

Bound to the Staff

An archaeological investigation of *seiðr* and Viking 'witches' in early medieval Scandinavia.

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Aims

- Examine the literature and archaeological evidence of *seiðr* in order to understand the practice.
- Explore the role of *seiðr* practitioners and compare them with the 'traditional' concept of witches.

Methods

My research involved an in-depth desk-based study of the archaeological evidence, which predominantly comes from early medieval female burials in Scandinavia, as well as examinations of the Old Norse sagas and texts, and recent academic publications. Specifically, the archaeological evidence mentioned in this study comes from Sweden and Norway.

Summarising *seiðr*

Seiðr (pronounced 'say-ther') was a Norse magical practice from early medieval Scandinavia. It was predominantly practiced by women, who were often referred to as *völva* (plural *völur*) or *seiðkonur* (*seið*-women). Male practitioners were not uncommon, although their association with this magic was often considered as *ergi*, a term meaning 'shameful' or 'unmanly'.

Seiðr had many purposes in the Nordic world, both positive and negative. Primarily it was associated with divining the future, but it could also be used to inflict misfortune upon people, such as sickness or even death. Despite the negativity that could come from the practice, the *völur* were treated with great respect and dignity, presumably to ensure a positive outcome in the future.

The practice is often referenced in the Old Norse sagas and texts, perhaps most notably in *Ynglingasaga* and in *Eiríks saga rauða*, the saga of Eiríkr the Red. Other mentions of *seiðr* are found in works such as the Poetic *Edda*; there are also some more obscure mentions, which may or may not refer directly to *seiðr*, for example in the poem *Hávámál*.

Þorbiorg and the *seiðr* 'performance'

Eiríks saga rauða 4 contains an account of *seiðr* which takes place in the late tenth century, and is incredibly thorough in its description. The passage (Price 2019) details the visit of Þorbiorg, a seeress, to a farm in Greenland. The people are suffering from a great famine, and so Þorbiorg is invited by the leading farmer, Þorkell, to divine the future in order to find out how long the misfortune will last, as well as answer questions about personal fortune.

Þorbiorg is given a good welcome, 'as was the custom when a woman of this kind was received.' Her clothing is described in great detail, as well as 'a staff in her hand, with a knob on it; it was fitted with brass and set with stones up around the knob.'

She is given a 'high-seat' and a cushion stuffed with chicken feathers, and a meal is prepared for her: a bowl of porridge made from kids' milk, and a selection of the hearts of all animals on the farm. After eating, Þorkell asks the seeress when he and the people can expect an answer to their questions; Þorbiorg replies that this will not be revealed until the morning, after she has spent a night there.

The next day, the seeress "asked for women who knew the charms necessary for carrying out *seiðr*'. A circle of the women formed around the *seiðrhjallr*, or *seiðr*-platform, where Þorbiorg sits. A chant is recited, which the seeress explains has drawn in many spirits. She then tells that the famine will be over by the spring, before answering individual questions from the people. 'Next she was sent for from another house, and so she went on her way.'

The summary of this passage has been greatly simplified, but it highlights the key components of the *seiðr* performance, specifically the special equipment consisting of the 'high-seat', a platform, and a staff. The involvement of the women chanting in a circle also seems to be a key part as it helps to draw in the spirits, who appear to be required in order for the seeress to divine the future.

The 'divination staff': a precursor to the broomstick?

There are dozens of examples of what are believed to be 'divination staffs' or *seiðstafr*. There have been a variety of interpretations for these staffs, but it is thought that they are surviving examples of the staffs mentioned in the Old Norse texts such as *Eiríks saga rauða*. Rather frustratingly, despite these staffs being mentioned numerous times and clearly being of importance to the practice of *seiðr*, we have no information regarding their use or function. Examples have been found across Scandinavia, including from Sweden, Denmark and Norway.

The staff held by the British Museum dates to the late 9th/10th century and was found in one of three burial mounds at Villa Farm, Møre og Romsdal in Norway; this mound has been interpreted as a female grave. Containing a cremation urn, the burial also had grave goods located in its centre, which included the iron rod/staff (Fig. 2). The object had been bent at some point before its deposition but its length is approximately 900mm, making it larger than the typical length of other staffs which are around 750mm. The shaft of the staff is plain, while the 'handle' end shows remains of a copper alloy ring and a 'basket-shaped terminal' (Fig. 3). This feature is described in the Museum's register as 'several twisted bars placed longitudinally and held by the nuts' (Brunning 2016).

The 'basket' feature, also sometimes referred to as a cage, appears to be a recurring feature on many staffs. Often they are referred to as the 'handle' but their design made it difficult to grasp the staff in this way. This design bears resemblance to the ends of distaffs which were associated with weaving, spinning and binding. The 'basket' resembles the organic materials and fibres that are wrapped around one end of the distaff. Indeed, *seiðr* is sometimes linked to the concept of 'textile magic', as *völur* were thought to be able to 'bind' themselves to the spirits and other worlds involved in divination. Interestingly, 'basket' design and the shapes of distaffs bear a striking resemblance to the broomsticks that are associated with the image of witches.

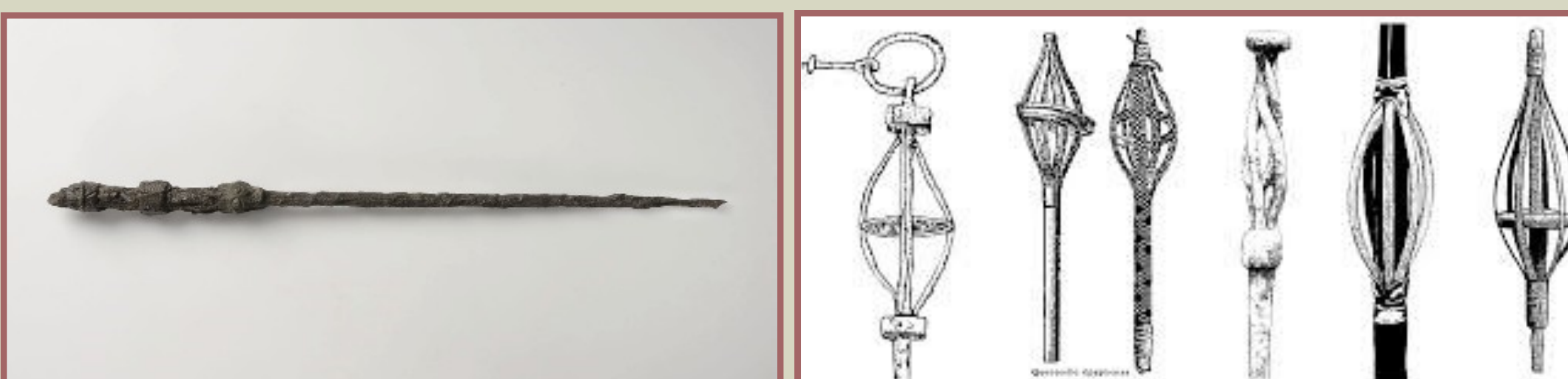


Fig. 2 and Fig. 3: An iron seeress's staff? The late 9th-10th century staff held at the British Museum, with a closer view of the 'basket' detail (British Museum 2019).

The *Völva* and the Witch: A Comparison

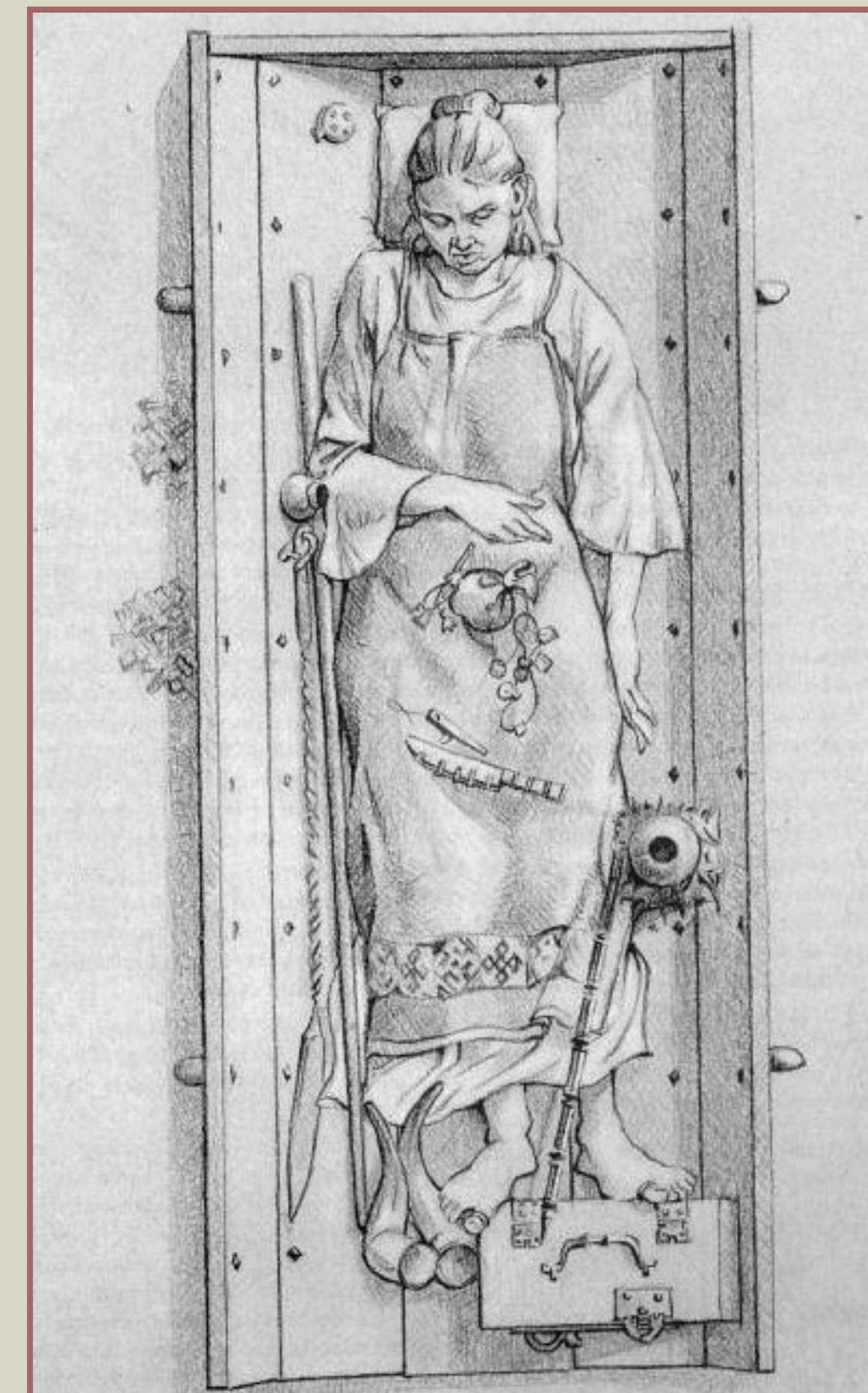
Through my research of *seiðr* I have noticed there are some similarities between the role of the *völva* and the role of the witch. Certainly the most obvious similarity seems to be the use of the *seiðstafr* and the use of a broomstick. As mentioned above, there are no definitive answers regarding the actual use of the staff, and so we can only speculate how it would have been used during a *seiðr* performance. We continue to associate the image of the witch with broomsticks as a mode of transport more than anything else, rather than a tool as the staff appears to have been used—but perhaps we can not rule out the possibility that the *seiðstafr* had a similar purpose!

One significant difference however, is the attitude of the people towards the *völva* and towards the witch. As we have seen, the *völva* was treated with a great deal of respect and dignity. She was given food, a place to stay, and anything she required in order to give people the answers they were seeking; a positive reception clearly helped to ensure positive answers. Witches, however, were associated with actions of negativity and misfortune, such as curses, sickness and even death. They received harsh prosecution, and people often took measures to protect themselves and their homes from witches.



A *seiðstafr* from Birka in Sweden, with a beautifully detailed 'handle'.

Illustrations showing the various designs of 'baskets'/'cages' on *seiðstafr*.



A reconstruction of a possible *völva* grave (Grave 4), found at Fyrkat in Denmark. Drawing by Þórhallur Þráinsson (Price 2019, 108).

Conclusion

My research has allowed me to understand similarities and differences between the Old Norse practice of *seiðr* and the practices associated with witchcraft which arose in the mid-to-late medieval period, but reached their peak in the 16th and 17th centuries. I have identified similarities in the tools used in these practices, and differences in the attitudes of communities through analysis of the literature. Whether these associations are deliberate or came about purely by chance and coincidence, I believe that we can comfortably refer to the *völur* as witches in their earliest form.

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