

The Undercurrent of Female Power in the North Atlantic

MICHÈLE HAYEUR SMITH, 2020, *The Valkyries' Loom: The Archaeology of Cloth Production and Female Power in the North Atlantic*, Florida: University Press of Florida, 236 pp., ISBN 9780813066622

Throughout *The Valkyries' Loom*, Smith discusses how textiles (which were largely produced by women) “encode information” about the societies in which they were created, particularly the Scandinavian societies of the North Atlantic. Smith also emphasizes the role of women in cloth production as one of the foundations of Norse society and aims to shed light on the importance of women in the North Atlantic throughout history and the textiles recovered from the region, both topics that have so far remained largely understudied.

Smith organizes her chapters both chronologically and thematically. The book begins with an overview of the terminology used for textile analysis. The first chapter after the book's introduction provides an overview of early cloth production in the North Atlantic and the archaeological themes surrounding the subject matter, such as the ways in which researchers study recovered textile fragments, ideas related to weaving as strictly women's work, and evidence suggesting that men showcased a “fear of cloth” because of the exclusivity of its production (23). The remaining chapters follow the evolution of the North Atlantic's societies and economies from the Viking Age to the Early Modern Period through the archaeological and historical analysis of cloth production in the region. One of the most notable concepts discussed throughout the work is that of *vaðmál*, which is a term that has been used historically to describe cloth that was used as a form of currency between the eleventh and seventeenth centuries (172).

The Valkyries' Loom concisely and cohesively covers over a millennium of history and archaeology regarding textiles and the practice of weaving in the North Atlantic. Smith manages much ground while also providing an in-depth analysis of material discussed throughout the book, from the entire Norse settlement in Greenland to individual textile samples discovered across the North Atlantic. Smith's discussion provides an excellent

jumping-off point for readers who wish to expand their knowledge of weaving in the North Atlantic. Additionally, her extensive bibliography provides numerous avenues for further research and even includes a glossary in the back for quick reference of the many Norse words and weaving-related technical jargon.

Smith grounds her analysis and interpretation with a strong theoretical framework, which she cleverly weaves throughout the book rather than consolidating it into a single section dedicated to a theoretical background. Furthermore, she draws heavily on socio-cultural anthropology. For example, while discussing the burial of a woman from Ketilsstaðir, Smith (47-8) introduces the term *cultural authentication*, a term originally coined by Erekosima (1979). Smith uses this term to describe the process through which a culture will incorporate and adopt aspects of another culture into its own, especially regarding fashion. She then applies it to the mix of styles found with the woman from Ketilsstaðir's funeral costume, explaining that the combination of cultural traditions exhibited by the woman's dress and adornment has resulted in the cultural authentication of the textiles into a hybrid style often referred to as Hiberno-Norse (48). She later cites Terence Turner's (1993) work regarding the "social skin" to affirm that the production of cloth played an integral role in the socialization process for the people of the North Atlantic (165).

In addition, Smith (85) references multiple studies that involve the scientific analysis of surviving textile samples. For instance, she often cites textile studies conducted by Walton Rogers (1998) and Østergård (2004), who notably analyzed textile remains from Greenland. These researchers discovered that many arctic species other than sheep were used to make cloth, which provides insight into the ways Greenlandic settlers adapted to their environment. Smith's focus on the social aspects of cloth and weaving combined with her usage of more empirical archaeological studies allows her to produce a dynamic, well-rounded analysis of weaving and the textiles produced across the North Atlantic over the last millennium.

The body of *The Valkyries' Loom* focuses more on the social aspects of cloth production in the North Atlantic as a whole rather than cloth production's relationship with female power in the region. Throughout most of this book, the reader is left to make his or her own connections to the topic of female power in the North Atlantic, and Smith saves her in-depth discussion of female power for the book's conclusion. This approach was likely taken because of the sheer amount of ground she covers throughout the book, especially regarding her comparative analysis of the (until now) severely understudied textile collections in Iceland, Greenland, Denmark, Scotland, and the Faroe Islands.

The Valkyries' Loom would appeal to a wide audience – academics and lay people alike. One does not need to be a textile expert to use and enjoy this highly informative work. It is an excellent resource for researchers at any stage in their careers looking for an updated overview of the archaeological study of textiles from the North Atlantic.

Works Cited:

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