



The Figure of the *Virago* Between Norm and Deviance: Constructions of Femininity from Classical Antiquity to Medieval European Literature

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Abstract

This doctoral project investigates the figure of the *virago*. The originality of this study lies in its focus on the various forms assumed by this model in classical and medieval literature, with particular reference to Germanic and Nordic traditions, by analyzing female characters who display traits culturally coded as masculine (authority, aggressiveness, spiritual or military leadership, and similar).

The primary texts will include the *Nibelungenlied* — with particular attention to the figures of Kriemhild and Brunhild — and the *Íslendingasögur*, especially the *Saga of Erik the Red* and the *Saga of the Greenlanders*, with a focus on the central character Freydis and reflections on Thorbjörg's liminal spiritual authority and the centrality of Gudrid.

The project also involves a detailed study of previous scholarship on the attestation of the *virago* model in Classical Antiquity, with particular attention to lexicographic research. This includes a close examination of the entries *virago* and *virgo* in Maltby (1999) and in the *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* (TLL, 1900-), compared with insights from historical linguistics, including consultation of Pokorny (1959-1969). The aim is to reconstruct both the semantic field and the cultural resonance of these terms in Roman society, highlighting the tension between normative gender roles and behaviors deemed deviant for women.

Special attention will also be devoted to the hagiographic tradition, where figures such as Mary of Egypt testify to both the persistence and the transformation of the *virago* paradigm in a spiritual context, offering a liminal model that oscillates between extreme asceticism and the subversion of gender roles.

The project will further explore female models depicted by Gregory of Tours and Liutprand of Cremona, two authors who, in different ways, construct extreme and ambiguous representations



of the *virago*. This study will be expanded to include Carolingian sources, with the aim of identifying examples of the *virago* prototype and tracing its evolution within the medieval period itself. By comparing Carolingian cases with early medieval sources, the project seeks to highlight continuities and transformations in the construction of female agency, deviance, and power.

The project will also consider contemporary Balkan traditions, focusing on sworn virgins as a model of female agency and social legitimation. Anthropological studies on these unique Balkan cultures will allow the research to extend to present-day contexts, completing a diachronic investigation that begins with the etymology of the term, continues through classical and medieval sources, and arrives at contemporary expressions of female virilization.

All differences and analogies with the Nordic model—the main focus of this research—will be analyzed. The study will also address the critical question of whether female virilization constitutes mere assimilation to the masculine model or represents the affirmation of an alternative model to patriarchy.

The project adopts a comparative approach, applied to sources of different natures, geographical origins, and chronological contexts.

Project

This research aims to advance the historical and cultural study of the *virago*, systematically investigating the function of these “borderline” female figures, situated at the threshold between masculinity and femininity. The project seeks to observe how classical and medieval sources conceived and constructed alternative forms of female power.

The approach is predominantly comparative, without neglecting philological analysis of the supporting texts. The theoretical framework draws on gender studies, cultural anthropology, and symbolic rhetoric. Particular attention will be paid to paratextual and symbolic elements—frequent in Old High German and Norse texts—that implicitly mark the protagonists’ deviation from social norms.

The ultimate goal is not only to describe the numerous transgressive female figures preserved in classical and medieval culture, but also to understand the rhetoric and intentionality behind their literary construction, situating them within broader reflections on narrative and ideological categories of gender, power, and identity.

The project will first develop an etymological and paretymological analysis of the entries *virago* and *virgo* in Maltby (1999) and in the *TLL* (1900-). Both terms refer to women excluded from reproductive roles and therefore perceived as structurally marginal in relation to the normative model. This lexicographic study will be enriched by insights from historical linguistics and by consultation of Pokorny (1887).

The study will include several Roman female figures less explored in previous research. These include Turia, a historical example of a woman embodying a historically attested form of female



power, and prominent women of the Severan dynasty—Julia Domna, Julia Maesa, and Julia Mamaea—who, during periods of deep political instability, assumed leading roles in ensuring the continuity of the imperial house. Their authority represents a case of informal power, recognized indirectly through honorific titles, coin iconography, and official narratives.

These cases allow direct comparison with numerous mythical female exempla transmitted in literary tradition as condensed expressions of cultural beliefs: Lucretia, Cornelia, Arria, Octavia, Livia, among others. Because these figures are invested with a strong symbolic aura, they allow us to investigate how socially accepted female virtue was narrated by male authors.

The project will focus primarily on medieval formulations of the *virago* within Germanic and Norse literary culture. Key corpora include the *Nibelungenlied*, featuring two central characters: Kriemhild, who embodies the transgression of feminine norms through the active pursuit of revenge as a political project, and Brunhild, emblematic of warrior strength and honor. Two central Icelandic sagas—the *Saga of Erik the Red* and the *Saga of the Greenlanders*—will also be examined. Within these works, three emblematic female figures will be studied: Freydís, a paradigmatic warrior *virago*; Thorbjörg, a spiritual guide embodying a liminal form of ritual authority; and Gudrid, whose spiritual transformation presents interesting affinities with the model of hagiographic saints.

A specific section will focus on medieval hagiography, beginning with the figure of Mary of Egypt and extending to other exemplary female prototypes, in order to demonstrate how female hagiography frequently features the adoption of virile traits by its protagonists. Collaboration is envisaged with an internationally active researcher on this topic.

The study of Gregory of Tours' *Historia Francorum* and Liutprand of Cremona's *Antapodosis* will be expanded to include Carolingian sources, in order to identify examples of the *virago* prototype and to trace its evolution within the medieval period itself. Comparing Carolingian cases with early medieval sources will highlight continuities and transformations in the representation of female agency, deviance, and power.

Furthermore, comparative analysis will include contemporary Balkan traditions, focusing on sworn virgins as a model of female agency and social legitimation. Anthropological research on these distinct Balkan cultures will extend the study to present-day contexts, integrating contemporary manifestations of female virilization into the historical trajectory traced from the term's archaic etymology through classical and medieval sources.

The study of Norse literature, in constant dialogue with classical and medieval historiographical and hagiographical models, will allow a critical reflection on the concept of female virilization: is it merely assimilation to the masculine model, or does it represent an alternative form of agency emerging outside the patriarchal paradigm?

The project maintains a comparative approach while preserving philological attention to relevant texts. The theoretical framework combines gender studies, cultural anthropology, and symbolic rhetoric. Paratextual and symbolic elements—common in Old High German and Norse texts—that implicitly indicate the protagonists' deviation from social norms will be carefully



examined.

The ultimate goal is to describe transgressive female figures in classical and medieval culture and to understand the rhetoric and intentionality of their literary construction, situating them within a broader reflection on gender, power, and identity.

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