

Sketches of women, from the dusk of the Roman Empire to the dawn of the Enlightenment

A five-part course for Spring 2018, with Max Adams

Over the years I have accumulated many stories of extraordinary women who, if not forgotten, have become obscure figures, often side-lined in the grand historical narratives. Now I am collecting many of these stories together for a book; and I wanted to share some of them with Explore students. So I have chosen to explore a few of the themes which have struck me during the writing of the book, in the hope that they will interest you too. Each week there will be plenty of images and, if we only concentrate on a small number of the women whose essays feature in the book, I'll be offering ideas for further reading. I'll also be giving you an exclusive preview of some of the essays – still in draft form, so you'll have to forgive me if they look a little unpolished... I look forward to some lively debates. Here are the five themes:

1. Healers, seeresses and holy women
2. Weavers and peace-weavers: textiles, politics and women's narratives
3. Widows and wills: how women have used longevity, wealth and power
4. A room of one's own: women writers (and artists) and their work
5. New worlds: the experiences of women engaging with Europeans in the colonial period

In week 1 I want to look at the role of women in healing, miracle-working, magic and divination. We will be looking at some remarkable objects from museums, examining some of the controversial results of archaeological excavations, and trying to pick out reality from myth in often misogynistic representations of women by male writers. Featuring in this session will be St Brigit of Kildare, a shaman from northern Peru called La Señora de Cao, the graves of Anglo-Saxon women who were buried with some highly suggestive artefacts, and the adventures of the Viking woman Gudrid Thorbjarnardottir. Here's an essay to whet the appetite...

Seeresses and cunning-women The grave of a female excavated from the Viking period fortress of Fyrkat, near Hobro in eastern Jutland in the 1950s, appears to mark her out as a shaman, a seeress or völva. She had been interred within the frame of a horse-drawn carriage – an echo, perhaps, of the bed burials of Anglo-Saxon England and the ship burials of contemporary Scandinavia. Entombed with her were a pair of shears and the spindle whorls that no woman would be without in life or death. Her tunic – dyed blue and red and trimmed with gold thread, her silver toe-rings, a duck's foot silver pendant and two bronze bowls, which might have come from as far as Central Asia, show her to have been a woman of status and wealth. What make her special are the contents of a box found at her feet: an owl pellet, small bird and animal bones and a little silver amulet shaped like a chair. Close by her head lay a unique box-brooch which may have held liquid or an ointment. Seeds from the poisonous hallucinogen henbane (*Hyoscyamus niger*), contained in a wallet or purse at her waist, and the presence of a heavily corroded iron stick with bronze fittings, also buried with her, incline one to believe that she was a practitioner of magic, divination and prophecy. Smoke from burning henbane, inhaled while incanting verse or ritual songs, would help to induce a trance. The iron stick might be her wand (the Norse word Völva means 'wand-bearer').

The most important of the Norse sagas, known as the Poetic Edda, begins with a 'Seeress's prophecy', a poem of 62 verses in which the seeress looks back to the beginning of the world, forward to the last great battle of Ragnarök, and beyond even that. Odin the one-eyed seeks her knowledge of what will come. Her answers are always allusive; but her sayings are regarded by scholars as the most important statement of the Norse myth of creation. She accounts for her own

profession by describing the first seeress: '*Bright-one they called her, wherever she came to houses, the seer with pleasing prophecies, she practised spirit-magic.* The Bright-one alludes to Freja, the goddess of love, war, fertility and death, said to be skilled in seid, a sort of shape-shifting magical practice. A vivid description of the seeress called Thorbjorg (in whose story Gudrid Thorbjarnardottir plays a cameo role) survives in the Saga of Eirik the Red. Its value as ethnography is suspect – the saga was written in the 13th century, long after the Christianisation of Scandinavia. But it is nothing if not evocative:

When she arrived.. she was wearing a black mantle, with a strap, which was adorned with precious stones set right down to the hem. About her neck she wore a string of glass beads and on her head a hood of black lambskin lined with white catskin. She bore a staff with a knob at the top, adorned with brass set with stones on top. About her waist she had a linked charm belt with a large purse. In it she kept the charms which she needed for her predictions. She wore calfskin boots lined with fur, with long, sturdy laces and large pewter knobs on the ends. On her hands she wore gloves of catskin, white and lined with fur...

If the description is fanciful, it bears a strong resemblance to the paraphernalia buried with the Fyrkat woman, as it does to a much earlier grave of the late 5th or 6th century from Anglo-Saxon England: the so-called 'cunning-woman' from Bidford-on-Avon, excavated in 1971. This woman was interred in more modest fashion, lying on her back in a plain earth-cut grave. None of her possessions was especially valuable or exotic: two brooches of a sort found elsewhere in pre-Christian England and Wales; a knife with a bone handle of unusual form; two strings of beads, one of blue, red and yellow glass and the other of amber. These are common finds, although they do recall the beads of the seeress in Eirik's saga. More intriguing were a triangular spangle and a disc-shaped pendant with twelve miniature bucket pendants which, analysis by Dr Tania Dickinson suggests, were contained in or sewn onto the outside of a purse tied with thongs whose ends were finished with lace tags. At her side, the Bidford woman wore another purse closed by a pair of copper-alloy rings; it seems to have contained a small metal stud and a cone of antler. Tania argues that the bucket pendants contained either fragments of textiles or other charms, and that they symbolise drinking rituals associated with the cunning-woman's craft.

Women with special powers, echoing the charismatic healers and sooth-sayers who appear in a more holy form in the lives of the early saints and as bogeymen and women in tall tales of druids, performed important social and psychological functions in societies vulnerable to the multiple caprices of gods, poor harvests, plagues of insects, droughts, storms and floods – not to mention infant mortality, infertility and genetic abnormality. Men and women with the gift of prophecy, with training and knowledge of medicine and a lavish dose of showmanship, played roles later fulfilled by priests, leeches and pretentious blackguards offering hocus-pocus and the power of foresight. That cunning-women and men were seen as a threat to the orthodoxy of prayer, fasting, good behaviour and faith, the stock-in-trade of Christianity, is demonstrated by many attempts to demonise, ban and punish those who practiced what would later be cast in a much more sinister light as witchcraft, as the penitential of Theodore, Archbishop of Canterbury (from 668 to 690) makes clear:

If a woman has performed incantations or diabolical divinations, let her do penance for one year. About which it says in the canon: Those who observe auguries or auspices or dreams or any kind of divinations according to the customs of the heathens, or introduce men of this kind into their homes in investigating a device of the magicians – if these repent, if they are of the clergy let them be cast out, but if they are truly secular people let them do penance for five years.