Weaving Gender: Women and Textiles in Old Norse Literature  
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Weaving in the early medieval period

From the 4th/5th c. to the early medieval period (9th/10th c.), cloth production was largely a localised domestic task. Fabric was woven on a warp-weighted loom (see diagram). The warp-weighted loom is a weaving frame made up of two upright posts with a cross-beam (A) resting between them. The warp threads (G) hang from the cross-beam and are weighted down with heavy clay or stone loom-weights (E). These threads are divided by a second horizontal beam called the heddle-rod (B), which enables a weaver to pick between the different warp threads with the weft thread, which is attached to a shuttle (D). Through different combinations of ‘over and under’ it is possible to create a variety of different weave patterns (see examples!)

A snapshot of the evidence

The archaeological evidence for the warp-weighted loom in the early medieval period is plentiful. Perhaps some of the more interesting sites are in Greenland, which was settled by Icelandic Vikings in the 10th c. (read all about it in Eiríkr the Red’s Saga, from circa 13th c.). Entire garments which originate from this period of early settlement were lifted from the earth. While this is spectacular on its own, what is more exciting is the preservation of wooden fragments which could have made up a 13th c. warp-weighted loom. It was discovered in an annex which was clearly devoted to weaving: a sunken floor indicates accommodation for the height of the loom, while other weaving implements and textile finds (see below) signify that weaving and cloth production took place there.

An example of weaving-battens and loom-weights from Viking-Age Greenland

Image from Else Østergård, Woven into the Earth: Textiles from Norse Greenland (Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 2009) p. 56.

Swords are for men - or are they?

A ‘weaving-batten’ was used to compress the woven weft-threads upwards in order to create a dense and tightly-packed fabric. Weaving battens can be called either ‘sword’ or ‘spear’ beaters, depending on their shape: there is even evidence to suggest that they could be made of cut-down swords. Interestingly, spear heads which have been found in female graves have been re-categorised as spear-shaped weaving-battens. The ambiguity between weapon vs. domestic tool gives rise to some interesting questions about gender roles and scholarly bias.

Weaving and gender - initial research questions:

- How is textile-production represented in ON literary and historical texts?
- What technical processes and vocabulary can be found in medieval texts?
- What are the cultural, economic and gender significations of medieval textile-production?
- How does feminine power and agency relate to textile-production in both literary and historical contexts?

Additional research questions:

- What is ‘femininity’? How is it created and sustained across the early medieval period (10th-13th c.)?
- Why is textile production considered to be a feminine task, or an ‘innately feminine’ quality?
- How can feminist and queer theory inform our interpretation of literary female characters from medieval texts?