

7.6.1 - Topic Paper Seiðr and Seið Practitioners



*Artistic reconstruction of the 'Pagan Lady' grave. Drawing by Miroslaw Kuciema.
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Seið Practitioner

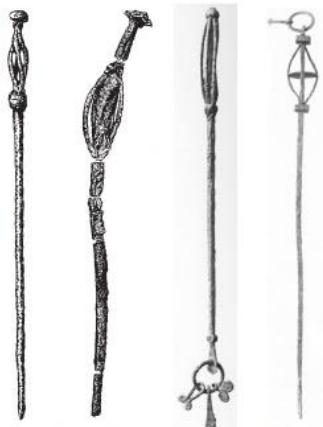
“I have told you much,
And I remember still more.
I suspect that few know all of this –
Do you want to know more?”

Voluspa en skamma
(13th century, Poetic Edda)

What is faith? What makes one person believe in one god or multiple gods? What is it that makes some people believe in the power of nature while others happily exist without? The answers to these questions really depend on what we as an individual believe rules over us. Is it “a higher being”, is it “nature”, or is it “nothing”? For many there is a belief in “something” or “some things”. This is difficult enough to discuss in today’s society, much less in earlier cultures that have limited written histories. During what is termed the “Viking Age”, 793 – 1066AD, it is believed that the Norse or those in many of the Scandinavian countries were a polytheistic, pagan community. The relationship between the people and the gods was a contract. It was a bargain between them that allowed for the ability to worship multiple gods and work with nature to assure good lives and prosperity. The Norse believed that there were many ways to reach out to the gods including but not limited to Seið (pronounced Say-th). A Seið practitioner was very important to the Viking society and up until the Norse conversion to Christianity in the mid-11th century, Seið was held in very high regard. But what is Seið, who is the Seið practitioner and what is their role in the Viking society?

Seið means magic, while Seiðr, pronounced say-ther, is the practice of using magic to ascertain the fates of the living and to develop relationships with nature and the gods. A seið practitioner could be described as a sorceress. “It [seiðr] suggests the

singing or chanting of magical charms that has a desired effect of bringing an object, person or resource to the sorcerer”¹. The definition of seiðr can be difficult to understand because there are many aspects to this magic. A seið practitioner could be a healer, attract animal/wildlife (to an area), control the weather, foretell the future, curse another person, bless another person, cause harm to others, communicate with the dead, communicate with the gods, communicate with the unseen worlds, produce war magic, use a staff (for spinning magic), produce sexual magic, as well as aid in death and pain relief (euthanasia)”². Much like modern day doctors have a particular specialty, seið practitioners may have also had a specialty. And just as the god Odin has numerous names that describes the various aspects of his “being” there are many names that describe a seið practitioner such as “*Volva* is “sorceress with good intent”, and *seiðkona* “seiðr woman””³, *Visendakonur* – “wise woman” or ‘woman who knows”⁴.



Iron staffs from Scandinavian women's Viking Age graves. After, from the left: Bøgh-Andersen 1999:50, 52, 78; Brøndsted 1936:196; Petersen 1951:423.

1 - Staff of Seid practitioner

The meaning of certain words truly demonstrates the respect shown to these women, while other names/descriptors are based on the accessories used by the Seiðr. Also, there are many words/names that are related to the word “staff”/wand such as *volur*⁵. In the Oseberg burial in Norway, two female bodies were discovered. In the grave were several items that are

connected to the practice of seið, including a wood staff. Also, in the

Viking grave in Fyrkat, near Hobro, Denmark, a staff with bronze fittings was discovered. This is similar to the description from the Eirik the Red saga, where Thorborg, the seiðr, carries a staff with a bronze knob encrusted with jewels. The

staff/wand was an integral part of the rituals. The variety of uses allowed the seið practitioner to specialize in different areas while the titles helped those in the community identify the person they needed. While the seið practitioners were an integral part of the Norse society, they were not part of the mainstream society. The seið practitioner would live just outside of the main village often making yearly visits or being called upon when needed. Because they were on the verge of society there was a mystery that surrounded them. “The *vo/va* was normally an elderly woman who stood outside the normal society”⁶. It was believed that the practitioner was in direct contact with the gods, such as but not limited to Odin and Freya “...were feared and respected and were supposedly in direct contact with Odin, the Allfather”⁷. The connection between the Seið practitioner and Freya stems from the belief that Freya, daughter of Niord, is the god that “taught the Asaland people wizardry, which was in use with the Vanes”⁸. The Vanes are the gods of the Vanir. The Vanir is one of the two houses of Norse gods which includes but is not limited to Freya, Freyr, Njord, and Heimdall. The other house is the Aesir. It is important to understand that seið/seiðr are open-ended and refer to magic, sorcery, spell-work, and bodily transcendence. While Freya is considered the ‘head’ of seið, Odin was also known to use seiðr. Neil Price, English archeologist specializing in the Viking Age and Shamanism describes in his book, *The Viking Way*, how Odin’s ability to shap-shift and soul-journey was attributed to his use of seiðr. “Odin knew and practiced that craft which brought most power and which was called seið (witch-craft), and he therefore knew much of man’s fate and of the future, likewise how to bring people death, ill-luck or illness, or he took power and wit from them and gave it to others”⁹. Additionally, in the *Hávamál*, stanzas 138 – 142, Odin explains how he hung

from a tree for nine nights, going without food or drink and then when he grasped the runes he fell from the tree. His transcendence during this time helped him learn nine spells and his mind is awakened. Because of the special relationship between the gods and the Seið practitioner, they were often leaned on during difficult times, such as but not limited to famine, sickness and wars, births, and other important events. In the Eirik the Red saga, Throborg (þorbjargar), the local seiðkona, was called upon to give guidance about the current drought that was occurring. “At that time there was a great dearth in Greenland; those who had been out on fishing expeditions had caught little, and some had not returned”¹⁰. Her connection to the land and nature helped her make predictions. In addition to providing guidance, Throborg (þorbjargar) assisted her community by serving as a midwife. The seið woman was believed to be in direct contact with the gods and norns, the Fates, and her presence at the birth of a child helped mother, child and spirits. According to Jens Heimdahl, an archaeobotanist and Quaternary Geologist, “during the birthing of a child, the volva would write the secret ruins on the wrist of the woman. They would kneel on the bed and the volva would grasp her wrists. The volva would then pray to the “Dis’, the god of birth”¹¹. Having this spiritual connection was important to the Vikings. It is believed that the Norns, the fates, would be present at every birth and plan the life of the child. The saga of the Voluspa describes the norns, “Three wise women live there, by that well under that tree. Urth is named one, another is Verthandi, the third is named Skuld. They carve men’s fates, they determine destiny’s laws, they choose the lifespan of every human child, and how each life will end”¹². Thus, the seidr provide a critical service by being able to communicate with the gods and learn the fates of those who wish to know. Prior to

having a physician that helped with the relief of pain, a seið practitioner would also be able to aid with relieving pain. Knowledge of local herbs and treatments was beneficial, and they helped by providing “healing” charms. It was important for them to understand the herbs because of the potential potency of the herbs themselves. Use of Henbane (bolmort) which is a toxic narcotic¹³ would be available to ease pain and possibly have other mind-altering affects. In the Viking grave of Fyrkat, near Hobro, Denmark, henbane seeds were found in a small purse. “If seeds are thrown onto a fire, a mildly hallucinogenic smoke is produced. Taken in the right quantities, they can produce hallucinations and euphoric states.”¹⁴

While it was not a common thing to be a seið practitioner, it was usually practiced by women and handed down from generation to generation. “She had had nine sisters, and they were all spae-queens (prophetess)...”¹⁵. This stereotype possibly comes from the use of the staff/wand. The staff has been associated with a ‘distaff’ or other implement used in ‘spinning’. Spinning was a job done by women and therefore the use of a staff/wand was women’s work. Seið practitioners were often seen as ‘weaving’ a portion of the fabric of life, which was already decided by the norms, or using the staff to send her ‘spiritual’ self (soul emissary) out to do her bidding.¹⁶ The sending of a soul emissary would allow the seið practitioner to send creatures or a piece of themselves to do errands. Another aspect of the staff is that during some of the seið ritual, the staff would be held between the legs in a sexual manner. The image of “riding” the staff leads to the image of having sex.¹⁷ With that said, it was not unheard of for men or even the gods to participate in the practice or use of seið. In Ynglinga Saga, which is the origin story of the Yngling clan of rulers of Scandinavia, it is mentioned that Odin was able to use seið

(magic) for his own purposes. When the Vanir sent Mimir's head back to the Aesir, Odin took Mimir's head and smeared it with herbs so that it would not rot and quoted spells and worked charms that his (Mimir) head would continue to speak to him.¹⁸ Also, in this story, Odin uses seið to send out his soul emissaries to do his bidding. "Odin often changed himself; at those times his body lay as though he were asleep or dead, and he then became a bird or a beast, a fish or a dragon, and went in an instant to far-off lands on his own or other men's errands."¹⁹ Even though Odin and other gods would practice seið and/or other aspects of magic, it was not considered manly for men to participate. If by chance a man chose to practice seiðr, they would be considered, *ergi*, lacking in virility²⁰. "But in promoting this sorcery, lack of manliness followed so much that men seemed without shame in dealing in it; the priestesses were therefore taught this craft"²¹. In the Viking era, being perceived as 'ergi' was considered such an issue that even other gods would "mock" Odin for his practice of magic. "Loki said: But people say that you practiced womanly magic on Samsey, dressed as a woman. You lived as a witch among the humans – and I call that a pervert's way of living"²². The perceived 'unmanliness' could be dangerous. King Harold Fairhair's son Rognvald was a practicing male seiðr and when the King was shamed for this fact, he ordered his older son, Eirik Bloodaxe to murder him.²³ Viking males had a reputation of being strong, virile, and in charge and it was more important to maintain that image, unfortunately, that would lead to the death of many.

As the seid practitioner lived on the outskirts of the society they would often travel a circuit each throughout the year. "The archetypal description of a volva is undoubtedly that from Eiriks saga Rouða... This passage contains most of the

conventions associated with these women; the touring seeress visiting each homestead in turn to answer questions about the future, personal fortune and the health of the crops; the special equipment of a platform, staff and other items; the 'choir' of assistants; the spirits in attendance"²⁴. This allowed the healer to travel and see many parts of the country as well as aide many members of the society. "It was a custom of Thorborg (þorbjargar), in the winter time, to make a circuit, and people invited her to their houses, especially those who had any curiosity about the season, or desired to know their fate; and inasmuch as Thorkell was chief thereabouts, he considered that it concerned him to know when the scarcity which overhung the settlement should cease"²⁵. Not only did the practitioner visit the community, she was more likely called to the house of the Jarl or chieftain. "...Heiðr was hailed, 'at all the house she came to'"²⁶. Hrolfs saga kraka - "In the early part of the saga, Frodi has murdered his brother King Halfdan, and proclaimed himself ruler of Denmark... In the audience also sits Signy, who is Halfdan's daughter and the sister of the two boys, and who is desperate to avoid the revelation of their hiding place in the hall: Then the volva came who was called Heiðr. The king asked her to use her art and to say what she could learn about the boys. He had a magnificent feast prepared for her coming and set her upon a high seiðr-platform. The king then asked what she could see of the future, 'because I know', he said, 'that now much will be made clear to you, and I see you have great luck about you, so answer me as fast as you can'²⁷.

When it was all said and done, the seið practitioner was well paid well for her services. This idea of payment is important enough that even the god Odin is required



2 - Isle of Peel Pagan Lady Necklace

to show this courtesy. “Odin opened my eyes to rings and necklaces, in exchange he got wisdom and prophecy. I saw more and more, looking out over all the worlds”²⁸. “In some instances, they, seiðr, are clearly paid for their services, above

the bed and board that they also received”²⁹. Having a Seið practitioner come to your home and perform a service would require not just room and board but payment using other means. According to the meeting in the Eirik saga Rauda, Thorborg was greeted warmly and provided a high seat as well as a lavish meal and gifts. “Now, when she entered, all men thought it their duty to offer her becoming greetings, and these she received according as the men were agreeable to her. ... There was prepared for her a porridge of kid’s milk, and hearts of all kinds of living creatures there found were cooked for her.”³⁰ Ultimately, the more pleased she was with the gifts and treatment, the better the prophecies might be.

As in most cultures, faith and religion have a role in the daily lives of the society. Why, we as individual, believe in a higher being is a question that can only be answered by the individual. However, for modern historians it is difficult to understand the faith of those that we study. It is therefore important that we use written works and extant artifacts to help explain the importance of religion/faith in the cultures that we study. As for the pre-Christian Norse, the few burial sites that have been attributed to seið practitioners it is believed that they were held in high regard, based on the items placed in the burial mounds. The sagas, written works, help us understand not only the role the

gods played in the faith of society, but more importantly they emphasize the role of the seið practitioners, especially their link to the gods and the rest of society. Modern scholars believe the Seið practitioners (regardless of gender) helped society and the gods. Their repeated appearances in the sagas tell of their reputation and importance. It is through these that we can speculate as to the magnitude of their role. Even Odin is not immune to their value.

“Ride home, Odin!
Feel triumphant, for now.
But you will come
For a second visit.
When Loki breaks free
From his chains,
And Ragnarok
Comes to end Everything.

Baldrs Draumar
(13th century, Poetic Edda)

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