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Christianization, Female Infanticide, and the Abundance of Female Burials at Viking Age Birka in Sweden

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THE SWEDISH VIKING AGE TRADING site of Birka, located on the small island of Björkö in Lake Mälaren, is considered an area of such outstanding archaeological importance that it has been added to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) list of World Heritage sites.¹ This complex of archaeological monuments includes remains of an urban trading center located below a fortification on a rocky outcropping as well as several cemeteries surrounding the occupation area. Birka was one of a handful of such prototowns around the Baltic Sea where manufacturing of craft items, redistribution of raw materials such as furs and iron from the North, and long-distance trade took place. Exchange connected Birka to Continental Europe but also to Central Asia and the Middle East. Birka was also the site of one of the earliest documented Christian missions to Scandinavia by Ansgar (d. 865), a Frankish monk who went to Birka as a missionary in the 830s and again in the 850s.

One of the numerous ways in which Birka stands out is that women's graves outnumber men's graves discovered in the cemeteries there, in contrast to the dearth of female remains evident in many other areas of Scandinavia. The relatively large number of female graves unearthed at Birka may result from the early missionary activity on the island and the interdiction of infanticide that accompanied conversion to Christianity.² I have previously proposed that selective female infanticide may be one explanation for a shortage of women's mortuary remains generally in Viking Age Scandinavia, an argument that is supported by Old Icelandic family

¹ See <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list>.

² Ian Wood, "Christians and Pagans in Ninth-Century Scandinavia," in *The Christianization of Scandinavia*, ed. Birgit Sawyer, Peter Sawyer, and Ian Wood (Alingsås, Sweden: Victoria Bokförlag, 1987), 84.

saga references to the cultural practice of exposure of female infants.³ At Birka, however, more women's burials than would be expected by natural sex ratios have been discovered.⁴ The evidence also strongly suggests that at Birka there were high-status women who controlled property and thus could sponsor chamber graves for themselves or their husbands and sons, raise runestones, or build churches and bridges to aid missionaries' travel. High-status women's graves that might reflect commercial activities by women are also found among the Viking merchants in Russia, where women's graves outnumber men's; at the coastal site of Karmøy in Norway, which might be a small-scale trading place; and at the prototown site of Kaupang, also in Norway, where the number of women's graves, though still fewer than men's, is higher than throughout most of Norway.⁵ I propose that the construction of elaborate mounds by pagan women may have been a conspicuous and contentious display of their power in response to the public donations of churches and bridges by Christian women.

THE SITE OF BIRKA

Björn Ambrosiani considers Birka, which occupied an unrivaled position for control of trade routes between 750 and 950 CE, "one of the earliest true urban centers of the north."⁶ Excavations at this site have informed much of the past century's research on the early Viking Age in Sweden. Nonetheless, it is not representative for this area archaeologically due to its protourban nature and the internationalizing presence of foreigners and

³ Nancy L. Wicker, "Selective Female Infanticide as Partial Explanation for the Death of Women in Viking Age Scandinavia," in *Violence and Society in the Early Medieval West*, ed. Guy Halsall (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 1998), 205–21. See also Emily Coleman, "Infanticide in the Early Middle Ages," in *Women in Medieval Society*, ed. Susan Mosher Stuard (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1976), 47–70; and Carol Clover, "The Politics of Scarcity: On the Sex Ratio in Early Scandinavia," *Scandinavian Studies* 60, no. 2 (1988): 147–88.

⁴ I rely upon Anne-Sofie Gräslund, *Birka IV: The Burial Customs; a Study of the Graves on Björkö* (Stockholm: Kungliga Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien, 1980), for the number, types, and sexing of the graves.

⁵ For Russia, see Anne Stalsberg, "The Implications of the Women's Finds for the Understanding of the Activities of the Scandinavians in Rus' during the Viking Age," *Kvinnor i Arkeologi i Norge* 5 (1987): 33–49; and Anne Stalsberg, "Tok vikingtidens kvinner aktiv del i handelen?," *Spor* 3, no. 2 (1988): 36–39; for Norway, see Ellen Høigård Hofseth, "Historien bak handelskvinnen på Kaupang: Kvinnegraver fra vikingtid langs Vestfoldkysten," *Viking* 62 (1999): 101–29.

⁶ Helen Clarke and Björn Ambrosiani, *Towns in the Viking Age* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 71. The 1990–95 excavations in the Black Earth at Birka have pushed the beginning of the Viking Age settlement there back to the middle of the eighth century rather than the traditional date of around 800 CE. See Björn Ambrosiani, "Excavations at Birka 1900: Interim Report," in *Birka Studies*, vol. 2, *Excavations in the Black Earth 1990*, ed. Björn Ambrosiani and Helen Clarke (Stockholm: Riksantikvarieämbetet and Statens Historiska Museer, 1995), 39.

Christians there. Since the Middle Ages the site has been identified with the Viking Age center called Birca in the *Vita Anskarii* (Life of Ansgar), written in the 870s.⁷ According to this saint's life, the people of Birka sought refuge in times of trouble inside the 8-meter-high fortress on a rocky hill. Archaeological excavations of the settlement area of Birka known as the Black Earth, or Svarta Jordet, which is bounded by a 1.5- to 2-meter-high wall, were conducted as early as the seventeenth century, with investigations during the latter part of the nineteenth century by Hjalmar Stolpe—who could be considered the founder of modern field archaeology in Sweden—and again in the 1990s by Björn Ambrosiani.⁸

Although Birka is renowned for its settlement or “town” site, it is a multifaceted archaeological complex, with much research concentrated on the small island's over 2,000 grave mounds and at least 1,000 flat graves.⁹ Stolpe also excavated 560 cremation graves and 550 inhumation graves between 1875 and 1890. The graves are concentrated in the major cemetery called Hemlanden, an area 500 by 400 meters with 1,600 graves. Burials are also found below the hillfort and in a few smaller cemeteries on the island. The cemeteries analyzed by Anne-Sofie Gräslund of Uppsala University include a variety of burial types: cremations, inhumations with and without coffins, and chambered barrow inhumations; externally, some graves were flat, whereas others were marked with mounds and stone settings. Inhumations in coffin graves and in chamber graves consisting of wood-lined pits located between the hillfort and the settlement area contained the richest grave goods, and this particular cemetery has been interpreted by Gräslund as the resting place of foreign merchants, identified by their exotic grave goods.¹⁰

IDENTIFICATION OF SEX OR GENDER IN GRAVES

As already noted, Birka's cemeteries differ from others of the Viking Age because remains of more women than men have been identified in the graves that have been investigated. The number of graves excavated at Birka is large in comparison to other Scandinavian Viking Age cemeteries, and the total area of Birka is relatively small and well demarcated because it is an island. It

⁷ Björn Ambrosiani, “What Is Birka?,” in *Birka Studies*, vol. 1, *Early Investigations and Future Plans*, ed. Björn Ambrosiani and Helen Clarke (Stockholm: Riksantikvarieämbetet and Statens Historiska Museer, 1992), 11.

⁸ See Eva Hyenstrand, “Early Discoveries in the Black Earth,” in Ambrosiani and Clarke, *Early Investigations and Future Plans*, 23–51. Publication of the 1990s excavations is ongoing in the Birka Studies series.

⁹ The graves excavated by Stolpe were published by Holger Arbman, *Birka I: Die Gräber* (Stockholm: Kungliga Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien, 1940–43); and by Greta Arwidsson, *Birka II: Systematische Analysen der Gräberfunde*, 3 vols. (Stockholm: Kungliga Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien, 1984–89).

¹⁰ See Gräslund, *Birka IV*, 7–62 (for variations of inhumation and cremation graves), 63–71 (for the external structures of the graves), and 77–86 (for the cemetery with foreigners).

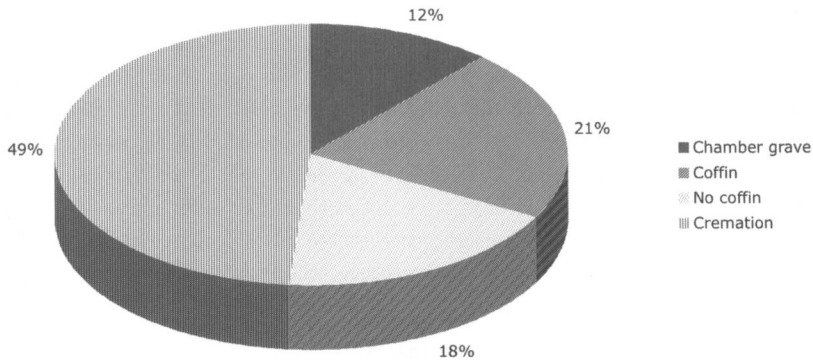


Figure 1. Grave types at Birka.

is estimated that at least one-third of the graves on Birka have been excavated, and while one could consider this a glass either one-third full or two-thirds empty, conclusions based upon this sample must be considered carefully.

Vikings practiced both inhumation and cremation, with the latter comprising about half of the Birka burials. Analysis of skeletal remains sometimes allows for identification of the biological, morphological sex of interred individuals. In contrast, osteological examination is nearly impossible for cremations—depending, of course, upon how complete the cremation was—and often difficult even for inhumations due to soil conditions affecting bone preservation. In the case of poorly preserved nineteenth-century finds such as from Stolpe's excavations at Birka, gender and social status are usually ascribed by a study of grave goods that may permit some degree of confidence.

Much research has been devoted to deciding which objects may be diagnostic for gender determination.¹¹ In Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian Viking Age contexts, skeletons buried with weapons and certain tools have traditionally been identified as male and those buried with jewelry and domestic implements as female; however, it is difficult to make these assignments with certainty, and it is debatable exactly which grave goods can be used reliably as indicators of gender.¹² In a study of Danish Iron Age (which includes Viking Age) burials, Berit Jansen Sellevold, Ulla Lund Hansen, and Jørgen Balslev Jørgensen compared grave goods with osteological

¹¹ See Wicker, "Selective Female Infanticide," 210–11, for a longer discussion of sex or gender identification of Viking burials.

¹² A helpful summary of these issues is provided in Janet Henderson, "Pagan Saxon Cemeteries: A Study of the Problems of Sexing by Grave Goods and Bones," in *Burial Archaeology: Current Methods and Developments*, ed. Charlotte A. Roberts, Frances Lee, and John Bintliff (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 1989), 77–83; see also Judith Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 1991), 13–22; and Roberta Gilchrist, "Women's Archaeology? Political Feminism, Gender Theory and Historical Revision," *Antiquity* 65 (1991): 495–501.

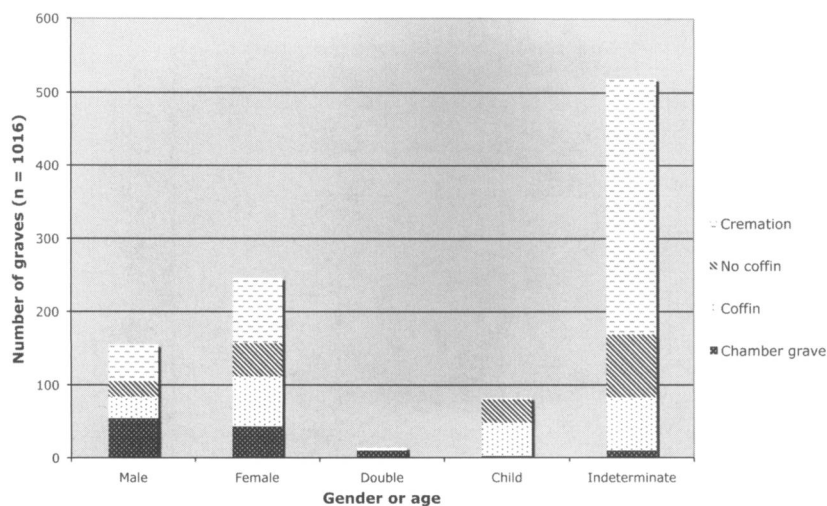


Figure 2. Birka grave types by gender and age if known.

results and determined that there was a high correlation between the biological sex of the deceased (arrived at by skeletal analysis) and gender (determined by the types of objects buried with the deceased).¹³ Specifically, swords, spears, axes, riding equipment, blacksmith's tools, and penannular brooches were associated with males, while paired oval brooches, trefoil buckles, disc brooches, arm rings, necklaces, jewel boxes, and spindle whorls were discovered with females.¹⁴ At Birka, where the preservation of human remains was rarely satisfactory to permit conclusions about biological sex on the basis of osteological analysis, grave goods that were found with fragments of burned bone sometimes allow gender identification of cremation graves, especially oval brooches, which are associated with females.

THE PROPORTION OF WOMEN AT BIRKA

Although various grave types are represented at Birka—chamber graves, wooden coffins, interment without coffins, and cremations—almost half of the total number of graves (494 of 1,016) were cremations (see fig. 1). With such a large proportion of cremations, it is not surprising that the sex

¹³ Berit Jansen Sellevold, Ulla Lund Hansen, and Jørgen Balslev Jørgensen, *Iron Age Man in Denmark: Prehistoric Man in Denmark, Vol. III* (Copenhagen: Kongelige Nordiske Oldskriftselskab, 1984).

¹⁴ Berit Jansen Sellevold, "Knokler, oldsaker og kvinner: Fysisk antropologi som metode til kunnskap om kvinner i middelalderen," in *Kvinnearbeid i Norden fra vikingtiden til reformasjonen: Foredrag fra et nordisk kvinnehistorisk seminar i Bergen 3–7 august 1983* (Bergen, Norway: Universitetet i Bergen, 1985), 63–77.

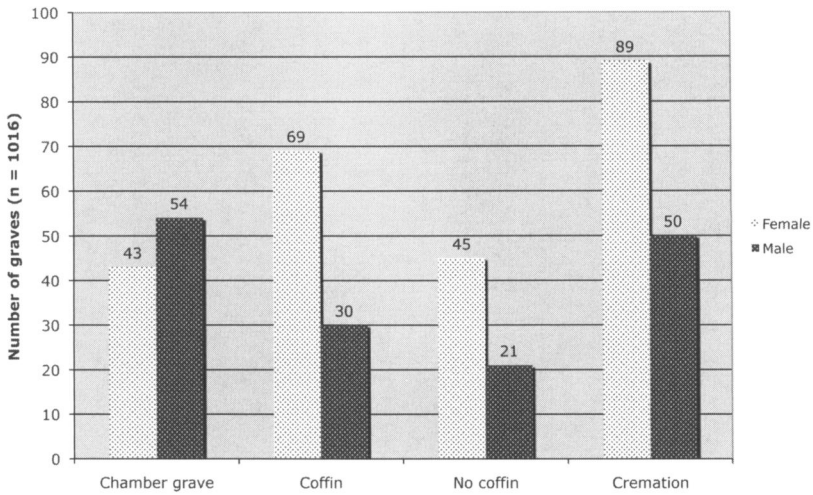


Figure 3. Male and female grave types at Birka.

could not be determined for many of the burials—gender was assigned for only 415 (including double burials) of a total of 1,016 burials (see fig. 2). Of these, 246 (60 percent) were female and 169 (40 percent) male.¹⁵ Even though cremations are particularly difficult to sex, in many cases the grave goods were not fully burned, so it was possible to identify 89 cremations out of 494 (18 percent) as female and 50 (10 percent) as male.

Some differences between men and women also appear in the treatment of the body and burial practices in the various grave types (see fig. 3). Women were buried in chamber graves somewhat less frequently (36 percent) than men (46 percent) (see fig. 4), in spite of the fact that a greater number of female graves have been identified overall. Women were interred both with and without coffins, and they were cremated significantly more often than men, resulting in differential preservation of the bodies and of objects identifiable according to gender. The chamber graves contain by far the richest grave goods of all the burial types, so there seems to be a qualitative differentiation between women's and men's graves. Anne-Sofie Gräslund concedes that "it can . . . be postulated that there were approximately equal numbers of men and women at Birka," since the greater number of women's graves than men's at Birka, rather than indicating a preponderance of women, may merely indicate that their graves are easier to identify because of their contents, especially jewelry.¹⁶ The relatively more numerous remains of women found at Birka when compared to other areas of

¹⁵ Gräslund, *Birka IV*, 82.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

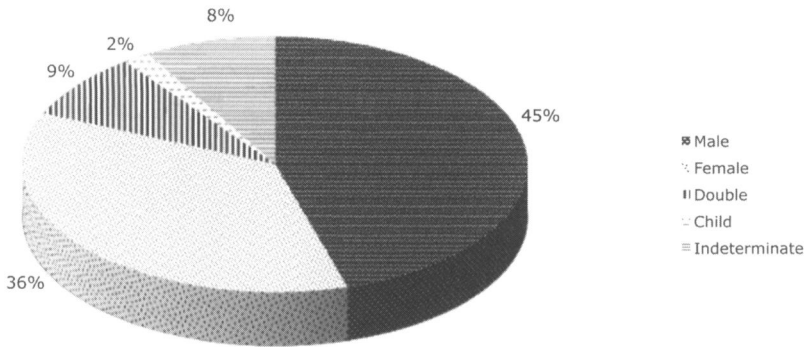


Figure 4. Birka chamber graves (N = 110).

Scandinavia where women seem to be lacking may also be explained by the unusual wealth and early missionary activity at this site, as I will demonstrate.

COMPARING THE PROPORTION OF FEMALE REMAINS AT BIRKA WITH THE REST OF SCANDINAVIA

Before turning to the relative proportion of male and female remains at Birka, it is worth briefly reviewing the relative proportions of male and female burials in other areas of Scandinavia based on my 1998 article.¹⁷ In many regions of Scandinavia for the late Iron Age (that is, the Viking Age), a relative shortage of adult female mortuary remains has been noted compared to the expected sex ratio of approximately one to one; thus the situation at Birka seems to be anomalous.

Norway's population diverges most markedly from average sex ratios. Liv Helga Dommasnes found very low numbers of women in studies of burials in four regions: Sogn, Gloppen, Nordland, and Upper Telemark, where women's graves identifiable by grave goods ranged from 6 percent to 32 percent of the total number of burials (see fig. 5). Dommasnes found ratios of eight males to one female in Sogn in the seventh century and six to one in the eighth century.¹⁸ These numbers are similar to finds from other areas of Norway in that period; for instance, women's remains represented

¹⁷ Wicker, "Selective Female Infanticide," 212–13.

¹⁸ Liv Helga Dommasnes, "Et gravmateriale fra yngre jernalder brukt til å belyse kvinners stilling," *Viking* 42 (1978): 99–100; Liv Helga Dommasnes, "Late Iron Age in Western Norway: Female Roles and Ranks as Deduced from an Analysis of Burial Customs," *Norwegian Archaeological Review* 15 (1982): 70–84; and Liv Helga Dommasnes, "Women, Kinship, and the Basis of Power in the Norwegian Viking Age," in *Social Approaches to Viking Studies*, ed. Ross Samson (Glasgow: Cruithne Press, 1991), 65–73.

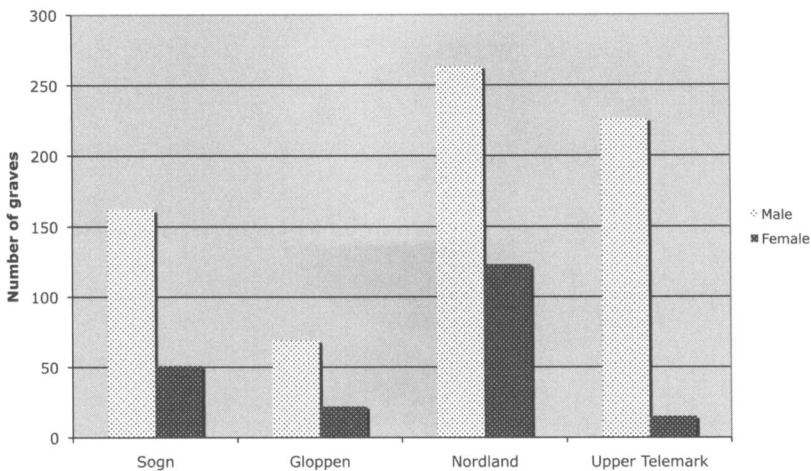


Figure 5. Male and female Iron Age graves in Norway (after Dommasnes, “Late Iron Age in Western Norway”; see note 18 for full citation).

only 8 percent to 18 percent of the late Iron Age graves in Hordaland in a study by Ellen Høigård Hofseth.¹⁹ In Iron Age material from the regions of Østfold and Vestfold near Oslo, Trond Løken distinguished three times as many male as female graves.²⁰ Hofseth has also summarized findings from Vestfold, where women’s graves average 20 percent along the coast but constitute over one-third of the graves at the international trading place of Kaupang.²¹

In their study of all unburned Iron Age skeletal remains in Denmark, Sellevold, Lund Hansen, and Jørgensen identified 158 Viking Age individuals for whom sex could be determined by skeletal analysis. Of these, 85 were identified as male and 73 as female.²² The numbers represented are small and reflect a serious sampling problem in Denmark, where bone preservation is particularly poor due to soil conditions, but fewer women than men were identified. The sex imbalance is even more pronounced in Danish Iron Age material dating to earlier than the Viking Age. At Viking Hedeby, just across the modern Danish-German border, Ulrich Schaefer

¹⁹ See figure 11 in Ellen Høigård Hofseth, “Liten tue velter . . . Problemer knyttet til manns- og kvinnegravens fordeling i Nord-Rogaland,” in *Artikkelsamling II*, ed. Einar Solheim Pedersen (Stavanger, Norway: Arkeologisk museum i Stavanger, 1988), 5–38.

²⁰ Trond Løken, “The Correlation between the Shape of Grave Monuments and Sex in the Iron Age, Based on Material from Østfold and Vestfold,” in *Were They All Men? An Examination of Sex Roles in Prehistoric Society*, ed. Reidar Bertelsen, Arnvid Lillehammer, and Jenny-Rita Næss (Stavanger, Norway: Arkeologisk museum i Stavanger, 1987), 53–64.

²¹ Hofseth, “Historien bak handelskvinnen på Kaupang,” 126.

²² Sellevold, Lund Hansen, and Jørgensen, *Iron Age Man in Denmark*, 178.

identified 62 percent of adult dead that could be skeletally sexed as male and only 38 percent as female from a total of 76 individuals.²³

In Sweden there is a noticeable qualitative as well as quantitative difference in how women's remains were treated compared to men's remains, with female graves generally reflecting lower status. Studies of Swedish material have concentrated on extraordinary sites such as boat graves at Valsgårde and the variety of burial types at Viking Age Birka. At Valsgårde in Uppland, men were generally inhumed in chamber graves and boat graves, but women were cremated.²⁴ Recall that at Birka women were buried in the generally richer chamber graves less frequently than men (see fig. 4), even though a somewhat larger number of female graves than male graves was discovered, with females representing 58 percent of inhumations and 61 percent of cremations.²⁵ This observation differs significantly from the heavily skewed number of male graves discovered in Norway. Even though there was indeed a marked qualitative differentiation between women's and men's graves even at Birka, with women more often interred without coffins than men (see fig. 3), women's graves actually outnumber men's at this site.

EXPLANATIONS FOR THE DEARTH OF WOMEN

Various explanations have been offered for the apparent dearth of women in many areas of Scandinavia, including attempts to justify the smaller numbers of women's remains by rationalizing that women only seem to be lacking because they were not commemorated as often with large grave mounds or visible stone settings, so their graves go mostly unnoticed. If women were given a different, less ostentatious, burial rite, we would not find their remains as frequently. However, once graves are located, women's remains tend to be more identifiable than men's.²⁶ Although some methods may indeed be biased toward locating male remains, cemeteries such as at Birka that are intensely excavated are likely to yield more of the ubiquitous female jewelry than weapons because nearly every woman would have had brooches, whereas only certain men were interred with weapons. Even though we can identify a relatively large number of women at Birka through finds of jewelry, therefore, it is possible that there really were fewer women than men here as at other sites.

²³ Ulrich Schaefer, *Die Ausgrabungen in Haihabu*, vol. 4, *Anthropologische Untersuchung der Skelette von Haihabu* (Neumünster, Ger.: Karl Wachholtz, 1963), 211.

²⁴ Märten Stenberger, *Sweden* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1962), 161. The graves are published by Greta Arwidsson, *Valsgårde*, vol. 6, *Die Gräberfund von Valsgårde 1* (Uppsala: Almqvist och Wiksell, 1942); and Arwidsson, *Valsgårde*, vol. 8, *Die Gräberfunde von Valsgårde 2* (Uppsala: Almqvist och Wiksell, 1954).

²⁵ Gräslund, *Birka IV*, 82.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

I have suggested elsewhere that perhaps men truly outnumbered women in many areas of Scandinavia during the Viking Age due at least in part to selective female infanticide.²⁷ There is very little direct archaeological confirmation of infanticide, it should be noted, since children's and especially infants' bones disintegrate easily.²⁸ For this reason, most archaeological evidence of infanticide is only indirect—such as the dearth of adult female burials—but there is other testimony that may reveal its existence.

The sections of the medieval Scandinavian law codes dealing with Christianity explicitly prohibit infanticide. The earliest Icelandic historical work, the *Íslendingabók* (Book of the Icelanders), states that when Iceland adopted Christianity in about 1000, infanticide was permitted, though this concession to tradition was soon revoked.²⁹ The early thirteenth-century *Gutalagen* (Law of Gotland) from the Swedish island of Gotland states that “every child born in our country shall be raised and not gotten rid of.”³⁰ Several more examples of prohibitions of infanticide in the early periods of Christianization in Scandinavia are given by Jenny Jochens.³¹ Juha Pentikäinen has interpreted the increasing criminalization of the exposure of infants as evidence of Christianization in the medieval period.³² There is, however, no indication in the law codes that the practice affected girls preferentially; the few codes that make concessions do so on the basis of malformation rather than gender.³³

The most explicit Scandinavian accounts of female infanticide, usually in the form of exposure, occur in Icelandic family sagas, most of which were composed in the thirteenth century. For instance, in the beginning of *Gunnlaugs saga Ormstungu* (The saga of Gunnlaug Serpent-tongue), Thorsteinn remarks to Jófríðr: “You are soon going to have a baby. Now if you have a girl, it must be left out to die, but if it is a boy, it will be brought up.”³⁴ Though written several centuries after the Viking Age, sagas

²⁷ Wicker, “Selective Female Infanticide.”

²⁸ Brenda J. Baker, Tosha L. Dupras, and Matthew W. Tocheri, *The Osteology of Infants and Children* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2005), 11.

²⁹ *Íslendingabók, Kristni Saga: The Book of the Icelanders, the Story of the Conversion*, trans. Siân Grønlie (London: Viking Society of Northern Research, 2006), 9: “The old laws should stand as regards the exposure of children and the eating of horse-flesh; . . . [but] a few years later, these heathen provisions were abolished, like others.” Ari Thorgilsson, *Íslendingabók, Landnámabók*, vol. 1, ed. Jakob Benediktsson (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenska fornritafélag, 1968), 17.

³⁰ Arthur Thomson, *Barnkvävningen: En rättshistorisk studie* (Lund, Swed.: Gleerups Forlag, 1960), 6.

³¹ Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 85–93.

³² Juha Pentikäinen, “Child Abandonment as an Indicator of Christianization in the Nordic Countries,” in *Old Norse and Finnish Religions and Cultic Place-Names*, ed. Tore Ahlbäck (Åbo, Swed.: Donner Institute for Research in Religious and Cultural History, 1990), 72–91.

³³ *The Earliest Norwegian Laws*, trans. Laurence M. Larson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1935), 49.

³⁴ *Gunnlaugs saga Ormstungu*, in *Borgfirðinga sogur. Íslensk fornrit*, vol. 3, ed. Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenska fornritafélag, 1938), 51–107 at 55–56;

probably preserved some traditions and/or attitudes from times as early as the later ninth century. Carol Clover argues that passages such as the one cited provide such evidence for preferential female infanticide.³⁵ She also notes that in *Landnámabók* (The book of settlements), the thirteenth-century Icelandic account of settlers, land claims, and genealogies, sons outnumber daughters at a ratio of four or five to one or occasionally even as many as nine to one.³⁶ Anne-Sofie Gräslund also demonstrates that Swedish Upplandic runestones raised by sons and daughters for their parents often mention several sons but frequently only one daughter.³⁷

Since medieval sources are often strangely silent about certain parts of the population, we must ask whether there really was a dearth of females or whether children and specifically girls were underreported because they simply were not considered important enough to be enumerated. Thus while Árni Pálsson proposes that most offspring of slaves were exposed at birth in medieval Iceland because it was not economically feasible to support them, Ruth Mazo Karras suggests that they were simply ignored in written sources because lawgivers and authors of the Old Icelandic family sagas most likely would not have been concerned with them.³⁸ Roberta Frank asks whether the lack of “old maids” in the Icelandic family sagas could also be marshaled as evidence of female infanticide by exposure but concludes with Karras that unmarried women were simply not of interest to saga authors because of the “importance which thirteenth-century Iceland attached to marriage, family connections, and procreation.”³⁹ Clover herself concedes this point and notes that *Landnámabók* has long been suspected of undenumerating women (especially wives of the earliest settlers), adding that for those trying to trace their lineage to a known settler, “there were better reasons for remembering daughters than wives.”⁴⁰ Ian Miller agrees, noting that the aim of any given genealogy in *Landnámabók* is to get from the present to the noble ancestor in the past, with a preference for the male line, though women may also be invoked if necessary “to get where you intend to go.”⁴¹

“The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent-tongue,” trans. Katrina C. Attwood, in *The Sagas of Icelanders* (New York: Penguin, 2001), 563.

³⁵ Clover, “The Politics of Scarcity,” 150.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 167–68.

³⁷ Gräslund, “Gud hjälpe nu väl hennes själ: Om runstenskvinnorna, deras roll vid kristnandet och deras plats i familj och samhälle,” *Tor: Tidskrift för Nordisk Fornkunskap* 22 (1988–89): 223–44.

³⁸ Árni Pálsson, “Um lok þrældóms á Íslandi,” *Skírnir* 106 (1932): 191–203; Ruth Mazo Karras, *Slavery and Society in Medieval Scandinavia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 52.

³⁹ Roberta Frank, “Marriage in Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Iceland,” *Viator* 4 (1973): 475.

⁴⁰ Clover, “The Politics of Scarcity,” 168, 173–75.

⁴¹ Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 143.

Indeed, Orri Vésteinsson and Adolf Friðriksson have recently argued that a large number of the settlers in *Landnámabók* never existed but simply represent imaginary figures created on the basis of place-names.⁴² One reason for raising girls rather than killing them at birth would be their economic significance due to the future impact of their dowries and, through them, the claims of subsequent generations to lands they may have brought into the family; still, as Clover has earlier mentioned, the requirement of a dowry might equally serve as a reason *against* raising daughters, that is, that they “may be eliminated as potentially too costly.”⁴³ We must remember that both dowry and bride price operated in Viking Age Scandinavia as well as medieval Iceland; there was considerable variation as to the number of goods brought to the marriage by each party.⁴⁴

HOW BIRKA DIFFERS FROM THE REST OF SCANDINAVIA

Against this background, the relatively large number of women’s mortuary remains found at Birka is remarkable. I believe that this disparity can be explained by three factors: the intensity of archaeological investigation on this very small island, the character of Birka as an international trading site, and the early Christianization of it. Were there really more women at Birka?⁴⁵ It is difficult to support such a conjecture with any certainty, but the nature of the population and graves there does indeed depart from other sites and lends credence to the possibility.

Nowhere else in the whole of Scandinavia is there anything comparable to the density of archaeological features on this tiny island, and the level of investigation has been extremely high, particularly with Stolpe’s prodigious excavation activity. The small size of the island and protection from large-scale agricultural exploitation has made it feasible to investigate smaller mounds that would likely have been plowed away in other parts of the Swedish countryside. Likewise, stone settings and curbstones outlining graves are more likely to have remained undisturbed, so a larger variety of graves have been located over the whole island than is likely in other landscapes. Large numbers of cremation burials that are not marked by large chambers or above-ground mounds have also been discovered simply because of the concentrated nature of archaeological exploration here. Although the biological sex of the remains in cremation burials cannot be determined osteologically,

⁴² Orri Vésteinsson and Adolf Friðriksson, “Creating a Past: A Historiography of the Settlement of Iceland,” in *Contact, Continuity, and Collapse: The Norse Colonization of the North Atlantic*, ed. James H. Barrett (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2003), 139–61.

⁴³ Clover, “The Politics of Scarcity,” 161.

⁴⁴ Diane Owen Hughes, “From Brideprice to Dowry,” *Journal of Family History* 3, no. 3 (1978): 262–97; and Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 26–27.

⁴⁵ I am paraphrasing the title used by Bertelsen, Lillehammer, and Næss, *Were They All Men?*, the published proceedings from the first conference on sex roles in prehistory, held in 1979.

it is possible to identify many of them at Birka as female due to the presence of women's jewelry, if it survived the funeral pyre in a more-or-less identifiable state.⁴⁶ In contrast, the cremation graves of males that lack weapons are more difficult to distinguish than those of females. Thus the total number of identifiable female graves is relatively high. The ratio of male to female graves discovered at Birka, approximately 1 to 1.5 overall, is skewed toward women but not as severely distorted as sex ratios in favor of males reflected on the Upplandic runestones or in Iron Age cemeteries in Norway.⁴⁷

Not only are the numbers of graves discovered at Birka high, but the burials are also exceptional in other ways. Many graves at Birka contain exotic goods that reflect foreign trade or perhaps the presence of foreigners, although it is as challenging to ascertain which articles are diagnostic for outsiders as it is to determine the gender of the deceased based on objects buried in a grave.⁴⁸ Fragments of Byzantine or Chinese silk cloth preserved in the backs of oval brooches from 160 presumed female graves, for example, may signal local women of high status who had access to imported cloth. Other objects, however, suggest that certain inhumation burials belonged to foreign merchants. Testifying to wide-ranging Viking contacts are coins, including Sassanian and Arabic ones, Rhenish ceramics and glass, Carolingian funnel beakers, Frisian or Tating jugs, Slavic Fresendorfer and Feldberger ceramics, Persian glass, and glass gaming pieces perhaps from Egypt. Such luxury articles could have been imported and then used by the local population, or they could have belonged to foreigners who were buried with them.

Based on grave goods, Arbman dates the burials at Birka from approximately 800 to 975 CE, divided broadly into an earlier and a later period; Gräslund also prefers to avoid "the commitment to absolute dates implied by such expressions as 'ninth-century' or 'tenth-century.'"⁴⁹ Sweden was converted to Christianity very late compared to the rest of Europe, with the new religion introduced at Birka by the missionary Ansgar only in the mid-ninth century, coinciding roughly with the "early period" burials there. In contrast to other Scandinavian Viking Age towns such as Hedeby, Kaupang, or Ribe, our modern understanding of Birka in this period is enhanced by the hagiographical account of Ansgar's life, *Vita Anskarii*, written by Rimbert, who accompanied him to Birka and later succeeded him as archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen. According to Rimbert, Ansgar and his companions successfully converted some of Birka's inhabitants to Christianity in the ninth century and built churches.⁵⁰ The Christian community at Birka

⁴⁶ As cited earlier from Gräslund, *Birka IV*, 82.

⁴⁷ See Wicker, "Selective Female Infanticide," 212–13; and Gräslund, "Gud hjälpe nu väl hennes själ," 236–38.

⁴⁸ Gräslund, *Birka IV*, 80.

⁴⁹ Arbman, *Birka I*, xvii; Gräslund, *Birka IV*, 3.

⁵⁰ Rimbert, *Vita Anskarii*, 11, 14, in *Quellen des 9. und 11. Jahrhunderts zur Geschichte der hamburgischen Kirche und des Reiches*, 5th ed., ed. Werner Trillmich (Darmstadt, Ger.: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1978), 40–42, 48–51.

did not survive very long after Ansgar's visit, and wide-scale Christianization did not take place in Sweden until two centuries after Ansgar, in the middle of the eleventh century.

GRAVE FORMS AND GRAVE GOODS AS EVIDENCE OF CHRISTIANITY

Since the churches built by Ansgar at Birka do not survive, we find evidence of his missionary efforts only in the graves of those who were converted. Cremation graves are assumed to belong to the indigenous, non-Christian population, since cremation was inconsistent with Christian belief.⁵¹ Among the graves at Birka are a cluster of burials north of the fortress that Gräslund suggests may have belonged to Christians because they were crowded very close together, which may reveal the need to fit them within a demarcated, consecrated area.⁵² She also proposes that graves of twenty-two women, nine men, and twelve children with trapezoidal coffins may indicate Christian practice, since this shape is considered evidence of converted individuals on the Continent.⁵³

Perhaps even more difficult than detecting Christian grave forms is the identification of objects of a Christian character included in graves. One might assume that Christians should have been inhumed without grave goods, but the absence of such objects does not necessarily indicate a Christian: it might simply point to a pagan whose survivors could not spare any of their worldly goods to include in the grave. Gräslund believes that "it is likely that members of Ansgar's congregation were buried in inhumation graves without grave goods," but she also states that "the Christians at Birka may, however, also have been buried in graves with grave goods, objects worn by the deceased," making a distinction between dress accessories and other articles such as boxes, buckets, drinking and eating vessels, weapons, and tools.⁵⁴ Although such "grave gifts" might seem to conflict with Christian ideas, Christians at Birka may have been buried with some true grave goods during this period of transition. For instance, Birka chamber grave number 854 contains the remains of a woman with jewelry and dress accessories but also with a jug and bowl, undoubtedly grave gifts but objects that might be associated with Christianity.⁵⁵ Gräslund suggests that this grave may be "an example of mixed religiosity, partly Christian, partly Old Norse at a time when people were hesitant as

⁵¹ Gräslund, *Birka IV*, 84.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 74, 83–84; and Anne-Sofie Gräslund, "Arkeologin och kristnandet," in *Kristnandet i Sverige: Gamla källor och nya perspektiv*, ed. Bertil Nilsson (Uppsala: Lunne Böcker, 1996), 29.

⁵³ Anne-Sofie Gräslund, "The Role of Scandinavian Women in Christianization: The Neglected Evidence," in *The Cross Goes North: Processes of Conversion in Northern Europe, A.D. 300–1300*, ed. Martin Carver (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 2003), 485.

⁵⁴ Gräslund, *Birka IV*, 84.

⁵⁵ Arbman, *Birka I*, 326–30.

to which was the better religion.”⁵⁶ In fact, the reliance on grave goods as evidence for religious affiliation has probably been overemphasized; Julia Smith has pointed out that in early Germanic Christian burials, inclusion or lack of grave goods indicates age and status rather than religion.⁵⁷

Several objects found in Viking Age burials in Scandinavia have been clearly identified as Christian by Jörn Staecker, including crosiers, reliquaries (often reused as fibulae or pendants), cross- and crucifix-shaped pendants, and so-called Frisian or Tating jugs, which are decorated with cruciform designs and may have been used as communion vessels or holy water containers for the ritual washing of hands.⁵⁸ Gräslund, citing Bertil Almgren, adds bronze openwork keys with an equal-armed cross to the list of objects identified with Christianity, suggesting that they may symbolize the keys of Saint Peter.⁵⁹ Perhaps indicative of the local presence of Christianity because they are explicitly non-Christian are examples of small Thor’s hammer amulets, which Staecker considers a “symbol of pagan reaction against Christianity,” since they are found only in a milieu where their counterparts, Christian crosses, are known, thus signaling the presence of Christians.⁶⁰

The objects that Staecker and Gräslund link—both positively and negatively—with Christianity are found almost exclusively in female rather than male graves. All except one of fifteen Tating ware jugs found in Scandinavia (five of which were found at Birka) were from women’s graves, and nine out of the ten cross-shaped pendants found at Birka were from female burials, with the tenth from a double grave containing a male and a female where it is impossible to ascertain to which individual the cross belonged.⁶¹ According to Gräslund, keys are “almost always found in women’s graves, both in Birka and elsewhere.”⁶² Jesch notes that keys are associated with women as the keeper of the storehouse and thus the mistress of the farm in a Viking Age context.⁶³ Although they quite reliably assist in the identification of female graves, it is only the bronze keys with openwork cross, which were found at Birka in ninth-century graves as well as from the Rhineland to Dorestad and Hedeby and along the Oslo fjord, that may have religious significance.⁶⁴ These keys, strictly speaking, are not grave goods but rather objects suspended from women’s clothing, which were included in clothed burials at Birka.

⁵⁶ Gräslund, “The Role of Scandinavian Women,” 487.

⁵⁷ Julia M. H. Smith, *Europe after Rome: A New Cultural History 500–1000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 119–20.

⁵⁸ Jörn Staecker, “The Cross Goes North: Christian Symbols and Scandinavian Women,” in Carver, *The Cross Goes North*, 463–66.

⁵⁹ Gräslund, “The Role of Scandinavian Women,” 486–87; and Bertil Almgren, “Thors märke’ och himmelrikets nycklar,” *Uppland: Årsbok för medlemmarna i Upplands fornminnesförening* (1942): 7–17.

⁶⁰ Staecker, “The Cross Goes North,” 467–70.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 466; Gräslund, *Birka IV*, 84.

⁶² Gräslund, “The Role of Scandinavian Women,” 486.

⁶³ Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, 25.

⁶⁴ Almgren, “Thors märke,” 15 (fig. 6).

WOMEN AND CHRISTIANITY

Crosses, crucifixes, Tating jugs, and openwork-cross keys discovered in female graves at Birka may have belonged to the Christians converted by Ansgar or to their progeny. In particular, his message seems to have appealed to women, and the *Vita Anskarii* relates several stories about women who were important in the early church. For instance, Rimbart described a woman named Frideborg and her daughter Katla as examples of pious Christian generosity at Birka.⁶⁵ Frideborg was a rich widow who decreed that her daughter should distribute her inheritance to the poor following the mother's death. In pagan Germanic society as well as Old Icelandic family sagas, widows typically had more control over their own finances than other women and could devote themselves to God and their property to the church.⁶⁶ Women such as Frideborg, of high status with property at their disposal, chose to give their assets to charity. Some actively sponsored the construction of roads and bridges, which was considered a pious act that was important for missionary activity. Birgit Sawyer has pointed out that women commissioned 42 percent of the eleventh-century Upplandic runestones that commemorate the construction of bridges even though they sponsored only 27.5 percent of the total number of runestones.⁶⁷

Women's roles in the first centuries of Christianity in the Mediterranean have been exhaustively examined by scholars.⁶⁸ One example of such a woman who played an important role in the early church was Paula (d. 404), a wealthy Roman widow who left her family to follow Jerome.⁶⁹ Through the early Middle Ages, women were often the first family members to convert to Christianity and then served as "domestic proselytizers."⁷⁰ Thus women were significant in the initial stage of the Christianization process both in the ninth century at Birka, as remembered by Rimbart, and again in the eleventh century, as recorded on runestones.⁷¹

⁶⁵ Rimbart, *Vita Anskarii*, 20 (ed. Trillmich, 64–65).

⁶⁶ Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 61–64.

⁶⁷ Birgit Sawyer, "Women as Bridge-Builders: The Role of Women in Viking-Age Scandinavia," in *People and Places in Northern Europe 500–1600: Essays in Honour of Peter Hayes Sawyer*, ed. Ian Wood and Niels Lund (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 1991), 221–23.

⁶⁸ See, for instance, Gillian Cloke, *This Female Man of God: Women and Spiritual Power in the Patristic Age, A.D. 350–450* (London: Routledge, 1995); and Lynda L. Coon, *Sacred Fictions: Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997).

⁶⁹ Cloke, *This Female Man of God*, 35.

⁷⁰ Jane Tibbets Schulenberg, *Forgetful of Their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society, ca. 500–1100* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 177.

⁷¹ See, for example, Lilian Portefaix, *Sisters Rejoice: Paul's Letter to the Philippians and Luke-Acts as Seen by First-Century Philippian Women* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 1988), 181, 199. For eleventh-century Sweden, see Birgit Sawyer, *The Viking-Age Rune-Stones: Custom and Commemoration in Early Medieval Scandinavia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 135.

Given what seems like a relatively powerful position women had in pagan Norse society, we may wonder why they would be willing to convert to Christianity.⁷² Possibly the new faith offered more to women than the old one. For example, the Christian heaven was seen as a great reward for all women, whereas the pagan Valhalla, where female Valkyries constantly served male warriors, was not accessible to most women after death. Anne-Sofie Gräslund summarizes the reasons why the new religion might be a positive change for women:

- Conditions in the afterlife were much better. Of course it sounded preferable to go to “light and paradise,” compared to the dark, dreary and depressing Hel.
- The Christian message was less violent.
- The Christian attitude to small children, who were usually the responsibility of women. Infanticide was forbidden. . . .
- Christianity stressed the individual instead of the collective, the family.⁷³

Judith Jesch also observes that Christianity provided an opportunity for women in the Viking Age to “commission runic memorials, for their daughters as well as husbands and sons, build and repair bridges and causeways, and go on pilgrimage.”⁷⁴ Jenny Jochens presents a more pessimistic view of the new religion’s opportunities for women; nonetheless, she also concludes that “Christianity’s most original contribution to the feminine condition was the insertion of gender equality into marriage and sexual relations,” including “forbidding the killing not only of boy babies, but also of girls.”⁷⁵

The number of women’s burials discovered at Birka may partly reflect the influence of the clergy in gradually limiting selective female infanticide, but it may also indicate the important role played by women during the earliest stage of the Christianization process in Sweden. Prosperous Christian women, especially widows such as Frideborg who had control of their inheritances, were buried simply and donated their wealth to the church or to charity. They were commemorated by their reputation, remembered in hagiographical writings, and sometimes memorialized with runestones detailing their bequests for a bridge or church. On the other hand, wealthy non-Christian women of high status with property at their disposal were likely to be buried at Birka in more elaborate chamber graves or coffin graves with exotic grave goods. This contentious display of wealth by pagan women signaled that they, too, could manage their own inheritance and

⁷² Gro Steinsland, “Kvinner og kult i Vikingetid,” in *Kvinnearbeid i Norden fra vikingtiden til reformasjonen*, 31–42.

⁷³ Gräslund, “The Role of Scandinavian Women,” 492.

⁷⁴ Jesch, *Women in the Viking Age*, 205.

⁷⁵ Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 164–70.

their reputation; perhaps Christians and non-Christians even rivaled each other about who could give or display the most.

The intensive investigation of Birka, where both Christian and pagan women were buried with their characteristic oval brooches, combined with competitive displays of wealth, allows us to recognize a larger proportion of women's graves than at other sites and perhaps best explains the abundance of women at this remarkable site. Birka's foreign market and missionary contacts also help us to place Scandinavia into the larger context of Continental Europe. The changes that occurred were not entirely to the benefit of women. David Herlihy articulates the paradox that as a woman's "hopes of surviving improved, as her relative numbers grew, so the social position of the medieval woman seems in some ways to have deteriorated."⁷⁶ He also notes that early medieval property systems in which women controlled their inheritance allowed women a strong role in controlling their assets, but, beginning in the eleventh century, "women further lost their functions as principal conduits in the flow of wealth down the generations."⁷⁷

The burials at Birka reflect a period of the very earliest Christianization of Sweden. The large number of girls who survived to be buried as adult women may reflect the influence of Christianity, which eventually changed the landscape for women. At the exceptional site of Birka, however, we may witness women at their zenith, still powerful under the Germanic, pre-Christian marriage and inheritance systems of morning gift, bride-price, and dowry, surviving in larger numbers due to the reduction of the culling effect of female exposure and also enjoying the fruits of their influence within the newly arrived church.

⁷⁶ David Herlihy, "Life Expectancies for Women in Medieval Society," in *The Role of Women in the Middle Ages: Papers of the Sixth Annual Conference of the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, State University of New York at Binghamton, 6-7 May 1972*, ed. Rosemarie Thee Morewedge (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1975), 16.

⁷⁷ David Herlihy, "Did Women Have a Renaissance? A Reconsideration," *Medievalia et Humanistica* 13 (1985): 11-13.