seen themselves as living at the edge of the world. These adaptations in clothing fit, style, and the strength of *vaðmál* are examples of necessary adjustments in medieval Greenland's social culture. It is obvious that these settlers brought Norse culture and trends with them from Iceland and received continued influence from mainland Europe; however, the textiles uncovered at Herjolfsnæs are a part of a specifically Greenlandic culture as well.

CONCLUSION

By applying new thinking and questions to the Herjolfsnæs garments, our understanding of them and their relation to European fashion changed substantially since 1921. These garments offer insight into the culture and daily life of Norse women in the Greenland settlements. Again, head coverings take on an important role; however, this time the male child's liripipe hood and cap provide understanding of the use of hoods as protective outerwear by Greenlanders (despite age or gender). Focusing on the short-sleeved and long-sleeved dress serves as a distinct example of how archaeologists' understanding of these garments changed drastically since Nørlund first wrote about them nearly a century ago. It appears that the Norse Greenlanders' relationship and exposure to mainland Europe's fashion factored into their homemade clothing; however, it is important to recognize the distinctly Greenlandic characteristics of their textiles.

Although this study began with Iceland and the importance of textile-related themes in the Icelandic saga literature, archaeological evidence from Norway and Greenland further enhance

our understanding of medieval writings about Norse people. Incorporating Sigrid Undset's modern depiction of fourteenth-century Norway provides an additional (albeit unconventional) representation of Christian Norse culture that uses these same written sources for historical background. Although the role of saga literature as historical source material remains controversial, I incorporated examples from the sagas that emphasize archaeological evidence in order to demonstrate their usefulness in the study of medieval daily life. Once we recognize the importance of textiles and textile labor in daily life, we can approach archaeological remains with new questions and thinking that will enhance our historical understanding of women in the past.

One of my goals with this project was to put women and traditionally female tasks at the forefront of historical thought and analysis. I also wanted to demonstrate that we can read textiles (via their material, color, style, and geographic location) alongside texts in order to expand our understanding of past cultures. Especially in the case of Norse adventurers who began these settlements in Iceland and Greenland, we often focus on the more masculine themes of exploration, violence, and battle. Women also played an important role in these societies and their textile contributions aided in the trade industry and survival of the settlers. Like many modern women, I do not produce my own cloth or clothing; yet, I am incredibly interested in the steps of textile creation. More specifically, I wanted to research the symbolic role that clothing played in past cultures. For this project I chose to focus primarily on various headdresses and the symbolism that specific head coverings had for Christian Norse women throughout their lives. The textiles produced and worn by medieval Norse women in Iceland, Greenland, and Norway serve as texts for us to read and understand their daily lives. With limited written

sources, archaeological remains are an instrumental source for expanding our knowledge of Norse culture.

Further questions remain about the garments, sources, and information I presented in this thesis project. Understanding the textile traditions of medieval Norse women requires analysis of a much larger selection of archaeological remains and focus on all possible written sources beyond a portion of the saga literature. On a greater scale this research should employ traditional production techniques that are evident in archaeological remains in order to reproduce and gain a greater understanding of the head coverings and outerwear discussed in the previous chapters. In addition to focusing on the cut and style of garments, it is necessary to also give greater attention to the use of dye and decorative elements. What do these extra details reveal about changes in clothing trends? What adornment is specifically a part of Norse culture? Do other fabrics inform us about Norse climate and culture in a similar way to *vaðmál*? In addition to these questions, we can expand the research even further and apply gendered questions to the tools used in textile production. How do these tools connect to identifying the female voice in a finished textile? These additional questions further represent the limitless opportunities for research that studies past women and their creative voices through the textiles they left behind.

APPENDIX 1

IMAGES

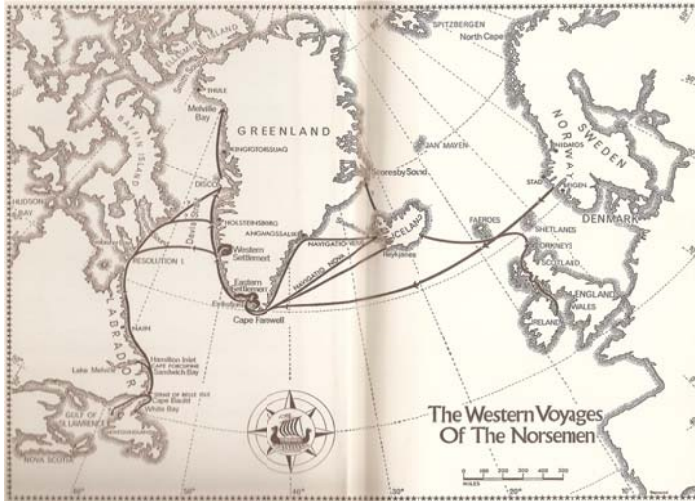


Figure 1. Map displaying geographic location and connection among Norway, Iceland, and Greenland.²¹⁰



Figure 2. Image of reconstructed house (with focus on the warp-weighted loom) at Moesgård, Denmark.²¹¹

²¹⁰ Gwyn Jones, *The Norse Atlantic Saga: Being the Norse Voyages of Discovery and Settlement to Iceland, Greenland [and] America* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), front end page.



Figure 3. Warp-weighted loom at the National Museum in Copenhagen, Denmark.²¹²



Figure 4. Scene from a fresco dated to 1300 in Kirkerup Church at Roskilde, Denmark. The image depicts a woman spinning thread while watching over children.²¹³

²¹¹ Judith Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1991), 41.

²¹² Else Østergård, *Woven into the Earth: Textiles from Norse Greenland* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2004), 54.

²¹³ Else Østergård, *Woven into the Earth: Textiles from Norse Greenland* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2004), 46.



Figure 5. Remains of a garment dyed with kermes dated to the fourteenth century.²¹⁴



Figure 6. Modern madder-dyed silk and madder root.²¹⁵

²¹⁴ Elisabeth Crowfoot, Frances Pritchard, and Kay Staniland, *Textiles and Clothing: C.1150-C.1450* (London: HMSO, 1992), Plate 2.

²¹⁵ Author's own picture.



Figure 7. Twelfth/century wimple.²¹⁶



Figure 8. Anglo-Saxon veil.²¹⁷

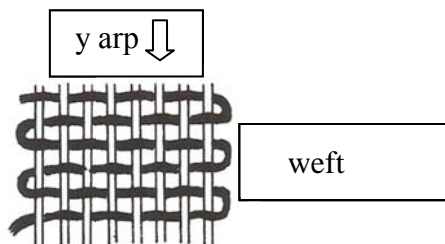


Figure 9. Depiction of warp and weft threads.²¹⁸

²¹⁶ De Courtais, *Women's Headdress and Hairstyles in England from AD 600 to the Present Day*, 19.

²¹⁷ Georgine De Courtais, *Women's Headdress and Hairstyles in England from AD 600 to the Present Day* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1973), 13.

²¹⁸ Gale R. Owen-Crocker, *Dress in Anglo-Saxon England* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1986), 291.



Figure 10. Nørlund No.38. Long-sleeved garment made of Greenlandic *vaðmál*.²¹⁹



Figure 11. Nørlund No. 39. Short-sleeved garment made of Greenlandic *vaðmál*.²²⁰

²¹⁹ Østergård, *Woven into the Earth*, 160.



Figure 12. Nørlund No. 80. Child's liripipe hood.²²¹



Figure 13. Nørlund No. 86. Child's cap.²²²

²²⁰ Østergård, *Woven into the Earth*, 163.

²²¹ Østergård, *Woven into the Earth*, 216.

²²² Østergård, *Woven into the Earth*, 220.



Figure 14. Artistic depiction of a liriþípe hood from Icelandic law manuscript.²²³

²²³Poul Nørlund and W. E. Calvert, *Viking Settlers in Greenland and Their Descendants During Five Hundred Years* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1936), 120.

APPENDIX 2

ENGLISH TO OLD NORSE VOCABULARY

Homespun

Homemade cloth/homespun cloth—*vaðmál*

Ell of cloth (measured by the length of a grown man's forearm from the elbow to the fingertips)—*alin* or *qln*

One ounce of cloth equal to six ells—*lögeyrir*

Higher quality cloth shipped in rolls of sixty ells—*spýtingar*

Costly stuff—*skríð*

Textile Tools

Distaff—*rokkr*

Spindle—*snælda*

Warp-weighted loom—*vefstaðr*

Crossbeam on the warp-weighted loom—*rifr*

Warp—*varp*

Weft—*vipta*

Stone loom weights—*kljár*

Shuttle—*hræll*

Beater—*skeið*

Colors

Black—*svartr*

Blue—*blár*

Dark brown—*dökkjarpr*

Light brown—*ljósjarpr*

Gold—*gull*

Purple—*purpuri or purpur-ligr*

Red—*rautt*

Medieval scarlet—*skarlati*

White—*hvít*

Cloth of bright colors—*litklæði*

Headcoverings

Headdress—*faldinum*

Woman's hood—*falda*

Hood—*hötr*

Hood—*kofri*

Hood of lamb's fur—*lambskinnskofra*

Lady's headgear—*motr*

Woman wearing a *motr*—*motra*

Mantle—*möttull*

Mantle of hand woven cloth—*vaðmálmöttul*

Head thing—*höfði*

Fold (indicates form of headgear)—*faldr*

Hat—*hattr*

Garments

Gray coat—*gráfelder*

Rain coat—*váskufl*

Homespun coat—*vöruváðarkful*

Cloak with hood—*kápa*

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Andersson, Theodore M. *The Icelandic Family Saga: An Analytical Reading*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967.
- Auerbach, Loren. "Female Experience and Authorial Intention in Laxdæla Saga." *SAGA BOOK-VIKING SOCIETY FOR NORTHERN RESEARCH* 25, no. 1 (1998): 30-52.
- BABEL Working Group. *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- Bagge, Sverre H. *Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.
- Bandlien, Bjørn. *Strategies of Passion: Love and Marriage in Medieval Iceland and Norway*. Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2005.
- Barber, Elizabeth Wayland. *Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years: Women, Cloth, and Society in Early Times*. New York: Norton, 1994.
- Beaudry, Mary Carolyn. *Findings: The Material Culture of Needlework and Sewing*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006.
- Bigelow, Marybelle S. *Fashion in History: Western Dress, Prehistoric to Present*. Minneapolis, Minn: Burgess Pub. Co, 1979.
- Brink, Stefan and Neil Price, ed. *The Viking World*. New York: Routledge, 2008.
- Boulhosa, Patricia Pires. *Icelanders and the Kings of Norway: Medieval Sagas and Legal Texts*. Leiden: Brill, 2005.
- Burns, E. Jane. *Sea of Silk: A Textile Geography of Women's Work in Medieval French Literature*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009.
- Byock, Jesse L. *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas, and Power*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.
- Christensen, Arne Emil, Anne Stine Ingstad, and Bjorn Myhre. *Oseberg Dronningens Grav: Vår Arkeologiske Nasjonalskatt i Nytt Lys*. Oslo: Schibsted, 1993.
- Clinch, George. *English Costume from Prehistoric Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century*. E. Ardsley, Eng: EP Pub, 1975.
- Crowfoot, Elisabeth, Frances Pritchard, and Kay Staniland. *Textiles and Clothing: C.1150-C.1450*. London: HMSO, 1992.

- Dahn, Camilla Luise and Isis Sturtewagen. "The Cap of St. Birgitta." In *Medieval Clothing and Textiles IV*, edited by Robin Netherton and Gale R. Owen-Crocker, 99-142. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2008.
- De Courtais, Georgine. *Women's Headdress and Hairstyles in England from AD 600 to the Present Day*. London: B.T. Batsford, 1973.
- D'Ettore, Kate. "Clothing and Conflict in the Icelandic Family Sagas: Literary Convention and the Discourse of Power." In *Medieval Clothing and Textiles V*, edited by Robin Netherton and Gale R. Owen-Crocker. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2009.
- Farmer, Sharon. "Biffes, Tiretaines, and Aumonières: The Role of Paris in the International Textile Markets of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries." In *Medieval Clothing and Textiles II*, edited by Robin Netherton and Gale R. Owen-Crocker, 73-90. Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2006.
- Geijer, Agnes. "The Textile Finds in Birka." In *Cloth and Clothing in Medieval Europe: Essays in Memory of Professor E. M. Carus-Wilson*, edited by N. B. Harte and K. G. Ponting, 80-99. London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1983.
- Gero, Joan M. and Margaret Wright Conkey. *Engendering Archaeology: Women and Prehistory*. Oxford, UK: B. Blackwell, 1991.
- Gilchrist, Roberta. *Gender and Material Culture: The Archaeology of Religious Women*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Græsdal, Katherine. "Joint Ownership in Medieval Norway." In *Family, Marriage, and Property Devolution in the Middle Ages*, edited by Lars Ivar Hansen. Tromsø, Norway: Dept. of History, University of Tromsø, 2000.
- Heckett, Elizabeth Wincott. *Viking Age Headcoverings from Dublin*. Dublin: Irish Royal Academy, 2003.
- Houston, Mary Galway. *Medieval Costume in England and France*. Black, 1950.
- Jakobsson, Ármann. "Laxdaela Dreaming: A Saga Heroine Invents Her Own Life." *Leeds Studies in English* 39 (2007): 35-54.
- Jesch, Judith. *Women in the Viking Age*. Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1991.
- Jochens, Jenny. "The Church and Sexuality in Medieval Iceland." *Journal of Medieval History* 6 (1980): 377-392.
- Jochens, Jenny. *Women in Old Norse Society*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995.

- Jones, Gwyn. *The Norse Atlantic Saga, Being the Norse Voyages of Discovery and Settlement to Iceland, Greenland [and] America*. London: Oxford University Press, 1964.
- Joyce, Rosemary A. *Ancient Bodies, Ancient Lives: Sex, Gender, and Archaeology*. New York: Thames & Hudson, 2008.
- Karlsson, Gunnar. *The History of Iceland*. Minneapolis, Minn: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.
- Köhler, Carl and Emma von Sichart, ed. *A History of Costume*. New York: Dover Publications, 1963.
- Korpiola, Mia. "An Act or Process?" In *Family, Marriage, and Property Devolution in the Middle Ages*, edited by Lars Ivar Hansen. Tromsø, Norway: Dept. of History, University of Tromsø, 2000.
- Koslin, Désirée G. and Janet Ellen Snyder, ed. *Encountering Medieval Textiles and Dress: Objects, Texts, Images*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.
- Kruger, Kathryn Sullivan. *Weaving the Word: The Metaphorics of Weaving and Female Textual Production*. Selinsgrove [Pa.]: Susquehanna University Press, 2001.
- Kunz, Keneva, trans. *Erik the Red's Saga*. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*, edited by Örnólfur Thorsson, 653-674. New York: Penguin Books, 2001.
- Kunz, Keneva, trans. *Laxdæla Saga*. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*, edited by Örnólfur Thorsson, 270-421. New York: Penguin Books, 2001.
- Larrington, Carolyne, trans. *The Poetic Edda*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Larson, Laurence Marcellus, trans. *The King's Mirror (Speculum Regalae—Konungs Skuggsjá)*. New York: American-Scandinavian Foundation, 1917.
- Laver, James, Amy De La Haye, and Andrew Tucker. *Costume and Fashion: A Concise History*. New York: Thames & Hudson, 2002.
- Lui, Hsin-ju. *Silk and Religion: An Exploration of Material Life and the Thought of People, AD 600-1200*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Magnusson, Magnus, trans. *Njal's Saga*. New York: Penguin Group, 1960.
- Matyszak, Philip. *The Greek and Roman Myths: A Guide to the Classical Stories*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2010.
- Miller, William Ian. *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.

- Munro, John H. "The Medieval Scarlet and the Economics of Sartorial Splendor." In *Cloth and Clothing in Medieval Europe: Essays in Memory of Professor E. M. Carus-Wilson*, edited by N. B. Harte and K. G. Ponting. London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1983.
- Nelson, Sarah M. *Gender in Archaeology: Analyzing Power and Prestige*. Walnut Creek, Calif: AltaMira Press, 1997.
- Netherton, Robin. "The View from Herjolfsnes: Greenland's Translation of the European Fitted Fashion." In *Medieval Clothing and Textiles. Vol. 4*, edited by Robin Netherton and Gale R. Owen-Crocker, 143-172. Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2008.
- Nørlund, Poul and Annie Fausbøll, trans. *Buried Norsemen at Herjolfsnes, An Archaeological and Historical Study*. Reitzel, 1924.
- Nørlund, Poul and W. E. Calvert, trans. *Viking Settlers in Greenland and Their Descendants During Five Hundred Years*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1936.
- Owen-Crocker, Gale R. *Dress in Anglo-Saxon England*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1986.
- Østergård, Else. *Woven into the Earth*. Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 2004.
- Page, Tim, ed., Tiina Nunnally, and Sigrid Undset. *The Unknown Sigrid Undset: Jenny and Other Works*. South Royalton, Vt: Steerforth Press, 2001.
- Payne, Blanche. *History of Costume: From the Ancient Egyptians to the Twentieth Century*. New York: Harper & Row, 1965.
- Regal, Martin S. trans. *Gisli Sursson's Saga*. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*, edited by Örnólfur Thorsson, 496-557. New York: Penguin Books, 2001.
- Ross, Margaret Clunies. *The Cambridge Introduction to the Old Norse-Icelandic Saga*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Samson, Ross, ed. *Social Approaches to Viking Studies*. Glasgow: Cruithne Press, 1991.
- Sawyer, P. H. *The Age of the Vikings*. London: E. Arnold, 1962.
- Schoeser, Mary. *Silk*. New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2007.
- Seaver, Kirsten A. *The Frozen Echo: Greenland and the Exploration of North America, Ca. A.D. 1000-1500*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1996.
- Sigerson, Yola Miller. *The Art of Compassion: A Biography of Sigrid Undset, Nobel Laureate for Literature*. Philadelphia, Pa: Xlibris, 2006.

- Sigurðsson, Gísli. *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition: A Discourse on Method*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004.
- Simpson, Colin. *The Viking Circle*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1967.
- Sinisi, Lucia. "The Wandering Wimple." In *Medieval Clothing and Textiles IV*, edited by Robin Netherton and Gale R. Owen-Crocker, 39-54. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2008.
- Spector, Janet. *What This Awl Means: Feminist Archaeology at a Wahpeton Dakota Village*. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1993.
- Strand E.A., et al. "Old Textiles - New Possibilities." *European Journal of Archaeology*. 13, no. 2 (2010): 149-173.
- Straubhaar, Sandra Ballif. "Wrapped in a Blue Mantle: Fashions for Icelandic Slayers?" In *Medieval Clothing and Textiles I*, edited by Robin Netherton and Gale R. Owen-Crocker. Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell, 2005.
- Strauss, Sarah and Benjamin S. Orlove. *Weather, Climate, Culture*. Oxford: Berg, 2003.
- Sturluson, Snorri. *The Prose Edda*. Translated by Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur. Charleston, S.C.: BiblioBazaar, 2008.
- Undset, Sigrid. *Gunnar's Daughter*. Translated by Arthur G. Chater. New York: A.A. Knopf, 1936.
- Undset, Sigrid. *Kristin Lavransdatter*. Translated by Tiina Nunnally. New York: Penguin Books, 2005.
- Walton Rogers, Penelope, Lise Bender Jørgensen, Antoinette Rast-Eicher, and John Peter Wild. *The Roman Textile Industry and Its Influence: A Birthday Tribute to John Peter Wild*. Oxford: Oxbow, 2001.
- Zanchi, Anna. "'Melius Abundare Quam Deficere': Scarlet Clothing in *Laxdæla Saga* and *Njáls Saga*." In *Medieval Clothing and Textiles IV*, edited by Robin Netherton and Gale R. Owen-Crocker, 21-38. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2008.