

Research Article

Womb Politics: The Pregnant Body and Archaeologies of Absence

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Abstract

Pregnancy encompasses core socio-political issues: kinship, demography, religion, gender and more. In any society, the ontology of the pregnant body and the embryo-fetus holds core existential concerns. Is a pregnant body one or two beings? When does personhood begin? Yet pregnancy is still a marginal topic in archaeology and its onto-political consequences have scarcely been raised. It would be ludicrous to claim that pregnancy or childbirth is part of the grand narratives of prehistory. Also in scholarship centring theoretical perspectives on the body and personhood the pregnant body is *absent*. This article poses fundamental questions of the body-politics of pregnancy. We develop concepts from material feminism, medical ethics and philosophy to interrogate pregnancy and provide a case study to demonstrate how these concepts can work in practice from the Viking Age. The questions posed, however, are not limited to the Viking period. Our overall objective is to centre pregnancy as a philosophical and political concern in archaeology *writ large*. We develop new thinking and language to this end, which can be used to examine the politics of pregnancy in other periods and regions. Ultimately, we discuss the *absence-making* of pregnant bodies from our sources as well as from archaeological discourse.

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Introduction

Which bodies come to matter—and why?
(Butler 1993, xii)

Pregnancy intersects with core social and political topics across time and space, such as kinship and belonging, labour and demography, religious beliefs and gender systems. It verges on the banal to state it, but pregnancy is an absolute necessity for all forms of reproduction—demographic, social, economic, political. Without pregnant bodies, none of us would be here. As such, the state of pregnancy is a universal human experience; all humans have at one point been part of a pregnant body. Yet the social, material and discursive understanding of pregnancy and the fetus is not universal, trivial, nor neutral—it is always ontological and always political.

In any society, the understanding(s) of the pregnant body and the embryo/fetus encompasses core philosophical and existential concerns. Is a pregnant body one or two beings (or something else entirely)? How does kinship work? When does personhood begin? These concerns also include questions of pollution and the danger of and towards the sexed female body, and broader politics of *grievability*—whose lives are

grieved when lost (Butler 2009; Eriksen & Kay 2022). Yet in archaeology, pregnancy is rarely considered or discussed outside gender or bioarchaeology, and its ontological and political consequences have scarcely been raised.

This article poses fundamental questions of the body-politics of pregnancy through three moves. First, we develop concepts and language drawn from material feminism (Barad 2007; Takeshita 2017), medical ethics and philosophy (Meincke 2022; Romanis *et al.* 2020) to interrogate pregnancy in past societies as an onto-political concern, rather than a peripheral women's issue. In the second section, we provide a case study to demonstrate how these conceptual tools can work in practice. Constituting the first focused study of pregnancy in Viking Scandinavia and its diaspora, c. 750–1050 CE, we review interdisciplinary datasets to explore the ontological positionings of the pregnant body in Viking worlds. We ask: how was the phenomenon of pregnancy understood in this specific historical-material situation, and especially, how was the assemblage of *mother-fetus* (see below) conceptualized?

The questions posed, however, are not limited to the Viking period. Our overall objective is to centre the phenomenon of pregnancy as a philosophical and political concern in archaeology *writ large*. We develop new thinking and language to this end, which can be used to examine the politics of pregnancy in other periods and regions. As a third

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and final move, we discuss the relative *absence* of pregnant bodies from our sources as well as from archaeological discourse. As the paper will demonstrate, for the Viking Age, as elsewhere in late prehistoric Europe, the source record is minimal. Pregnant bodies are *not* centred in iconography, they are *not* centred in literary narratives, and they are *not* centred in the treatment of pregnant bodies in death.

This absence, both critical and evidentiary, is not a neutral absence but—we argue—a deliberate absence-making (Meyer 2012). It is the trivialization of a body which has *not* come to matter in the grand narratives of history. Ultimately, this article aims to startle and disrupt some of the trivialization and assumed familiarity of particularly women's bodies in archaeological discourse. Our explicit objective here is to unsettle, to move us out of comfortable framings of pregnancy and domesticity: 'we have to make bodies *strange* before we can understand them' (Harris & Robb 2013, 7).

The motherfetus assemblage: theory-building for the pregnant body

All bodies constantly and relentlessly transform: blood pumps through the veins, hair and nails grow, cells die and regenerate. Even in death, corpses undergo steady transformation, through decomposition, skeletonization and decay. A body is never *one thing*, it is many and changing continuously. Current theoretical discourse increasingly sees the body as an assemblage and often as 'multiple'—not quite one monolithic and static entity, not quite a series of detached phenomena (e.g. Mol 2002; Robb & Harris 2013). As an assembled entity, the biological body extends into a number of other complex domains: gender systems, households, institutions, conversations, dress, labour, and many more.

A pregnant body is a particular form of embodied assemblage. It is in a state of continuous transformation as any other, it extends into networks and collectives as any other, and yet, it is not quite like any other. A pregnant body undergoes significant cognitive and physiological changes during gestation: it swells, hormones alter the plastic structure of the brain, the skeleton shifts and adapts in preparation for childbirth. These changes frequently also lead to changes in material culture, dress and bodily adornment (Gowland 2018), perhaps linked with a new embodied identity in the kin-group or community. Like the pregnant person, the fetus likewise undergoes significant transformation: the human body will never again transform at the speed and level of those months *in utero*. The pregnant body is thus potentially *multiple* in a literal way. In the words of Finlay (2013, 207), 'The processes of generating life within life are where private and public worlds elide.'

An emergent wave of research explores pregnancy and fertility in exciting new ways, for instance through the ERC-project 'The Value of Mothers to Society', developing bioarchaeological methods to identify traces of prehistoric childbearing (e.g. Rebay-Salisbury 2017). Pregnancy and especially infancy have thus seen growing attention in bioarchaeology (e.g. Gowland & Halcrow 2020), where a vibrant if (unjustly) somewhat peripheral discourse has developed.

Despite these important works, *political* and *theoretical* aspects of pregnancy have still seen limited focus in European prehistory. It would be ludicrous to claim that pregnancy or childbirth is any part of the grand narratives of e.g. European or global prehistory. It is also worth noting that in works centring theoretical perspectives on the body and personhood, the pregnant body is marginalized. Pregnancy is not mentioned at all in Fowler's *The Archaeology of Personhood* (2004). Likewise, in Robb and Harris' *The Body in History* (2013), pregnancy is mentioned *en passant* on a handful of occasions but is not subject to any in-depth interrogation (e.g. 2013, 140–41), for all its theoretical richness and potential.

We argue that there are outstanding and fundamental ontological implications of pregnancy, and theoretical implications for archaeology's conceptualization, documentation and interpretation of pregnant bodies. In the following we explore two interconnected issues related to pregnant bodies: fetal ontologies and 'womb politics'.

First issue: fetal ontologies and questions of personhood

The ways pregnancy is conceived, negotiated and materialized in a given society directly intersect with foundational questions such as *what is a life?* *Who is a person?* (cf. Butler 2009; Eriksen & Kay 2022). Finlay (2013) calls this 'fetal ontologies'. In contrast to archaeology, fetal ontologies have seen more intellectual inquiry in philosophy and science and technology studies. Here, current research centres pregnant bodies as specific forms of symbiotic and emergent phenomena that involve not only a biological body but the broader material and social world. Following on from Butler's watershed work on ultrasound technology and its role in assigning gender to a fetus—'girling the girl' (1993, 6–7)—material feminist Karen Barad extends the discussion from the human body to that of the piezoelectric crystal, a key component of ultrasound technology. Barad's argument is that imaging devices, through their ability to make visible a fetus *in utero*, in the moment *makes and unmakes* the boundaries between living and non-living, human and non-human, self and other (Barad 2007, ch. 5). The embryo-fetus does not exist independently of the materials, phrases and technologies through which we materialize it, and it is through its *enactment* that personhood (or non-personhood, or a different being altogether) is produced.

Similarly, Chikako Takeshita has discussed the complexities of the pregnant body and its amalgamation with microorganisms. Takeshita (2017, 1) contends that any biological body is a 'symbiotic process sustained by networks of commensal microbacterial activities'. The body is not a singular living entity to begin with: more than half of the cells of the human body are microbacterial. A key takeaway from Takeshita's work is that becoming pregnant does *not* fundamentally change the nature of the human body, which was already a symbiotic process into which the fertilized egg is simply integrated (Takeshita 2017, 14). Building on a Baradian and biological perspective, Takeshita rejects the idea of a mother/fetus as a Cartesian dichotomy in line with Self/Other. She rather suggests the nondualist concept 'motherfetus' to capture the inherent symbiotic material

grounding of pregnancy. In part building on Takeshita, philosopher Meincke (2022) argues against both what she calls the *containment view*—where the pregnant body is viewed as a container for another person—and the *parthood view*—where the fetus is seen as a part of the pregnant person's body. Meincke (2022, 1517) advocates instead a *process view*, where pregnancy is understood as a 'gradual coming-into-existence of a new mammalian organism that happens through a stepwise emancipation from the gestating organism before, during and after birth'.

As part of the language-building of this article, we adopt the concept *motherfetus* to express how a pregnant body is fundamentally a symbiotic and generative assemblage.¹ By adapting language that disrupts and challenges some comfortable categories, we may be able to highlight how, in historically situated ways, the emerging entity of a pregnant body is materialized as *different* kinds of things in *different* pasts. Across time and space, there are a plethora of understandings of pregnancy and the origins of its various substances. Examples include understanding the pregnant body as a conduit for ancestral spirit travel (Gottlieb 2004); as ritually unclean and a threat to society (Douglas 1966); as a mere host for sperm containing an already fully formed child; or as sanctified (Romanis et al. 2020). Again, by de-familiarizing and 'making strange' the pregnant body, we can rupture some conventional androcentric thinking surrounding both bodies and politics, and gain a new lens through which we can understand past societies.

Second issue: 'womb politics'

The womb is a political organ. The fundamental question of the ontological understanding of the pregnant person as *one* or *two* (or something else entirely), as a relational expansion or as a container and contained, are of urgent and explosive political concern in contemporary societies. In current reproductive rights-discourse, the womb is frequently staged as a site of conflict, particularly between the seen-as-opposing interests of the pregnant person and the rights of the fetus (Romanis et al. 2020). Philosophical and legal apparatuses seek to pinpoint the exact gestational week when a fetus becomes a person. The pregnant body, as a material object, is policed and controlled by various stakeholders, including the State, medical authorities and religious institutions. As an example of how consequential womb politics can be, the US Supreme Court is constituted by justices appointed primarily based on their view of the personhood of embryo-fetuses. This has enormous implications for millions of people's lives, as well as large-scale economic development, the healthcare system, social and child services, and potentially migration patterns within and to the US. The politics of pregnancy have exceptional impact on the political order of our contemporary world, and while womb politics will have looked different in different pasts, there is no reason to assume that pregnancy has ever been void of political ramifications.

Consequently, we argue that it is not only in current reproductive rights-discourse that the womb is a political player. In many societies, control over the pregnant body

equals control over power relations. The motherfetus is a prerequisite for economy, labour, kinship, social and political order. In societies where lineages are kinship- or primogeniture-based, controlling the motherfetus by controlling marital and/or sexual relations becomes a core political act. As an example, without the specific, historical, coming-into-being of the elite medieval pregnant body in Europe, we would not have current royal houses and lineages; political institutions which have in turn had profound impact on European history, the modern European nation states and, through colonial extension, the global political map. The pregnant body is a medium through which political structures can be realized, maintained, policed and disrupted.

Womb politics thus also leave the pregnant body open for volatility, risk and exploitation. While some of the existing work on pregnancy and motherhood may fairly be critiqued for essentializing the bio-social role of the 'mother', this article does not situate itself in that tradition. While we recognize 'motherhood' as a bio-social nexus of socialization, hormonal changes to brain chemistry, and biological instincts (e.g. Gowland & Halcrow 2020), we cannot universally assume maternal love, or a universal understanding of mother/child as a warm and nurturing relationship, across time, space and intersectional identities (e.g. Bodin 2024; Eriksen 2017; Scheper-Hughes 1992). In societies without effective forms for contraception, or safe access to abortion, to be pregnant was not necessarily, or perhaps even generally, a choice. The extent to which people across space and time would have a choice in whom to have sexual relationships with, and when, or whether, to become pregnant, varies greatly. In some societies, like the one we discuss below, the phenomenon of pregnancy could intersect with real concerns about sexual violence, enslavement, rape and volatility. Cross-culturally, infanticide has been found to be socially acceptable across 80 per cent of 400 sampled societies (Mays 2000), often as a form of reproductive control when few others were available (Eriksen 2017). In other words, the ontology of the embryo-fetus and its personhood may be linked with the technological apparatus available to prevent or terminate pregnancies. Situating parenthood and specifically motherhood as an inherent positive and nurturing phenomenon is to project a highly specific, middle-class, current Western freedom onto the past.

In the next section, we work through some of these theoretical contributions by mapping the 'motherfetus' in a specific time and place, examining the existential situation of pregnant bodies through a particular case study: the Viking Age (VA). We demonstrate how novel concepts and language help us to develop a particular historical-material understanding of pregnancy, which in turn can have transferable value for other periods and regions.

Pregnancy in Viking Age body-worlds

The second move of this article is thus to present the first focused examination of pregnancy in Viking Scandinavia and its diaspora, c. 750–1050 CE. We review three datasets to explore the pregnant body in Viking worlds. We ask: how was the phenomenon of pregnancy understood, and how was the

assemblage of *motherfetus* conceptualized, in this particular historical context? While pre-Christian Scandinavia is renowned for hegemonic masculinity, violence and fatalist warrior ideology, childhood and children have seen comparatively limited focus. Few (if any) scholars have examined the body-politics of pregnancy among the Late Iron and Viking Age peoples.

Similar points can be made for funerary archaeology. Compared to discourse in other areas of early medieval Europe (e.g. Sayer & Dickinson 2013), pregnancy and obstetrics have generally been cursorily treated in VA burial studies, on occasion mentioned in passing but not centred as a subject of interest (e.g. Arcini 2018; Price *et al.* 2014). In part, this absence clearly stems from challenges in preservation and documentation (Sellevold 1989). Skeletal preservation is frequently poor in Scandinavia, and many burials were excavated by antiquarians and lack detailed documentation. Moreover, infants and children are, broadly speaking, significantly underrepresented in the mortuary record of the VA overall (e.g. Price 2008). This may in itself speak to a differentiation in mortuary practice, even the personhood, of children (Eriksen 2017; cf. Ucko 1969).

In the following, the pregnant body of the VA is mapped through three categories of data, all with their own potentials as well as challenges: in later Old Norse textual sources pertaining to the VA; in iconography; and in the burial record. We ask: how are pregnant bodies narrated in stories and distinguished in Old Norse language? To what extent are they rendered in VA imagery? And can ‘mother-fetuses’ be identified in mortuary practice?

Pregnant bodies in language and literature

We begin our exploration of the body-politics of pregnancy by exploring Norse words and concepts used for pregnant bodies. The varied Old Norse textual corpus comprises poetry, sagas, early Christian literature, legal texts and more. The earliest surviving vernacular texts date to the twelfth century, and the texts themselves are the products of a medieval Christian society, albeit displaying a keen interest in the VA past. Some texts, such as the law codes, may share continuities with older, oral material (e.g. Brink 2003).

Despite the breadth of this corpus, the pregnant body is rarely to be found. If what Friðriksdóttir (2020, 120) suggests is true and ‘[s]exually active and fertile women were likely pregnant, suffering miscarriages, healing from childbirth and/or nursing for much of their life between puberty and menopause’, then the pregnant body is not so much absent from our written sources as *invisible*. Pregnant women appear in the *Sagas of Icelanders* (later narratives about prominent families in Iceland from the Viking settlement in the 870s until around 1030 CE). However, their condition is often inferred from their subsequent childbirth, rather than described in detail. There is little indication of the impact of pregnancy on women’s experiences or awareness of the pregnant body as a *body*, likely because it was conceptualized as a normal part of daily life, unworthy of comment by the anonymous (and probably male) saga compilers and clerical scribes responsible for medieval manuscript production.

Where words for pregnancy occur, they display significant variation (Table 1; see also Jacobsen 1984, 96). Several play on food (*to feed* and *to nourish* for giving birth); others on growth and weight. Terms like *bellyish*, *unlight*, *to swell*, *to fatten* and *to become lighter*, all conceptualize pregnancy as an expansion of the maternal body without specific identity or personhood. Language like *health-lack*, *unstrong* and *sickness* highlights pregnancy and labour’s physical effects for the childbearer. All of these suggest an *embodied* understanding of the motherfetus.

Other phrases like *to go not a woman alone* and *to walk with child*, however, ascribe more existential weight to the fetus, positioning the pregnant body as part of a *relational* expansion—the addition and positioning of a new person in the world. These two ways of conceptualizing pregnancy interweave in the way Old Norse texts describe pregnant bodies. The coexistence of multiple types of terminology is a reminder that pregnant bodies did not (and do not) conform to a uniform ontology but may sustain multiple ontologies simultaneously (cf. Harris & Robb 2012).

This multiplicity is further demonstrated by the two best-known depictions of pregnant women in the *Sagas of Icelanders*. The first narrative is from *Eirik the Red’s Saga*, taking place in Vinland (probably present-day Newfoundland). Here, Freyðís Eiríksdóttir is caught up in an attack by the *skrælings*, the Norse name for indigenous peoples of Greenland and Canada. Hampered by her pregnancy and unable to escape, Freyðís picks up the sword of a fallen companion. She faces her pursuers, takes a breast out of her shirt and beats the sword against it, frightening them away. This is clearly not a passive, nor pacified, pregnant body.

The second story is from *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*. It describes a confrontation between Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir and one of her husband’s killers, Helgi Harðbeinsson. As a provocation, Helgi wipes the blood from his spear on the shawl covering Guðrún’s pregnant belly and states ‘I think that under the corner of that shawl dwells my own death’. His prediction comes true, and the unborn fetus does indeed grow up to avenge his father. By calling attention to the threat he perceives beneath Guðrún’s shawl, Helgi demonstrates that the fetus is already inscribed not only into the kinship system of the elite early Icelanders, but into complex relationships of feuds, alliances and revenge. Without explicitly using the phrase, the scene makes it evident that Guðrún is not ‘a woman alone’ when it comes to avenging her husband’s death: in this case, the personhood of the fetus is recognized.

The words and stories above suggest a multiplicity of ways of viewing the pregnant body depending on the context and purpose of the body in the narrative. Moreover, the understanding of the pregnant body and the personhood of the fetus likely differed significantly depending on the pregnant person’s intersectional identity—especially in a hierarchical society that included enslaved people (e.g. Zachrisson 2003). The literary record over-represents elite experiences and points of view. Motherfetus assemblages at the margins of these societies, such as those of enslaved bodies, were likely understood quite differently.

Table 1. Old Norse terminology for pregnancy and labour; excluding terms with earliest attestations in manuscripts post c. 1400. The table is compiled from *The Dictionary of Old Norse Prose* and is not exhaustive. *Counts compiled by BP for phrases not specifically indexed in *ONP*.

Terminology	English translation		No. of attestations (<i>ONP</i>)	Earliest manuscript attestation (<i>ONP</i>)
	Literal	Extended		
<i>ala</i>	to nourish?	to give birth to	32	c. 1200
<i>barn</i>	child			
<i>fara/ganga með barni</i>	to go/walk with child	to be pregnant	9	c. 1300
<i>vera/verða með barni</i>	to be/become with child	to be/become pregnant	16	c. 1200–1225
<i>digrast</i>	to fatten, grow stout		5	c. 1275–1300
<i>eigi einsaman</i>	not alone			
<i>fara eigi kona einsaman</i>	to go not a woman alone	to be pregnant	3*	
<i>ei(gi) heil</i>	not whole, not hale	pregnant	12	c. 1300
<i>foeða</i>	to feed	to give birth to	37	c. 1200
<i>getnaðr</i>		pregnancy, fetus	58	c. 1200
<i>höfn</i>	burden?	fetus, pregnancy	15	c. 1200
<i>kviðug</i>	bellyish, bellyful	pregnant	17	c. 1200
<i>kviðug at/með barni</i>	bellyful with child	pregnant with child	4	c. 1300–1400
<i>óhraust</i>	unstrong, unhealthy	pregnant	9	c. 1220
<i>ólétt</i>	unlight	pregnant	28	c. 1200–1225
<i>verða léttari</i>	to become lighter	to give birth	34	c. 1200
<i>sótt</i>	sickness	birth pains, labour	8	c. 1200–1275
<i>sótt elnar</i>	sickness increases (for s.o.)	to go into labour	1	c. 1350–1400
<i>fá sótt</i>	to get sick	to go into labour	4	c. 1300–1325
<i>kenna sér sóttar</i>	to feel oneself sick	to go into labour	6	c. 1300–1325
<i>sótt stendr</i>	sickness troubles s.o.	to go into labour	2	c. 1250–1300
<i>taka sótt</i>	to take sick	to go into labour	5	c. 1300
<i>vanheilsa</i>	health-lack, illness	pregnancy	6	c. 1275
<i>þrútna</i>	to swell		6	c. 1270

The post-Conversion Icelandic law code *Grágás* affirms that relational and embodied understandings of pregnancy need not be mutually exclusive, presenting a complex picture in which the pregnant body is both to be policed and a motherfetus assemblage to be cared for. Thus, a pregnant woman gained immunity from outlawry until her child had been delivered, suggesting deference to the life inside her, but she could also be lawfully beaten if she were unmarried and refused to name the child's father, so long as she suffered no permanent injury. These are 'womb politics' in action. The laws highlight multiple key moments in the fetus's developing ontological status from the moment it was judged to be alive inside the womb, at which point the mother's death would prompt not one but two killing cases, to the birth itself, to the first feeding, which was required to make a man's posthumously born child his legal heir. This multi-staged development is supported by scholarship demonstrating that the personhood of infants transformed from nameless beings to emergent social persons, with thresholds including first feeding, name-giving and teething (Mejsholm 2009, 103–21).

We argue that motherfetus ontologies were multiple and complex, not only in word choice and later narratives, but also in the social realities of the VA. Pregnancy seems caught up in contrasting understandings: as a form of relation and care (*to nourish, woman not alone*), as an uncomfortable embodied state (become sick, become heavy), but also encompassing fierce resistance (beating a sword against a naked breast, carrying an avenger). The fetus was already immanent in existing structures of power, kinship and oppression. For some, gestation and birth represented a multi-staged process towards becoming a free social person. Others were born as chattel, or even perceived in the womb as a defect in the body of an enslaved person for sale (*Gulapingslög*, 30).

The pregnant body in iconography

Turning from one form of representation to another, we continue our exploration by centring the pregnant body in Viking iconography. Viking anthropomorphic imagery was



Figure 1. The Aska figurine. (a) Full object *en face* and (b) closeup of head/face, showing the potential clover-shaped nose guarded helmet (both Ola Myrin, Historiska Museet (CC BY 4.0)); (c) Dino-Lite close up of protruding belly in profile (BODY-POLITICS).

rendered in wood and stone, woven in wool and cast in bronze and silver. Male and female bodies were depicted, as well as bodies lacking sex or gender characteristics, or in rare cases displaying a combination of gender traits (e.g. Watt 2019). However, bodies displaying visible signs of pregnancy (or even children themselves) remain conspicuously absent. Among thousands of images of bodies we are aware of only *one* convincing pregnant body in iconography: a silver circular object with a central anthropomorphic figure found in Aska, Östergötland, Sweden. In what follows we examine how this singular object recasts a pregnant body in a metal miniature.

The Aska figure (Fig. 1) was found in a burial mound excavated in the 1920s (Arwill-Nordbladh 2012). The mid-tenth-century cremation burial included remains of an osteologically sexed adult woman and horse, dogs and sheep/goat. The burial also contained an abundance of material culture, including an iron staff and an additional eight gilded silver pendants (Arwill-Nordbladh 2012, 44–5). Several artefacts predate the burial and may have been heirlooms at the time of deposition. The iron staff and the rich artefactual material are part of the reason why the burial has been interpreted as a so-called *völva*-burial—that of a female ritual specialist practicing *seiðr* magic (Price 2019, 103–5).

Only 3.8 cm tall, the Aska object consists of a circle with a human figure in its centre. The circle may be the body of a snake biting its own tail, the head of the snake doubling as an oversized brooch across the figure's neck. The object is made in gilded silver and the frontal side is worn, including the

face. The figure appears to be wearing a long shawl/cloak and dress, and possibly a four-row bead necklace, although this has also been interpreted as decoration on the dress, as similar beadwork is found along its hem. The cloak is spread out, forming a triangle across its circular mount.

The figurine is widely interpreted to be pregnant due to its round belly cradled by the arms. The protruding belly, recognizable as a potentially late-term pregnant body 1200 years later, is unique in the Viking figurative corpus (Fig. 1; Eriksen *et al.* [under review](#)). Conventionally, depictions of bodies from later prehistory have seen much focus on *identification* and *representation*, especially through attempts to identify specific deities (Eriksen 2022). The figurine from Aska is no exception. Due to its interpreted display of pregnancy, the motif has been associated with fertility and the goddess Freyja (Arwill-Nordbladh 2012). Freyja is a complex deity with much stronger associations to sexuality than motherhood, and while the identification with Freyja is possible, we argue that there are thought-provoking traits of this anthropomorphic depiction *beyond* identifying deities.

First, the figure has an interesting demarcation on its head and towards the ridge of the nose, which could be a helmet with a cloverleaf-shaped nose guard (Arwill-Nordbladh 2012, 45). The combination of potentially martial gear and pregnant body is interesting and brings new insight, yet we have not seen this commented on anywhere in previous scholarship. Recent research has famously shown that biologically sexed women interred with full warrior apparatus is not fantasy but was a reality in Viking societies (Hedenstierna-Jonsson *et al.* 2017). Silver figurines of women carrying weapons have also been found in recent years (e.g. National Museum of Denmark 2013), and an anthropomorphic depiction on one of the Gotlandic picture stones has likewise been suggested to display a woman wearing a helmet (Göransson 1999, 66). Thus, there is no reason that this particular silver body could *not* be displayed in warrior gear. Just as with the example of Freydis above, we should not assume the pregnant body to be passive or pacified.

Second, the figure's cradling of the belly wraps the midriff in an accentuating and intentional way. It is tempting to relate this to the embodied understanding of pregnancy in Old Norse language discussed previously as being *bellyfull*, *unlight*, and *swollen*. There is even a question of whether this pose indicates a sense of protection of, or care for, the pregnancy. The head of the figure is slightly tilted forwards as if she is looking down towards her own body (Fig. 1b). Whatever message this pose was intended to signify, the intentional accentuation, the gaze towards and embrace of the abdomen are tantalising clues in terms of how pregnant bodies were understood to contemporary audiences. We argue that this singular figurine places an intentional emphasis on the relation between the pregnant person and fetus—perhaps she is also a woman who 'walks not alone'.

In sum, we have a singular depiction of a pregnant body, interred with a potential *völva*, in a remarkable burial assemblage. The figurine may be late-term pregnant and wearing martial gear, and her gaze and pose is set to accentuate the pregnancy. Elsewhere, Eriksen (2022) argues

that when metalworkers created miniature bodies in Scandinavian prehistory, the practice went beyond technical skill: it entailed creative choice-making. When recasting a body of flesh and blood in hard metals the makers were unable to make generic or neutral bodies: they made active choices of traits and capacities to emphasize. These choices can work as regulatory ideals (Butler 1990), shaped by and shaping ideas of how and what a body should look like, do and be. What does it mean, then, that while pregnant bodies must have been ubiquitous in people's lives, pregnant bodies, or children themselves, were practically never rendered in iconography? Certain bodies *came to matter* in Viking iconography, and most people would likely go through life never seeing a pregnant body recast in bodily imagery.

Pregnant bodies in burial practice

Although pregnant bodies were rarely made visible in metal or other media, another medium may have invited, or indeed *demand*ed, engagement with the condition of pregnancy: the handling of the bodies of those who died while pregnant, in childbirth, or shortly after. In line with the core questions of the article, we have reviewed potential evidence for pregnant bodies in the Viking mortuary record, to explore whether the fetus and pregnant person were staged as one, connected assemblage in death.

In preindustrial societies, obstetric-related death rates are thought to be very high (e.g. Bennett & Karras 2013; Kowaleski 2014)—in medieval Scandinavia estimated at nearly 50 per cent (e.g. Högberg et al. 1987). Obstetric death can be indicated by finding fetuses in the womb or the birth canal, but this is rare and not known from the VA; or through morphological changes to pelvic bones ('scars of parturition'). However, this method has recently been critiqued (Waltenberger et al. 2022) and again requires a level of preservation that is rare for our area.

Additionally, death during childbirth can be indicated through the co-burial of fetuses/newborns and adult women (Halcrow et al. 2018; Lewis 2006; Sayer & Dickinson 2013).² We focused on such adult-infant burials here, combing through existing VA osteological and funerary publications from Norway, Sweden and Denmark, as well as the Viking diaspora³ (Arcini 2018; Blindheim & Heyerdahl-Larsen 1995; Dunwell et al. 1996; Helgesson 1996; Ratican 2024; Richards et al. 2004; Sellevold 1999; Sellevold et al. 1984). Selection criteria included multiple inhumations of osteologically sexed women of a broad reproductive age⁴ and at least one fetus-neonate, dated between the eighth and eleventh centuries CE.

Our appraisal identified 14 multiple inhumations of possible pregnant body-infant graves from eight sites, in modern-day Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Scotland (Table 2; Fig. 2).⁵ The VA mortuary record is challenging, with sparse osteological overview works and a paucity of burial plans and detailed osteological cataloguing; thus this is likely not an exhaustive list of potential VA motherfetus burials. Yet, out of thousands of burials collated in

publications, 14 potential motherfetus burials must be said to be strikingly few.

So, what can the mortuary treatment of adult-infant burials tell us about the contemporary understanding of the pregnant body? In six of the fourteen burials, infant remains were found in the pelvic region or between the legs of the adult woman, which following Sayer and Dickinson (2013) may indicate obstetric death. Yet the literature also included infants buried with *adult men, older children* and *peri/post-menopausal women* (Table 2). For example, in a grave from Kaagården, Denmark (fig. 3) the remains of a newborn were placed between the legs of a 50–60-year-old adult man (Grøn et al. 1994, 145). This is a completely parallel arrangement to what the literature would deem an indication of death in childbirth. The multiple burial at Kaagården is obviously not a relational assemblage of a pregnant body. We may be looking instead at the *paternal* body—or at another kind of assemblage entirely.

This variety of adult-infant burials challenges the assumption that newborns found close to or between the legs of adults necessarily signifies biological parentage. Even in multiple burials of women and infants, we cannot automatically assume that these represent a 'mother-child dyad'. Evidence of peri/post-menopausal women, older children and men buried with infants demonstrates the variation in multiple burials that include fetus-neonates. Considering the complexity of multiple burial across the Viking world (Ratican 2024), we hesitate to assume *a priori* any parental or biological association. Other kinds of relationships may be central in selecting who are buried together, *beyond* biological kinship. Possibly, the practice related to situating infants in a position of closeness or protection. Alternatively, it was more focused on the *adults* for whom the infants were interred. Fetuses and newborns may exist in a blurred state, nearer to grave-goods or animate objects than full social persons (Eriksen 2017).

The major finding of our review of the burial record, though, is that very few cases of obstetric death in the VA can be identified. Considering that Ratican's database alone comprises c. 2200 VA burials, the 14 cases identified herein must be said to be extremely low. If maternal death was as frequent as the literature suggests, then this handful of potential motherfetus assemblages cannot logically reflect all the women and fetus-neonates that died in this way. There are several potential reasons for this scarcity of motherfetus burials. One possibility is that the preservation of infant bodies was negatively affected by taphonomic factors (Manifold 2012). Yet we find this unconvincing, as Booth et al. (2016) demonstrate that infant skeletons are less affected by bone diagenesis and preserve better than adult bones. Second, women and infants dying during pregnancy/childbirth may have seen a differentiated burial practice (e.g. cremation); this cannot be proved or disproved and remains speculative.

A third possibility follows the aforementioned underrepresentation of children in the VA burial record overall (Price 2008). In other words, VA communities may be splitting the motherfetus assemblage, treating the pregnant body and

Table 2. Fourteen possible motherfetus burials identified from VA cemeteries across the burial record of Scandinavia and the Viking diaspora.

Adult ages given in years-at-death; fetal and neonate ages given in weeks of gestational age (w.g.a.); infant ages given in months since birth (utilizing metric methods in Schaefer *et al.* 2009). G=graves; I=individuals; F=females; M=males; S=non-adults (including juveniles, aged 12–18 years); Inhum.=inhumations; Crem.=cremations *Osteologically analysed by E. Tollefsen/BODY-POLITICS (following Buikstra & Ubelaker 1994).

**Remains believed to have been lost since excavation.

Site	Burial ID	Date (CE)	Sex	Ages	Placement of sub-adult(s) in relation to adult remains	Total number of graves and individuals at site	Number of sexed/gendered and child burials	Years site excavated	Reference
Kaupang, Norway	Ka 294 Ø	900–950	F	45–50 y. Infant	Pelvic region	G=204-237 I=?	F=41 M=62 S=?	1867, 1902, 1950–57, 1965, 1974, 1999, 2003	Blindheim & Heyerdahl-Larsen (1995)
Fjälkinge, Sweden	G35a & G35b	900-1050	F	20–25 y. Fetus (<28–32 w.g.a.)	Between thighs	G=121 I=128	F=24 M=24 S=80	1990	Helgesson (1996)
"	G657I & G657II Ø	"	F	40 y. (noted as c. 40 in Helgesson (1990, Bilaga 1, 20) Fetus (<38 w.g.a.) (8–9 foetal months (Helgesson 1990, Bilaga 1, 19)	Grave fill	"	"	"	"
Fröjel, Sweden	21a00 & 21b00 & 21c00	600–900	F	35–39 y. Neonate (40–42 w.g.a.) Neonate (40–42 w.g.a.)	Under thighs Foot region	G=? I=141	F=73 M=28 S=14	1987–1990	Vos (2005)
"	25a00 & 25b00 Ø	"	F	35–49 y. Neonate (40–42 w.g.a.)	?	"	"	"	"
"	3a 1988 & 3b/88 Ø	"	F	44 y. Infant (0–6 m.)	?	"	"	"	"
Kopparsvik, Sweden	228/196?	8th–12th century	F	Adult Fetus (<38 w.g.a)	Pelvic region	G=326 I=333 (plus further skeletal parts from damaged graves)	F=? M=? S=?	1908, 1917–18, 1954, 1964–66	Toplak (2016)
"	294/1996	"	F	Adult Fetus (<38 w.g.a)	Pelvic region	"	"	"	"
Slite Torg, Sweden	2A/47 Ø	10th–12th century	F	Adult Fetus (26–28 w.g.a.)	?	G=>50 I=43	F=9 M=31 S=3	1916, 1933, 1943, 1944, 1946, 1947, 1952, 1953	Mortágua (2005–06)
"	2B/47 Ø	"	F	Adult Fetus (<38 w.g.a)**	?	"	"	"	"
Hessum, Denmark	3a* & 3b* Ø	'Viking Age'	F	Adult Fetus (28–30 w.g.a.)	?	?	F=1 M=3 S=1	1950	Sellevoid <i>et al.</i> (1984)
Galgedil, Denmark	XJ *	800–1050	F	20–45 y. Fetus/Neonate (30–36 w.g.a.)	?	G=54 I=61 (59 inhum., 2 crem.)	F=19 M=24 S=8	1999–2005	Price <i>et al.</i> (2014); Klitgaard (2002)
"	WG *	"	F	35–50 Infant (<8 m.)	?	"	"	"	"
Westness (Orkney), Scotland	1A & 1B Ø	9th century	F	Adult Fetus/Neonate (full-term)	?	G=30–40 I=32	F=12 M=11 S=6	1968–1984	Sellevoid (1999)

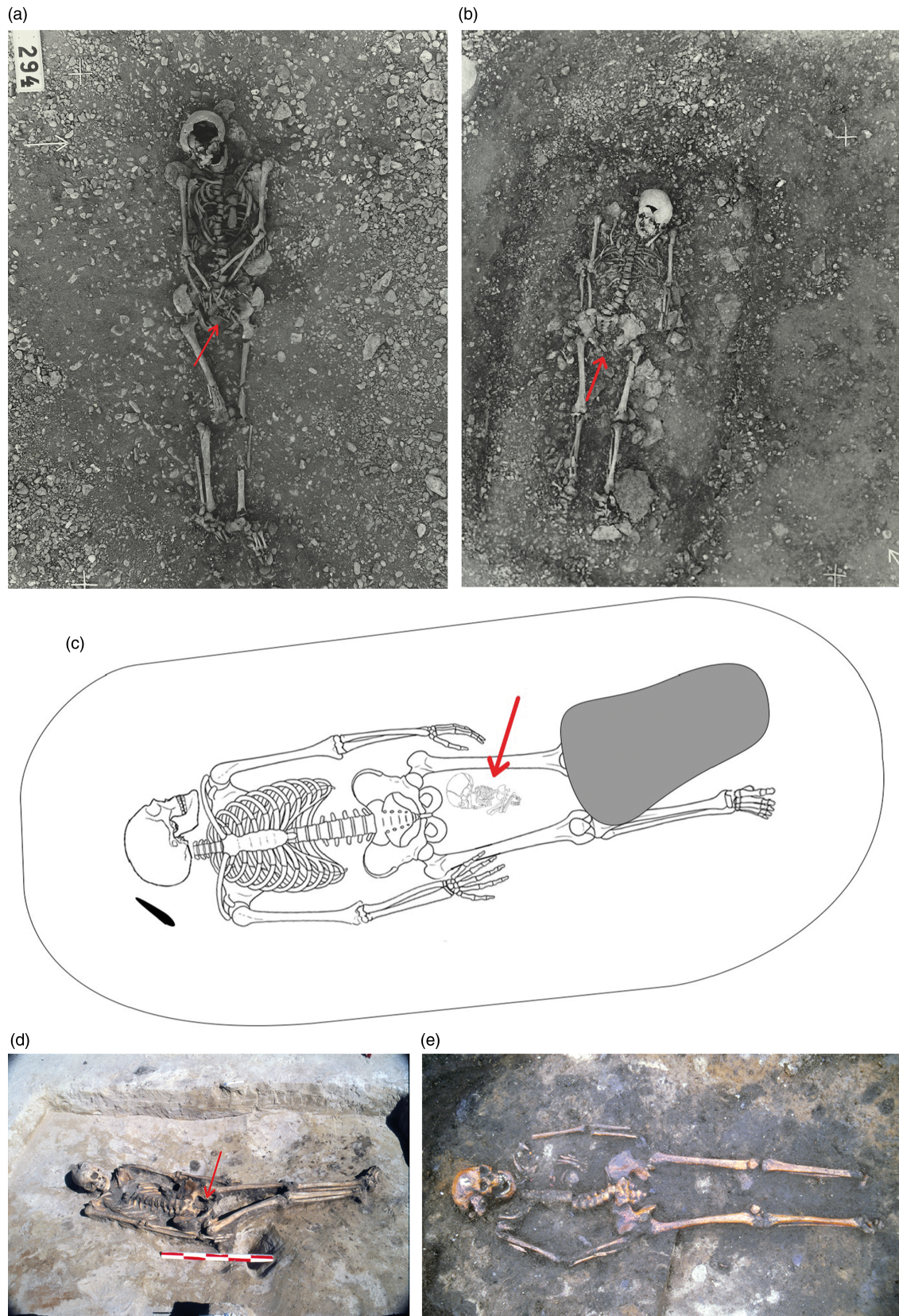


Figure 2. Photos and plans of potential motherfetus burials. (a–b) Grave 294 and 228, Kopparsvik, after Toplak (2016); (c) Grave 35a, Fjälkinge (interpretative drawing by Matt Hitchcock based on Helgesson 1996); (d–e) Grave WG and XJ, Galgedil (photographs from Odense Bys Museer). (All reproduced with kind permission.)

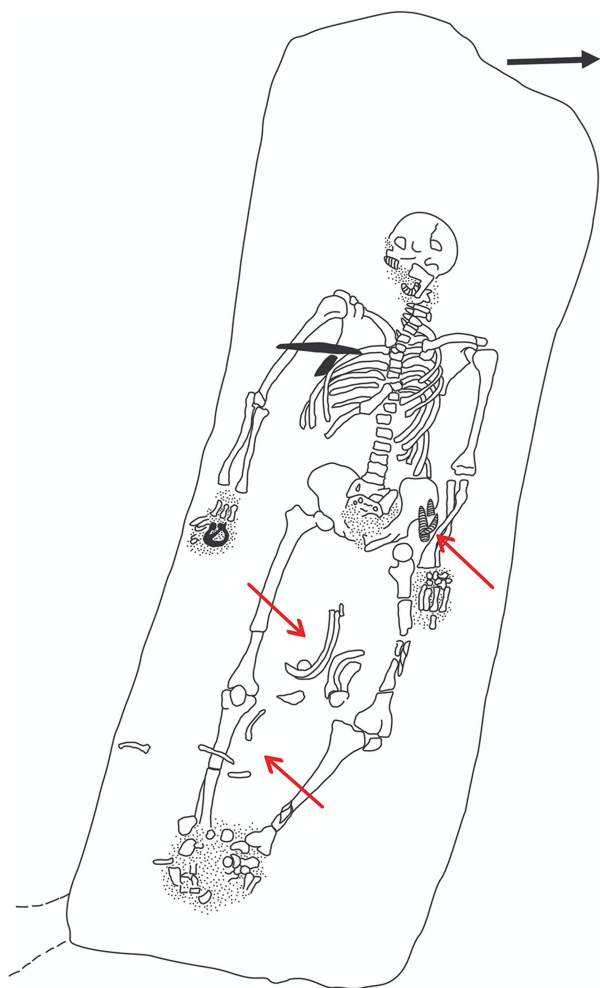


Figure 3. Burial plan of osteologically sexed man with neonate remains between his thighs, grave BG, Kaagården. (Image: Grøn et al. (1994, 65)/Langelands Museum with kind permission, digitized by Emma Tollefsen.)

fetus-neonate in two different ways, and consequently obstetric deaths become invisible in the mortuary record. Given the potential blurred ontological state of infants, we cannot exclude that newborns were used as grave-goods in other bodies' burials—perhaps akin to animal bodies (Eriksen & Ratican in press); were repurposed for ritual use elsewhere, for example in the construction of houses (Eriksen 2017); or were not widely formally buried at all. This begs the question of whether infants were automatically considered *grievable* (Eriksen & Kay 2022), perhaps particularly those born to unfree parents (see legal sources above).

VA communities were thus likely *not* burying pregnant bodies as one symbiotic entity—as a *motherfetus*. Whatever the reasons that VA communities were seemingly not burying victims of obstetric death as one unit, the consequence was that the motherfetus assemblage was *made absent* from the Viking Age burial record—likely intentionally so. Indeed, the fact that archaeological scholarship has never adequately theorized the pregnant body compounds its marginalization: the absence of the pregnant body in the archaeological record is perpetuated by its absence in scholarly discourse.

Discussion: enacting and absencing pregnancy

This article opened by arguing that the simultaneously existential and familiar transformation that pregnancy affords makes the pregnant body a rich medium to explore societal understandings of personhood, grievability, bodily capacity, kinship, identity, gender and many others. And yet pregnancy is often treated in archaeology (and beyond) as mundane, foremost a biological process, or peripherally as a women's issue.

In our second move, we examined diverse material and discursive evidence from the VA, to *make strange* the taken-for-granted, matter-of-fact, pregnant body. We have argued that pregnancy is foundational to any society, as it is a phenomenon where existential issues converge: when does personhood begin? Is a fetus, even an infant, necessarily a grievable person? Are women's bodies dangerous and unclean; sanctified in motherhood; or containers through which kinship and lineage pass?

Bodies gestating bodies are literally the basis of all life. We suggest they are extremely potent as objects of study in their own right—not necessarily only in the context of the bio-social role of motherhood, or in hand with infancy. Out of this 'strange-making' and the detailed considerations of the linguistic, iconographic and osteological data, in our final move we now present some broader discussion points for developing theoretical reflection on pregnancy in archaeology.

Motherfetus multiple

The material discussed above makes clear that the Viking motherfetus was multiple; literally in terms of being an assembled organism of blood and bone, microbacteria and an embryo-fetus (first section); but also conceptually. The later written sources (see second section) indicate that Old Norse language and literature held multiple and mutually inclusive ways of viewing pregnancy: as embodied experience—*unlight*, *unstrong* and *bellyful*; and the pregnant body as relational assemblage—to *be not a woman alone*; or even a hidden defect in a bought body.

Indeed, there was no monolithic category of 'woman' in the VA—and all experiences, including those related to sexuality and reproduction, will have varied according to intersectional identities. When Helgi wipes blood from his spear on Guðrún's shawl, it is a provocation not only towards her, but towards the person inside her—a fetus who is already inextricably woven into social and political relations of kinship, belonging, revenge and violence. This situation may relate to Meincke's *containment* view of the pregnant body: in this moment, Guðrún is the 'container' for another social person, the son, who will grow up to avenge his father. For the enslaved pregnant body in the VA, however, the womb politics were clearly radically different; the choice of whether the newborn was to live or die rested with the slave owners, not with the childbearer (Mundal 1988). The ontological situation of the motherfetus was fundamentally determined by social and political dynamics.

Moreover, there is no reason to assume that the pregnant body was inherently passive. Freydis undressing and beating

a sword against her breast when in danger, and the Aska figurine with its convincing nose-guarded helmet, provide tantalising glimpses that pregnant bodies had a broad remit of action. At minimum, these sources tell us that a pregnant woman in arms was not an unthinkable concept for contemporary audiences. This should not be surprising; if some women were interred with weapons and warrior gear (Hedenstierna-Jonson *et al.* 2017), it follows that some pregnant bodies could wield the sword.

Enacting the pregnant body

Our exploration of how pregnant bodies were materialized and enacted in iconography, written sources and the burial record provide new insights into how pregnant bodies were understood in the Viking period *specifically*: from bellyful and sick to wearing martial gear and swinging swords. Pregnant bodies were clearly not universally understood as a monolithic, essentialized category; neither the fetus nor the pregnant person had one, single ontological position.

Just as ultrasound technology can enact pregnancy in current societies (first section, above), pregnancy and the *making* and *unmaking* of social persons was also materially enacted in the VA. Helgi's bloody spear, like the piezoelectric crystal, is a materializing technology which enacts the male gender of Guðrún's formerly ambiguous fetus, thereby *making* him his father's avenger. The depictions (or lack thereof) of pregnancy in iconography, the carefully selected bodies (human and animal) and objects to be interred together (or the bodies intentionally *not* interred together), these constitute what Barad might call the material-discursive aspects of pregnancy. The VA pregnant body and the fetus do not pre-exist the words used to describe them, the practices surrounding them, or the way they are treated in death—this is how the pregnant body continually comes into being.

Absencing the pregnant body

Finally, after having reviewed the evidence of the pregnant body in the VA it must be admitted that it is, to a large extent, an absent body. It is bafflingly absent in the archaeological record, in creative imagery and Norse narratives, in period-specific scholarship, in prehistoric archaeology at large and in the archaeological literature on 'the body'. The idea that pregnancy is unremarkable and trivial falls into larger patterns of the body being treated as intuitive and 'natural', while in reality, practices of the body underpin crucial social action (Robb & Harris 2013, ch. 2).

It is a paradox that for societies that were famously preoccupied with kinship, listing their relations to the seventh degree and with a permeating kin-based social model (Olley 2022), pregnancy is hardly remarked upon. The mortuary record crucially indicates that co-inhumation of the mother/fetus was not universally performed nor essentialized, even in a society where pregnancy and childbirth were undoubtedly dangerous, claiming the lives of many women and children. If co-inhumation were the norm, we would in all likelihood find significantly more of these burials, even considering issues with preservation and documentation. We also note that crucial questions persist as

to whether adult and fetus/neonate co-interred burials necessarily point to biological kinship, or if the relationship could be non-biological or non-parental. This demands further attention, appraisal and theorizing.

Considering their foundational role in all forms of reproduction, it is also paradoxical that pregnant bodies have seen such sporadic and limited attention, not only in Viking scholarship, but in European pre- and protohistory more broadly. While some might argue that the lack of evidence for pregnancy explains the lack of scholarly attention, evidence that pregnancy occurred in the past is inherently embedded in the archaeological record—*societies would not exist without it*. That is indeed why the absence of attention to how pregnancy was conceptualized, handled, ritualized and politicized in the past is so striking. Absence is increasingly theorized in the social sciences as a consequential force in social, emotional and material life—beings and things that are absent have power in specific ways (e.g. Bille *et al.* 2010; Meyer 2012). The empty spaces between boundaries; ruins; lack of knowledge; grief of something gone—absences are 'as much of an occurrence as presence' (Bille *et al.* 2010, 10). Absence *does* something. However, as Meyer (2012) points out, absence is also something *we do*. Absence can be negotiated and contested; absence is political. We see this absence in relation to how pregnancy was conceptualized in our study period and beyond as a form of *absence-making*.

The absence of pregnant bodies has likewise been noted in contemporary social sciences—geographer Longhurst (2008) points out that up until very recently, pregnant bodies were constrained in space and place, particularly from public spaces such as the arch-British institution of the pub. The entertainment industry has seen a long-standing practice of firing actors from roles when pregnant (Stolzy 1996), while research demonstrates how US senior-level professional women experience marginalization and exclusion at work when pregnant (Gatrell *et al.* 2017). These examples, and many more, point to a contemporary, Western practice of making the pregnant body invisible. This is not only a question of who or what *is* absent. It is about who is *made absent* (Meyer 2012). We argue that pregnancy has *been made absent*—in medieval literary works, in VA body-imagery, in the mortuary practices of the Vikings—and in contemporary scholarship on prehistory, even where it centres on the body. Paradoxically, we end up in a situation where the pregnant body is a material substance that literally creates fundamental social and political structures—e.g. the lineages of rulers and chiefs—or simply generates new members of small-scale communities, while the same pregnant body can also be marginalized and absented in memory-making stories and artistic expression.

Some bodies and experiences *do not* come to matter in the grand narratives of history. It would not be a stretch to argue that for contemporary scholarship this absence-making relates to well-known androcentric foundations of the current West. An adult man with a sword is a recognized agent of prehistory, his bodily apparatus is of historical significance. Likewise, practices that echo late capitalism, e.g. technological innovation, global trade networks, 'big men' power struggles, etc., are immediately taken as

significant and impactful in the past. A pregnant woman brandishing a sword, by contrast, remains an obscure literary episode. This trivialization is misogyny in action, and potentially one that has quite a temporal depth.

Conclusions

This article set out to pose fundamental questions of the body-politics of pregnancy through three moves: (1) develop language to interrogate pregnancy in past societies as an onto-political concern; (2) provide the first focused study of the body-politics of pregnancy in Viking Scandinavia and its diaspora; and (3) centre the phenomenon of pregnancy and its *absence* as a philosophical and political concern in archaeology more broadly.

Our overall argument is that centring bodies and experiences often seen as trivial, essentialized as biological, and far removed from the grand narratives of history, has vast theoretical potential. We argue a need to defamiliarize taken-for-granted bodily experience and recognize that politics do not only happen on battlefields or through state formation. Exploring, for example, the body-politics of pregnancy can provide insights into ideas of kinship, sexuality, gender, personhood and inequality. The social, material and discursive understandings of pregnancy and the fetus are not universal, trivial nor neutral—they are always ontological and always political. We have herein used concepts such as ‘motherfetus’ and ‘womb politics’ to explore the pregnant body, intended as providing tools for archaeology more broadly to rethink bodies and processes that have been seen as ‘biological’, natural, and matter-of-fact. Archaeology needs further and deeper theoretical discourse on still-overlooked phenomena of the past—and we argue that one way forward is to explore marginalized bodies through attention to those that have been *made absent*.

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Notes

1 We recognize that the use of ‘mother’ in this compound forefronts a specific bio-social role; and we explicitly acknowledge that not every pregnant person is or was a mother (or identifies as a woman).

2 aDNA analysis can be used to examine biological kinship in multiple burials—but is a costly and destructive method, again requiring high levels of preservation.

3 Here, the North Atlantic, Britain and Ireland (see Jesch 2015, 19–29), including burials of a determinedly Scandinavian-type according to mortuary rite and/or artefacts assemblage.

4 The average age of menarche is 13–14 years (Thomas *et al.* 2001), in medieval Europe estimated between 12 and 15 (Papadimitriou 2016). Menopause typically begins between 45 and 55 (Gold 2011).

5 Several of the 14 multiple burials here come from the same sites. Possibly certain archaeologists were more attentive to infant remains—or some communities had a tradition of interring adults and infants together.

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