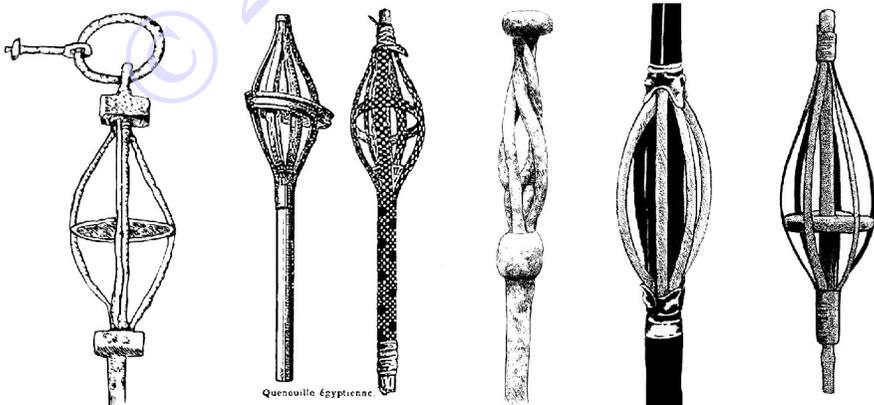


handles, awkward to hold because of their breadth, especially for women's hands. They're too airy for baskets, since they have no walls, only spokes sprouting out of the shaft, sometimes from the mouths of animal heads, which curve back to rejoin it. Occasionally a disc joins them at the center, as with the Swedish *völr* at Søreim.²¹

For years I puzzled over the peculiar spoked protrusions near the top of the *seið* staffs: what were they? What did they signify? The shape was distinctive, but had no obvious function or symbolism. Eldar Heide has unlocked the symbolic key: the staffs are modeled on distaffs.²² Once this clue was supplied, it was easy to find pictures of European distaffs that track exactly with the shape of Norse *völr*. The French call this shape a "linen distaff," the English, a "birdcage distaff."

The distaff symbolism of the Norse *völr* or *seiðstafr* is not a theory, but an irrefutable reality. The staffs of the *völur* are modeled on wooden distaffs with curved supports for the skeins of flax or wool that women wound around them for spinning, a process known as "dressing the distaff." Distaff itself means "staff with flax" (Old English *distæf*). From the same root comes *bedizen*, the act of draping flax around the staff for spinning.²³ Spokes on the *völr* in archaeological finds occasionally are grooved with a yarn pattern, underlining the symbolism of spinning, as in the Swedish staffs from Gävle and Närke, and the Norwegian ones from Kaupang and Myklebostad.²⁴

The symbolism of the *völva*'s staff emphasizes a connection between spinning, *seiðr*, and causation. It evokes a wider European pattern of



Iron staffs and wooden distaffs, from left: Swedish *völr*, Søreim; two Egyptian distaffs; Danish *völr*, Fuldbby; Swedish *völr*, Klinta; French distaff

distaff-bearing goddesses and threefold Fates or female ancestors.²⁵ It connects the shamanic ways of the *völur* with the early medieval women's sacraments detailed in Chapter 2, and ties in with a huge body of medieval and early modern stories and pictures of witches performing magic with distaffs or flying upon them, like a Norwegian *völva* who was buried astride her staff at Veka. So the *seiðstafr* of the *völva* belongs to a wide spectrum of female potency, while showing a culturally specific association with a Norse female spiritual office.

The distaff is presented as a staff of power in a northern Norwegian story brought forward by Eldar Heide. A Sámi woman takes her distaff up a mountaintop to call winds for her husband's ship to come home from faraway Bergen: "and she *yoiks* [chants in the Sámi way] on the mountain; she has her distaff on the mountain."²⁶ This hybrid story blends the Norse magical distaff with Sámi incantation. Heide notes that magical acts of spinning have the power to render a person invisible, as described in *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Fóstbræðra saga*. (In the former, the sorceress Katla uses the power of her distaff to conceal her son from his enemies.) A related theme is the sorceress who creates mind-sendings in the form of a ball of yarn or a rope.²⁷ The Norse witch-name *thraðriða*, "thread-rider," corresponds to these ideas.²⁸

THE SEIÐSTAFR IN ARCHAEOLOGY

Distaff-shaped *seiðstoffs* have been found in Sweden at Klinta, Birka (Bj.834), Gävle, Gnesta, and Närke; in Norway at Søreim and Kaupang, among others; and at Hardby, Denmark. On several of them, the corroded spokes have broken off, leaving only remnants. These include the staffs at Gnesta, and the lone example from Ireland. On the staffs from Närke and Fuldbý, the spokes twist in a spiral. The bars of the Fuldbý staff curve around sinuously as they ascend toward the staff head. Most of the staff finds catalogued by Price²⁹ are of the distaff type.

Norse seeresses are richly documented in archaeology, especially for the period 800-1000. Women have been found buried with ritual staffs of iron (or occasionally wood) in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark—often with regalia, herbs or other unusual items. One staff has turned up at Kilmainham near Dublin, another in the Manx islands, and another in Gnezdovo, Russia—all regions colonized by Vikings.

The staffs were found in female graves, or on female sides of joint burials, except for three in Norwegian male graves; one in Denmark; and one in Finland. The sex ratio of known staffs is 34: 5, with six more found either in unsexed graves or in non-burial contexts.³⁰

Kaupang, Norway

A distaff-shaped *völ*r was placed next to a woman in an unusual ship burial at Kaupang-Skiringssal in Vestlandet. A woman and man were buried head to head on the ship's deck. The *völva* was seated at the stern, as if steering the ship, wearing an unusual leather over-garment with women's brooches. Metal rings hanging from the twisted rods of the distaff head would have rattled when she moved her staff. A large stone had been placed over the *völva*'s iron staff.³¹ Archaeologists usually interpret the placement of stones to weigh down the body of a dead person as attempts to keep their magical power in the Otherworld. This sometimes held true for their tools of power as well. Sagas describe this use of stones to weigh down the dead, which occurs in other ship burials.³²



The Kaupang völ, the spokes of its distaff head corroded and broken

A stone was placed over the Fuldbý staff as well.³³ At Gerdrup, Zealand, a Danish woman lay under two large stones, with a man who had evidently been sacrificed, since he had been hanged with feet bound together. She has been interpreted as a *völva*.³⁴

Klinta, Sweden

One of the most impressive staff burials was found at Klinta, in Köpingsvik, Öland Island. A woman was buried with a large iron wand (82 cm) with brass detailing of bear heads, their jaws gripping the distaff head above and below. The squared cap of the staff is topped by a little house with bears at its corners. This staff, now in the Swedish Museum of National Antiquities in Stockholm, may be the oldest dated *völ*r of the distaff type (ca 900-950).³⁵

Great care and effort was devoted to this ship burial. A woman and a man were laid out on bearskins with many rich offerings. (That makes a third bear connection in this burial.) The ship was set afire,

after which their remains and goods were separated and buried in separate mounds. The woman's burial is the primary one, at the spot where the pyre was burned. After the cremation cooled, her bones were gathered together into a pit with the ashes and most of the offerings, including many animals. They were capped with a clay cover packed into a hexagonal twig frame. Her *seiðstafr* was placed under this cap, with its head protruding. Over all this was spread more debris from the pyre, then limestone chips, and finally a dome-shaped stone cairn.

The man's burial had no pit and fewer artifacts and ashes. It too was covered with a cairn, over which turf was laid. Both graves contained cross-gender artifacts. His included a needle, brooch and beads as well as a sword, balances, games, and whetstone. Hers held a battle-axe, tools for woodworking as well as female tools, most of the ship's rivets, and harnesses for draft horses, which would have pulled a cart (a marker of elite female burials).³⁶ Among the *völva*'s imported goods were a costly copper ewer of Turkic workmanship and coins from western Asia.

The prominent placement of the Klinta *seiðstafr* is echoed in a Swedish woman's burial in a 10th century cemetery at Jägarbacken. Her staff was adorned with unusual bronze spirals that protruded above and below its distaff spokes. It was "thrust vertically into the ashes surrounding the woman's bones; around the staff two unburnt brooches had been placed," after which the whole burial was covered by a mound.³⁷ These burials gave central prominence to the *seiðstafr*.

Aska, Sweden

Another woman's cremation mound with an iron staff was found at Aska, Hagebyhöga, in southern Sweden. Among her rich grave goods, dated to 800-1000 CE, were a kettle, four horses with their harnesses and carriage, unusual jewelry, and an imported bronze jug. Two silver pendants depict spiritual themes: a man's head with a bird covering his forehead, and an unusual female figure



The Klinta
seiðstafr